

Don't Cry Over Spilled Smoothie

Yesterday morning I made a mistake. A mindless, silly error.

I made my breakfast smoothie. Frozen banana and strawberry. Cocobella smoothie starter. Yogurt. Protein. (I'm bulking... jokes.)

I reached up into the cupboard and pulled down the tall smoothie glass I use each day, placing it on the bench in front of me. I picked up the blender jug, full of wholesome smoothie goodness and began to pour it out onto the bottom of the smoothie glass.

Note the word I used? Onto?

Not into. Onto.

Nobody told me, but the smoothie glass had been placed into the cupboard upside down. I had grabbed it out of the cupboard without paying any attention. I had deposited the glass on the bench without paying attention - upside down. And I had poured the smoothie onto the upside down base of the glass.

I paid so little attention that I spilled the smoothie all over the glass, the bench, and eventually the floor as it spilled off the counter top.

In psychology, and in life, this is called being "mindless". It's not being present. Not paying attention to what's going on around you. Not being 'here', 'now'. And when you're not paying attention, you tend to get lousy outcomes. Like spilled smoothie.

The opposite of mindlessness is 'mindfulness'. It's being where your feet are. Focused. Or as my kids would say, 'locked in'.

The challenge is that mindfulness is effortful. It places demands on us. Mindlessness? That's easy. Effortless.

Here's the thing though: it's one thing to pour smoothie onto an upside-down glass. It's another to parent that way - mindlessly, present in body, absent in attention, while breakfast and school runs and bathtime blur past on autopilot. Or perhaps we might call it "autoparent".

Harvard psychologist Ellen Langer has spent fifty years studying this. For her, mindfulness is not about meditation cushions and breathing apps.

Mindfulness, she says, is the simple act of actively noticing new things. Her research shows that when we pay fresh attention to something - or someone - we engage more, enjoy more, and even like the thing we're noticing more.

When have you been mindless today? Let me hit you up with a few suggestions from my life:

- When I moved house but drove home to my old house instead.
- When I ate breakfast but couldn't remember what I had eaten.

- When I drove to the airport but didn't really remember much of the drive.
- When my daughter entered the room with 'that' expression on her face. I mindlessly pre-determined that I knew her attitude and what was coming out of her mouth next. (I was wrong.)

Mindlessness has some advantages. It can be efficient to not have to notice everything like it's new all the time. We can take shortcuts and get more done.

But mindfulness offers us more. In a famous Harvard study published in [Science](#), psychologists Matthew Killingsworth and Daniel Gilbert pinged thousands of adults on their phones at random moments throughout the day and asked two questions: what are you doing, and where is your mind? The results were confronting. Our minds wander almost half of our waking hours - and when they do, we're reliably less happy, no matter how pleasant the activity we're supposed to be doing.

The parenting research points the same way. A [University of Sydney meta-analysis](#) led by Virginia Burgdorf pooled the available studies on mindfulness training for parents and found that when parents learned to pay attention on purpose, *parenting stress dropped - and kept dropping in the months that followed*. Better still, their children's psychological wellbeing improved too, even though the kids never attended a session. When we show up fully, everyone in the house feels the difference.

Some questions to sit with:

- When did you last really *look* at your child - not to check, correct or hurry them, but just to see them?
- What are you doing on autoparent that your child experiences every single day?
- If your child described how it feels to be noticed by you, what would they say?

So here's an experiment. For the next seven days, notice at least one genuinely new thing about your child every day.

Two rules. First, it must be something new; something you've never registered before. The way she holds her fork. The word he mispronounces. The song she hums when she thinks nobody's listening. Second, once a day, say something positive about your child and what you've noticed - to them, out loud: "I noticed you always check on your sister before you get in the car. I love that about you."

Then watch what happens. Being noticed is being loved in a language children understand instinctively.

One new thing. Seven days. Start today.

Oh, and check your glass is the right way up.



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