

ELLEN LANGER

How Changing Your Thinking Changes Everything

by April Thompson



FOR 40 YEARS, Social Psychologist Ellen Langer has conducted pioneering research on the power of our minds to shape health and well-being. Langer's work demonstrates that changing what we think and believe can transform not only our experiences, but also our bodies—a once-radical idea now common among neuroscientists. Her unconventional experiments often involve mind tricks: taking elders' subjective thoughts back 20 years to reverse objective metrics of aging; fostering weight loss in a group of hotel maids by simply suggesting that their jobs qualify as exercise; and even changing blood sugar levels in diabetics by speeding up or slowing down perceived time during a video game session.

Affectionately dubbed the “Mother of Mindfulness”, Langer was the first female professor to earn tenure in Harvard University's psychology department. A prolific writer and scientist, she has authored more than 200 related articles and 11 books, including *Mindfulness: The Power of Mindful Learning*; *On Becoming an Artist: Reinventing Yourself Through Mindful Creativity*; and *Counterclockwise: Mindful Health and the Power of Possibility*. Langer lives, paints, works and observes the world from Cambridge, Massachusetts. Learn more at EllenLanger.com.

What is mindful learning, and how can we best practice it?

All learning is mindful; the only way to learn is by noticing new things. When we stop observing and get into our heads, wondering if that answer was right or if we

responded quickly enough, we exit learning mode and enter mindlessness, where no learning can really take place.

Part of what makes travel exciting, for example, is that we are primed to experience new things and pay attention to them, but actually, newness surrounds us at all times, no matter where we are. What makes us mindless is the mistaken notion of already knowing, when everything is always changing.

What techniques, with or without meditation, can we adopt to change our mindset and mental habits to reduce stress and increase health and happiness?

Most mindlessness occurs by default, rather than design. If we all realized that through mindfulness we could look better, feel better, be better received and do better things—all claims that are supported by scientific research—it wouldn't be hard to choose.

Meditation is essentially a tool to lead you to the simple act of intentional noticing, but many routes lead to that destination. One way to learn mindfully is to learn conditionally; to see the world as “it would seem that” and “could be”, which is very different than “it is.”

If we recognized that evaluations occur in our heads rather than the external world, much of our stress would dissipate. Negativity and stress are typically a result of mindless ruminations about negative things we think are inevitable. If we simply ask ourselves why the dreaded event might not occur, we'd be less stressed. Next, if we

ask ourselves how it may actually be a good thing if it does happen, again stress would diminish.

How do the mental constructs we attach to our experiences affect outcomes of health and well-being?

Mental constructs are positions we consider as accepted certainties. When a physician makes a diagnosis, most people take it as a certainty and behave accordingly. Assuming that pain, decline or failure is inevitable can cause an individual to give up hope of complete recovery. But science only suggests probabilities, and if we understand this, we'll go to work on a solution.

We have a tremendous amount of control over our health that goes untapped. Placebos are today's strongest medications demonstrating this fact. Initially, placebos were frowned upon by the pharmaceutical industry because a drug couldn't be brought to market if a placebo was just as effective. When someone gives you a pill and you get better not because of the pill, but because of your beliefs about it, you realize that what stands in the way of healing is your own mindset.

How have you seen these principles play out in your own life?

My fascination with the ability of our mind to change our health began when my mother's diagnosed metastasized breast cancer disappeared, a fact the medical world could not explain. Since then, my own prognosis related to a smashed ankle from a Beth Israel teaching hospital physician with the

Harvard Medical School, stating that I would always walk with a limp and never play tennis again, has been completely overturned.

My mission coming out of these two experiences is to determine how we can apply our mental capacities to increase control of our health and well-being.

Connect with freelance writer April Thompson, in Washington, D.C., at AprilWrites.com.