Communicating Mindfully:
Mindfulness-Based Communication and Emotional Intelligence

Dan Huston

Electronic Excerpt

"Communicating Mindfully *is better than normal textbooks. The way it is written actually kept me wanting to read more*."

Elizabeth Huntley, former student

"I enjoyed reading* Communicating Mindfully *and actually found myself reading ahead because I was very interested in what the book had to offer—an opportunity to enhance my understanding of how to effectively communicate with others as well as the chance to better understand how my 'self thoughts' affect my communication."

Victoria Thomas, former student

"Communicating Mindfully *opened up a new world of meditating for me. When I meditated in the past, I thought if I was not relaxed it wasn't working. I know now I can look at that distress and accept it for what it is, and let it go. Feelings are neither good nor bad, they just exist.*"

Jay Bernier, former student

"I really enjoyed reading* Communicating Mindfully. *It was very relevant to my life, and I liked the fact that the author uses personal examples to help readers relate to and understand the material."

David Rushford, former student

"I found* Communicating Mindfully *to be delightful reading. For rookies like me, it may be the perfect introduction to contemplative pedagogy."

Michael Punches

Professor of English
Oklahoma City Community College

"Dan Huston has developed a truly amazing approach to 'Mindfulness.' In* Communicating Mindfully *he fluently presents his unique format of how one can learn to be 'in the moment' by tuning one's sensations to practice the art of acute observation in a manner that helps us communicate more accurately and effectively."

Susanne F. O'Brien

Adjunct Professor of Communications
NHTI, Concord's Community College

This book is dedicated to my father, mother, sisters, and brothers who taught me how to listen through their example and their love; to my wife, Danielle, for her love, support, encouragement, and patience over the years I have worked on this project; and to my stepson, Jacy, for being part of my family—and thus part of the rich network of relationships in my life that provides continuous opportunity for mindful learning and growth.

"Feel the rain on your skin
No one else can feel it for you
Only you can let it in
No one else, no one else
Can speak the words on your lips"

Natasha Bedingfield

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Introduction

Welcome.

Welcome to the words on these pages and the ideas they represent. These ideas describe the teaching methods I have been developing and putting to practice in my college communications courses for over a decade—teaching that has been inspiring, productive, and often life-changing for both myself and my students. These teaching methods are the result of personal experience, modern neuroscience, and mindfulness practices that date back more than 2,500 years. They overlap with many other fields as well, including health sciences, psychology, and sociology. There is a great deal of depth, history, and exciting potential in the following pages. Chances are you don't know me, and I don't know you—yet the ideas I will share with you in this book could very well help you get to know yourself even better than you do now, providing you with the rewards that come with that kind of increased self-awareness. These ideas represent an uncommon approach to teaching and learning, yet they are part of a broader, burgeoning field often described as Contemplative Education. In short, this book details an approach to the study of communication theory that includes the application of mindfulness meditation and recent research in emotional intelligence. The basic logic of this approach can be summarized with the following equation:

Mindfulness + Communication Theory = Emotional Intelligence

At the moment, that equation may mean very little to you. You may not know much about mindfulness or communication theory, and it's possible you've never even heard of emotional intelligence. That's okay. It's the logic that's important for now. Let me explain. Throughout this book [and the accompanying CD], you will be given instructions in mindfulness meditation. You will also be taught some basics about communication theory. Applying the awareness (or mindfulness) that one nurtures through meditation to the concepts described in communication theory often results in behavior psychologists and others describe as emotional intelligence, which many believe to be more important than IQ when it comes to personal and professional success. On the face of it, this approach may seem painfully simple. In a way it is. It's not rocket science. However, truly experiencing the process described above requires dedication, discipline, and commitment. Although some people may describe it as "touchy feely," this approach has the power to transform the way you view yourself and the way you communicate with others—recent breakthroughs in neuroscience suggest that to be true. Since communication plays such a vital role in every aspect of our lives, that transformation can lead to increased academic and professional success and increased happiness in your life. And all you need to do is pay attention—you'll see what I mean as you continue to read.

. . . . .

I have been teaching communications at the college level for more than fifteen years. During that time, I have had literally hundreds of students, many of whom at first resented having a communications course as a requirement of their program. They thought they already knew how to communicate well. They thought the course would be a waste of their time. Like many of our predictions, however, that expectation turned out to be far from the truth. Here's how some of them described their experience:

> *Prior to taking this class I was very skeptical about how important it could be. "Communications? I know how to talk to people. What a waste of time." But in all honesty, I have learned so much from you and from taking this class. This is not like most other classes . . . I am positive that I will use what we have learned in this class this semester for the rest of my life.*
>
> *I was very skeptical of a lot of the communication concepts. I figured I had been getting by for over 20 years so why change? However, through the course I have realized that "getting by" is no way to live your life.*

It's true. Getting by is no way to live your life. We all want more than that. We want to appreciate who we are as individuals. We want to build good relationships with others. We want to be successful in our careers. We want to find inspiration. We want to express ourselves accurately and honestly—and to be respected for expressing our unique experience and perspective.

So how do we get those things? Consider this: What's the one thread that runs through every moment of our lives? The one thread that constantly influences how we feel about ourselves, how others react to us, whether we smile, laugh, or cry in that instant? It's how we communicate. What we say and how we say it influences every moment of our lives. Each moment builds on the next, and all of those moments work together to build a lifetime. How we have communicated during that lifetime plays a huge role in determining how well we understand ourselves, the quality of relationships we have formed, our successes and our failures. We can get caught up in habitual ways of interacting with the world, or we can learn to open ourselves to the newness that exists in each moment. We can sleepwalk through the days, relying on learned scripts, personas, and egos to determine what to say and do—or we can learn to communicate our unique experience of each moment and thus be an active participant in our lives.

Learning a bit of communication theory can help in that process. But the theory alone is not enough. You need to learn how to apply it to *your* life. That's where mindfulness meditation comes in, and this book explains that connection. It includes an explanation of my approach, as well as practical exercises for

developing mindfulness and for applying an awareness of communication theory to your daily life. [Each chapter corresponds with a guided meditation on the CD that came with the book. If you are using this book as part of a class, your teacher may be guiding you through similar meditations—or possibly playing the CD in class. If that's the case, you can use the CD at home to continue to practice. The more you meditate, the more benefits you will gain from it. Each chapter also discusses ways mindfulness meditation relates to communication.]

Some Benefits of Merging Mindfulness Meditation and Communication Theory

- **People become better listeners because they are better able to let go of distracting inner monologue.**
- **People become more precise and articulate because they are more conscious of what they observe internally and externally.**
- **People take on more ownership for the way they perceive and react to the situations they experience, because they recognize what influences them and how.**
- **People become more respectful of others because they recognize the extent to which individual perspectives influence perception, and their insight into themselves gives them greater empathy and insight into others.**

In the remainder of the preface, I will explain how I came to incorporate mindfulness meditation into the teaching of communications, its impact on my classes, and how this approach fits in with the rapidly growing field of emotional intelligence. I include that information here because I believe it will help you understand the logic involved in this approach to studying and improving communication, and thus set the stage for the rest of the chapters, which are informed more by research and student observations than by my personal experiences.

Personal Experience: How I Discovered This Approach

I discovered the power of joining the study of communication concepts with the practice of mindfulness meditation by complete accident more than ten years ago. After seven years of marriage, my wife and I had decided to separate. It so happened that I was also out of work at the time, given that I was scraping together a living as an adjunct professor, and none of the summer courses I had

been offered garnered enough students to run. In short, I felt like my whole life was up in the air. I managed to finagle my finances so that I knew I could pay the rent and bills for the next three months, but what my life would be like after that I had no idea. I hadn't expected to find myself in that situation and had a hard time knowing what to do with myself. Everything seemed out of my control. And in many ways it was. That lack of control turned out to be a blessing in disguise.

At that time, a psychologist recommended a book to me: John Welwood's *Journey of the Heart*. This book spoke to me like no other ever had. In it Welwood (1990) points out that all committed relationships have problems; that is to be expected. However, he suggests that coming face to face with these issues when in a committed relationship is an opportunity, not a reason to run. It is an opportunity precisely because these issues are encountered while in a committed relationship, therefore, giving the participants an opportunity to look closely at themselves like they couldn't (or wouldn't) in a less permanent relationship. This view, combined with the fact that the particular issues that arise in a committed relationship are often very deeply rooted, provides an opportunity for spiritual and psychological growth like not much else can.

Now he had my attention.

He goes on to introduce readers to mindfulness, and his descriptions had a profound impact on me, changing the way I experienced my life. He points out to readers that no two moments are alike—a simplistic, common sense notion on one hand, but one that takes on added significance if you actually live by it. Whether you're in the same room with the same people, on the same day, at the same time every week, no two minutes are the same. Stop and think about that for a minute. In this very moment, no matter where you are—right now, *anything* can happen. Your predictions and expectations of how events will unfold might be inaccurate. Despite your typical behavior, you might feel a desire to do something outside of your ordinary repertoire, and so could others around you. Pay attention. Anything can happen.

When we are able to clear our minds enough to let that awareness sink in we feel a bit of a psychological jolt, what Buddhists call "Beginner's Mind"—a clean-slate perspective that can be vital for effective communication. We wake up. Our senses come alive. We are no longer operating on autopilot; rather we are alert, waiting to see what happens, ready to fully experience what this moment offers. Welwood refers to this state of being as "the razor's edge" and he says (rightly so I think) that we will feel two simultaneous emotions when we approach situations in this way: excitement, because anything can happen, and fear, for the same reason. We may notice sounds that beforehand were merely in the background. We may notice the artwork on the walls and begin to take in their detail, rather than view them as vague shapes we have seen a hundred times before. We may notice our thoughts and emotions more vividly. As time goes on,

if we continuously remind ourselves that each moment we experience is brand new and unpredictable, this awareness of the internal and external stimuli that often "lurk" in the background of our consciousness expands. Nurturing this type of openness has become an essential component to the way I now approach communication.

As I continued to observe my thoughts and emotions emerge with more accuracy and attention, I was surprised to realize how much they had been operating outside of my awareness. Although I had always been a reflective person, I had never viewed the world and myself from such a clean-slate perspective before. Watching the world, my thoughts, and my feelings reveal themselves moment by moment, was an eye opening experience. One thing I observed was the power of one's self-talk. This running commentary on our experiences often has a profound influence on how we interpret the events of our lives. Unfortunately, it can be limiting, misleading, and even inaccurate—yet we typically experience this persistent inner monologue as "reality" rather than the perspectives and beliefs we impose on ourselves and what's going on around us. These internal influences have a way of hiding behind the curtain of our consciousness, guiding our perceptions, interpretations, and creating expectations and forming judgments that dictate our behavior. However, if we are truly experiencing each moment as new and fresh, we begin to observe those thoughts, and we begin to become aware of what Welwood calls the "stories" we tell ourselves and recognize how they affect our behavior. Our job in that moment is just to notice and accept what comes without judgment.

For me, at that time, my stories were about how miserable my circumstances were: "My life is a mess." "I can't believe I let it come to this." "What if we do get divorced?" "Will I ever have another loving relationship again?" "Will I be this lonely forever?" The "stories" went on and on, each of them dictating the way I saw myself and my surroundings. My apartment seemed like a half empty prison in which I was sentenced for at least three months. My time seemed like it would be spent feeling miserable, and for the first time in my life I felt the physical manifestations of emotional pain—sharp, guttural pangs.

But before I make it seem like following Welwood's advice brings nothing but heartache and never-ending suffering, let me move on. Remember, he points out that no two moments are the same, and we should accept whatever we notice without judgment—and without piling our "stories" on to it. As I put that advice into practice, I became more conscious of my emotions, and I allowed myself to experience them—fully, completely. I did not push them away out of fear that they would hurt more than I could handle. Neither did I add to them with the "woe is me" stories. Instead I experienced the sorrow, anger, and fear for what they were. And though there were times when I would scream aloud, pound the floor with cushions, or run full speed through the woods to release my emotions, I found that (without adding onto them) those emotions would dissipate on their

own—often very quickly. I did not have to be controlled by them. It was ironic in a way that they would leave only when I stopped trying to push them away. By accepting them, I allowed them to run their course, and they slipped away "like clouds in the sky" (as many meditation practitioners would say: "Breaking the Chains," 2001, p. 43; Chödrön, 2002, p. 28). And then I experienced an unexpected reward: though the difficult emotions left, my recently attuned senses and awareness did not. Suddenly, I began to notice beautiful things more than ever, too: flowers, the moon, music. These things filled me with pleasant emotions, and I was equally compelled to express those. I would often pick up my guitar, play, sing, and practice for what I hoped would someday be my first gig (which did in fact happen later that summer). I would write, call friends and family. I couldn't believe it. It was like magic. Allowing myself to experience the greatest hurts of my life also opened the door to experiencing the greatest joys. I was both the saddest and the happiest I had ever been that summer. I realized that I was truly experiencing my life. And even when the emotions were unpleasant, they felt good. They were real, and so was I—more real and authentic than I had ever been.

Of course the enjoyable feelings had their own lifespan and would eventually fade away, just as the unpleasant moments did, and my life became a series of new moments each with their own surprises. Some of these moments consisted of spending time with my wife, and I applied the same approach to those experiences as I had others: I was in the moment and allowed myself to experience our interactions fully without imposing my desires, expectations, or fears. By not dwelling on my desire to preserve the marriage, for instance, my perceptions were more accurate. I was better able to listen to her, to understand her feelings, and I was able to express mine without trying to force any particular outcome. The focus of my communication became one of honesty and accuracy—let the results fall where they may. This attitude is what Buddhists refer to as Nonattachment. If we cling too hard to what Rebecca Shafir (2003), a speech/language pathologist at the Hallowell Center for Cognitive and Emotional Health, calls our "agenda," our perceptions, actions, and words are colored by it. We are no longer striving for accuracy in our perceptions; rather we are searching for ways to manipulate the situation and interpreting everything someone says in terms of how it fits—or doesn't fit—with our desired outcomes. The result is often acrimonious; no one feels heard or respected, and positive results rarely come from such interactions. We are more likely to have positive interactions with others if we let go of our own expectations and desires and, instead, rely on accuracy and honesty to determine what the outcome will be.

Though my now ex-wife and I did end up getting a divorce, it was a decision we came to mindfully because we both realized it was the best thing to do. It was not a decision based on fear, hate, or any other number of powerful emotions that can dictate human behavior. Yes, we experienced many of those feelings, but we felt them, talked about them, and ultimately let them go. By the

time my first marriage had ended, I had learned a new approach to life—"mindfulness"—which made me, as I have said above, more observant, more self-aware, more brave, more creative, stronger, and a better communicator. I had learned a new skill: mindful communication. And my life would be forever changed in wonderfully unpredictable ways.

. . . . .

As the above example illustrates, applying mindfulness to your relationships can change them. It is worth noting that I have had many students end relationships due to insights they had as a result of applying the course material, insights that helped them realize those relationships were not meeting their needs. However, I have also had equal numbers of students strengthen their relationships as a result of discovering new ways to communicate with their significant other, their family members, and their friends. I myself have experienced both results of applying mindfulness to intimate relationships, for my continued commitment to mindfulness led me to marry a beautiful woman whom I love very much. Our relationship is a journey that often calls for mindful communication from each of us. Of course, we're not perfect in that regard, but we have an understanding of the constant current of life, a recognition that no two moments are the same; and we bring that awareness into our relationship, living the ebbs and flows, and sharing our hopes, dreams, and fears along the way—all the while confident that our commitment to each other is strong enough to hold us, together.

Effects on My Teaching

Shortly after reading Welwood's book, I began a formal meditation practice to nurture the mindful awareness I had experienced as a result of his instructions. Soon after that summer of unemployment was over, I went back to my work as an adjunct instructor teaching writing and communications. But something was different this time. As I immersed myself in the communication concepts I was teaching, I noticed that the increased awareness fostered through meditation gave those concepts I had been teaching for several years added depth and significance. I began to become more aware of communication concepts in my daily life. When I was "in the moment," experiencing life from a "Beginner's Mind," my knowledge of communication concepts helped me to recognize what was influencing my thoughts, feelings, and behavior: elements of effective (or ineffective) conversations, elements of effective (or ineffective) listening, messages sent (intentionally or otherwise) by people's nonverbals, internal and external distractions that interfered with communication. These communication terms provided me with a vocabulary for what I was experiencing, and I began to think of them as internal and external influences on my behavior. Having a

language with which to identify these experiences also helped solidify a mindful approach to life. I discovered that I could use these concepts to heighten my awareness of how I experienced day-to-day situations.

Soon thereafter I decided I would attempt to share this approach with one of my classes, so I introduced them to mindfulness meditation and told them why I thought it was relevant to the course material. It was extremely well received. Ever since then I have been increasing the extent to which I incorporate mindfulness meditation in my classes. The results have been tremendous:

> *"This class has been life changing. . . I consider myself a happier person and a better communicator now."*
>
> *"Overall, I feel I have really learned a great deal about myself from this class. In the past three months, I have been making an honest effort to be more aware of my communication problems and correct them. This has made a great impact on the way I develop my perspective and has drastically improved my ability to communicate effectively."*
>
> *"In the long run this class definitely has made me a better person, and I look forward to seeing how my communication skills improve as I get older. It is a fascinating thing if you think about it. If my communication skills have improved this much I can't wait to see how much they will improve a few years from now!"*
>
> *"I am so happy to have taken this course. I can now see how my communication is affecting the world around me."*

Those early successes encouraged me to continue developing this approach and to eventually share my findings with others. As a result, I have developed an honors version of my communications course, written about my work for books and journals, presented at conferences, and given numerous workshops to educators and people in other fields as well.

Frankly, I'm a bit surprised how well this approach has worked considering that we do relatively little formal meditation in my classes. With the exception of the honors version of this course, my classes typically only meditate about a half dozen times during a semester, ranging from five to fifteen minutes each time. I encourage—but do not require—everyone to give it a try in the classroom and ideally practice meditation at home as well. [The guided meditations on the CD can be helpful for people who find it difficult to meditate on their own. After a while, you may find that you no longer need the CD (or your teacher) in order to meditate.] I strongly believe that students who practice meditation regularly—and who have the discipline to continuously attempt to "wake up" to the present moment and approach life mindfully—will develop a kind of awareness that enhances the application of the communication concepts that are covered in this book. One former student explained his experience this way:

"Disciplining myself to concentrate on the here and now is difficult, but vital, and the meditation helps me in this process. It fits into the class very well because in communicating it is important to be conscious of the environment in which the communicating is taking place."

This student clearly experienced the importance mindfulness can play in everyday communication—and the commitment it takes to experience life mindfully. As you continue reading this book, I hope you will do so with a level of commitment that allows you to experience the rewards that can come from merging communication theory and mindfulness meditation. Whether you're reading this book as part of a course—that meets "live" or online—or if you're reading it on your own, it provides you with information and exercises that will help you observe your life from a fresh perspective and provide you with tools for communicating effectively.

Each chapter includes the following:

- **An introduction to various communication concepts**
- **A discussion of the concepts as they relate to mindfulness**
- **A guided meditation (on the accompanying CD)**
- **An explanation of how the meditation applies to effective communication**
- **Neurology Notes [not yet complete]**
- **An Application Journal to help you begin to apply the concepts to your life**
- **A section on common "Challenges and Misconceptions" [not yet complete]**
- **Samples of how some of my former students have responded to the Application Journals**

The Application Journals are designed to build on each other, gradually increasing in complexity and encouraging readers to make use of insights from previous journals and an increased ability to be mindful. Although every person's journey through the Application Journals is different, the majority of people who do them end up experiencing many of the important elements of mindful communication that I have tried to emphasize throughout this introduction. They have:

- Experienced a clean-slate perspective—"Beginner's Mind"
- Felt the power of realizing that no two moments are ever the same
- Observed how their inner monologue influences their perception
- Developed the ability to sit with discomfort and not be controlled by it
- Learned to be honest with themselves and others
- Learned to express themselves accurately and productively
- Learned to listen and empathize with others more fully
- Begun to experience life in a richer way
- Discovered a path toward becoming happier, more authentic human beings

Emotional Intelligence

As I mentioned in the beginning of this introduction, the type of behavior that results from combining mindfulness meditation and communication theory can be described as "emotional intelligence" (EI). At first glance, combining the study of communication with the study of emotions may seem a bit strange. However, if you stop to consider how often our emotions impact the way we communicate you may begin to feel it is a very appropriate combination. Take a moment to think about interactions you have had with your boss, an angry customer, your significant other, your parents…. Do you sometimes feel threatened by your boss? Are there times when you want to yell back at an irate customer? Does your romantic partner seem to have a Ph.D. in getting under your skin? Does interacting with your parents sometimes stir strong emotions that date back as long as you can remember? These are just some examples of times when emotions play a role in how we communicate. Can you remember times when you reacted to a situation based on a powerful emotion rather than taking the time to consider a more productive response? Or maybe you can recall a time when you repressed a powerful emotion because you were scared to reveal how you felt. Like it or not, our emotions affect how we communicate, and it can be helpful to increase our awareness of them. As one student put it, "It doesn't matter whether it's a gentle conversation between a loving couple or a bitter confrontation between two foes, emotions are a major part of any conversation." We can learn, however, how to manage our emotions—how to feel them fully, recognize them, consider them, and make conscious choices about how to communicate as a result.

On a simplistic level, I believe the definition of emotional intelligence is built in to the term itself. Emotional intelligence can be described as behaving with an awareness of both our emotions and our thoughts in any given moment. From there, it isn't too much of a stretch to expand that notion to include acting with an awareness of other peoples' emotions, or what their emotional reaction might be to something we say or do. In short, it's a combination of emotional awareness and rational thinking. Let's look at an example. Imagine you're having an argument with someone you love and respect, maybe a boyfriend or girlfriend, a parent, or a best friend. That person is yelling at you (or at least speaking to you

in a loud volume). You could simply detach from the situation, ignoring the words coming from this person's mouth and the emotions behind those words. In most situations, I would not consider that response to be emotionally intelligent. A more emotionally intelligent response might be to listen to the words and feel the emotions being expressed in an effort to empathize with and fully understand that person's perspective. You might also remind yourself that he or she is speaking in the heat of the moment and may be overstating certain things because of being caught up in emotions. You don't have to agree with what he or she is saying, of course, but in order to have a productive response you do have to understand it. And when it is your turn to respond, you may decide to resist the impulse to lash back, and instead choose your words carefully, saying only those things you think that person is ready to hear at that moment—and not something that will rile him or her again. Such behavior is extremely challenging in the heat of the moment. The trick in that kind of situation is to be able to listen fully and empathetically without allowing someone's words and tone to trigger an aggressive response in you.

Of course, each situation is different. There may be times when you decide that complete detachment is best for all concerned. Or there may be times when you believe that fully expressing your anger *is* what the situation calls for. The key is to *choose* those responses rather than getting swept away by an impulsive reaction. How emotionally intelligent your choice is will depend on how accurately you assessed the situation—having practiced mindfulness meditation and studied communication theory can help you with that assessment.

At this point, it would be unethical of me not to mention that emotional intelligence is a hotly debated topic in some ways. Whether or not emotional intelligence even exists is still up for debate, for instance. Furthermore, even if EI does exist, there is currently no unanimous agreement on what exactly constitutes emotional intelligence. Professor John Mayer and his colleagues Peter Salovey and David Caruso (2008) believe the definition of emotional intelligence has become too broad over the last decade, and they argue that researchers need to be more careful about what they label as emotional intelligence. They suggest researchers pay particular attention to the ways emotional experiences—and our awareness of them—can operate as abilities, and they have come up with sixteen EI abilities of their own (see Appendix B). For example, they believe emotions can facilitate thinking: "Emotions prioritize thinking by directing attention to important information" (Mayer & Salovey, 1997, p. 11). One way emotions can do this is by serving as "an alerting system" (p. 12), such as when a student worries about the homework he/she has to do while watching TV. That emotion can help the student make a decision about what is important at that moment and positively impact his/her actions.

Despite the varying opinions on the subject and the relative infancy of the field*, EI has garnered a great deal of attention in businesses and educational institutions over the last decade or so. I find the term "emotional intelligence" to be an important and useful one. In the following paragraphs, I will explain why I feel this way and then try to clarify how it relates to the application of the material in this book.

The term Emotional Intelligence has become a buzz word since Daniel Goleman (now a household name in many circles) wrote his best-seller on the topic in 1995, *Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More Than IQ*. Although Goleman popularized the term, he did not coin it. The term had appeared in psychology articles prior to his book, perhaps most notably in the work of Mayer and Salovey, who wrote about the concept five years before Goleman's book was published. Like most of the general public, however, I first learned about EI as a result of Goleman's work. In the early stages of applying mindfulness meditation to my communications course, I came across an article called "Breaking the Chains" (2001), which appeared in *The Shambhala Sun*. It contained an interview with Judith Lief, Tara Bennett-Goleman, and Daniel Goleman. I remember the excitement I felt while reading the article, realizing I had just discovered a kindred spirit and was not as alone in my work as I had imagined at the time.

The focus of that article, as the title implies, is on breaking the cycle of habitual ways of thinking that continuously influence one's behavior in unproductive ways. For example, Denise (not her real name), a former student of mine wrote one of her Application Journals about how she almost talked herself out of having lunch with her classmates because her inner monologue was telling her she has little of value to add to a conversation. For Denise, that type of self talk had gone on for years—it was a fundamental belief she had about herself that had governed much of her behavior and held her back from developing friendships. When she had those types of thoughts she felt nervous and insecure. Those feelings—and the belief that her thoughts were accurate—had often led to her turning down such invitations in the past. That day in the cafeteria, however, due the study of mindful communication, she recognized the thought and the corresponding emotions and let them go. She didn't let the thought control her. In "Breaking the Chains" (2001) Goleman explains perfectly the role mindfulness plays in such processes:

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* The term "emotional intelligence" and popular interest in the concept is relatively recent; however, scholars have been studying related issues for over one hundred years (Bar-On, 2006).

> *With mindfulness, you can see it* [the habitual, unproductive thought pattern] *coming up and you can break the chain right there. You can choose to do something different . . . It really comes down to a very powerful insight, which is that you don't have to believe your thoughts. The thoughts that go along with these deep patterns are distorted: they are things that you have told yourself, that you have come to believe, but that don't work for you anymore. One of the powers of this application of mindfulness is in letting yourself disengage, and seeing that these thoughts are only one way of construing what is going on.* (p. 43)

I was ecstatic when I read that paragraph, for he stated, very clearly, one of the benefits of mindfulness I had experienced—and how I had been teaching the communication concept "self-talk" in my classes. More importantly, I realized the concept of emotional intelligence was very closely related to the mindful communication experiences I was trying to foster through my teaching. As I continued to read the article, I knew instantly I wanted to learn more about emotional intelligence. As mentioned above, I since discovered that there are many definitions of emotional intelligence being used and a certain amount of debate about which are more accurate and/or useful. Although Goleman's approach seems intimately connected to the ways I combine mindfulness and communication theory, I am also highly respectful of Mayer, Salovey, and Caruso's meticulous dedication to detailed definitions. It so happens, however, that Denise's experience is consistent not only with the mindfulness phenomenon Goleman describes above, but also with several of Mayer and Salovey's (1997) 16 EI abilities:

- "Ability to identify emotion in one's physical states, feelings, and thoughts"—

  > Denise recognized that she felt nervous when her peers invited her to join them for lunch. It is important to point out she noticed that emotion before she allowed it to consume her and control her actions. She also noticed her desire to accept the invitation.

- "Ability to reflective engage or detach from an emotion depending upon its judged informativeness or utility"—

  > Denise observed her worry. She accepted its presence but did not view it as being informative or reasonable in this situation. She recognized that the worry she felt was more of a habitual pattern of behavior than a response to what was actually occurring in that moment. Therefore, she was able to look past it and focus on more relevant information.

- "Ability to manage emotion in oneself and others by moderating negative emotions and enhancing pleasant ones, without repressing or exaggerating information they may convey"—

> Using her awareness of both her worry and her desire to accept the invitation, Denise was able to assess the situation, let go of the worry, and focus on her genuine desire to join her peers and their apparent enthusiasm about having her join them.

In his forward to a beautiful and insightful book detailing a conversation between The Dalai Lama and Dr. Paul Ekman, called *Emotional Awareness: Overcoming the Obstacles to Psychological Balance and Compassion*, Goleman provides a description of emotional intelligence that seems to be right on the mark when it comes to using an awareness of our emotions to communicate effectively. "'Emotional intelligence'," he writes, "refers to being intelligent about our emotional life: more self-aware, better able to handle disturbing emotions, more sensitive to the emotions of others—and able to put all that together to create effective, nourishing interactions" (Ekman, 2008, p. ix). Goleman's emphasis on how emotional intelligence can help people interact with one another in meaningful, effective ways suggests that it is intrinsically linked with how we communicate. Once you begin observing your communication experiences mindfully, you may be surprised just how true this really is. Whether your boss unjustly reprimands you, your husband looks at you in a disapproving way, or your self-talk tells you that you have no chance of doing well at an upcoming presentation, emotions play a vital role in how we communicate. Being aware of our emotions, therefore—and those of others—can be invaluable.

Unfortunately, human beings do not appear to be naturally aware of what ignites their emotions. According to Paul Ekman (2008), a renowned expert on emotions and facial expressions it's not the stimuli we experience in our daily lives—what people say or how they say it—that trigger emotions within us; it's our unconscious, almost instantaneous appraisal of that stimuli. According to Ekman, "The appraisal that triggers an emotion can be very complex, but it often involves very fast mental processes that are operating in a way that consciousness cannot enter" (p. 44). That appraisal happens so quickly, in fact, that very few people are ever able to develop the attention skills it would take to observe that interpretation while it is happening (Ekman, 2003). Nevertheless, that unconscious appraisal can trigger strong emotions within us. What happens next is surprising and important to understand:

> *When an emotion is triggered, a set of impulses arise that are translated into thoughts, actions, words, and bodily movement. Once the emotional behavior is set off, a refractory period begins in which we are not only* not *monitoring, we cannot reconsider. We cannot perceive anything in the external world that is inconsistent with the emotion we are feeling. We cannot access the knowledge we have that would disconfirm the emotion.* (p. 68).

To summarize, human beings tend to interpret the events of their lives quickly and unconsciously. That interpretation can set off a chain reaction of behaviors based on the perception that our interpretation was accurate. During the length of time the chain reaction is occurring (the "refractory period"), it is impossible for us to take in any information that would contradict our original interpretation.

What someone says to us during a conversation, for instance, could be the stimuli for an appraisal that triggers the reaction Ekman describes above. For example, one of my former students, Peter, was working for Stop and Shop when the company installed a new gas rewards system. The system often confused customers, and after six months of having to explain how to use it Peter began to get angry when customers were having difficulty. When a customer would ask for assistance, Peter's brain instantly appraised the customer as being inept because the system had been in place for so long it seemed to Peter as though his customers should know how to use it. That appraisal would lead to a refractory period during which Peter would speak abruptly to his customers in a tone of voice that conveyed impatience. He would speak quickly and rudely no matter how intelligent the customer appeared to be, and he would not observe that it was the first time the customer had ever been to the station—the refractory period had him in his grip. He was allowing his reactive "thoughts, actions, words, and bodily movement" to control his part of the conversation and, consequently, had surrendered to a kind of tunnel vision that limited his perception for the duration of the refractory period.

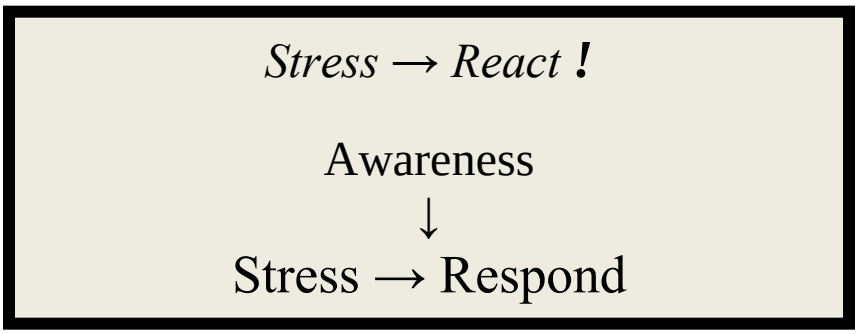
At this point, you might be wondering how one can avoid entering the refractory period if it is not possible for most people to observe their interpretation of the stimuli that set it into motion in the first place. Fortunately, it is possible to develop our attentional abilities to the point that we can become increasingly aware of the initial impulse to act during a refractory period—the very first indication that a refractory period is about to begin. If we observe that impulse, we still have time to reconsider. We are no longer doomed to act out our habitual reactions; instead, we are able to choose a response based on a more careful observation of the situation at hand. As Peter learned about this process and became more mindful of his behavior during the course, his manner of interacting with his customers changed one day:

The Stop and Shop gas rewards system has been running since December and yet we still get people that have no clue how to use it. When I was just finishing explaining how the system works to the second customer, a third one showed up and started listening intently, which told me that I was probably going to have to repeat everything I just said the first two times. In previous situations like this I would get angry that so many people would need the gas rewards system explained to them. This time, however, I noticed the anger begin to boil—my face began to tighten up and I could feel a slight frown develop—but before I acted on it, I looked more closely at the situation and realized that it was irritation at having to repeat myself several times in a row that caused my anger, not the uninformed customer himself. Consequently, I politely repeated the instructions to the third customer, knowing that his lack of understanding was not his fault.

As this example illustrates, the extent to which our actions and perceptions are controlled by an almost instantaneous appraisal of the events of our lives, which happens largely in our unconscious, can cause us to communicate in ways that are not very productive. Typically, when Peter becomes angry, his "responses become very short and to the point, and I develop an edge in my voice. I also become much more irritable." Clearly, that manner of communicating with customers is not very productive. The fact that it is nearly impossible to observe our nearly instantaneous appraisal of life events is enough to make one give up all of hope of communicating based on anything other than our subjective, immediate interpretations of our lives. An understanding of this phenomena makes it clear, however, that developing an ability to become aware of the moment we are struck with impulses that result from our appraisal of events, which could trigger the kind of chain reaction Ekman describes, can be key to avoiding habitual patterns of behavior that distort our perception of the world around us. If we learn to recognize the initial impulse that occurs just after our appraisal of stimuli—which is often a physiological sensation like those Peter observed: face tightening, slight frown—we can prevent the refractory period from happening (or consciously choose to allow it to happen if we determine that is what the situation calls for). Studies suggest, and plenty of anecdotal evidence indicates, that mindfulness meditation can improve our perceptive abilities to the point of observing the impulses that occur just after we appraise events we experience in our daily lives. Such information can, among other things, help us *choose* a response instead of getting swept away by an instinctual reaction. Thus, instead of instinctively yelling at your boss, returning your husband's dirty look, or becoming a bundle of nerves due to the belief that your presentation will not go well, you can choose alternative responses that may be more productive.

Instructors of Kabat-Zinn's Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction course make the same distinction between "reacting" and "responding" to situations we encounter in life as Ekman does. They point out that often in life we react to stressful situations habitually, automatically, and impulsively. Another way to

think of it is that we often encounter stimuli, appraise them unconsciously, feel stressed as a result, and react instinctively. Inserting mindful awareness into the middle of that process helps us recognize how we interpreted that stimuli, which enables us to choose a conscious response to it.



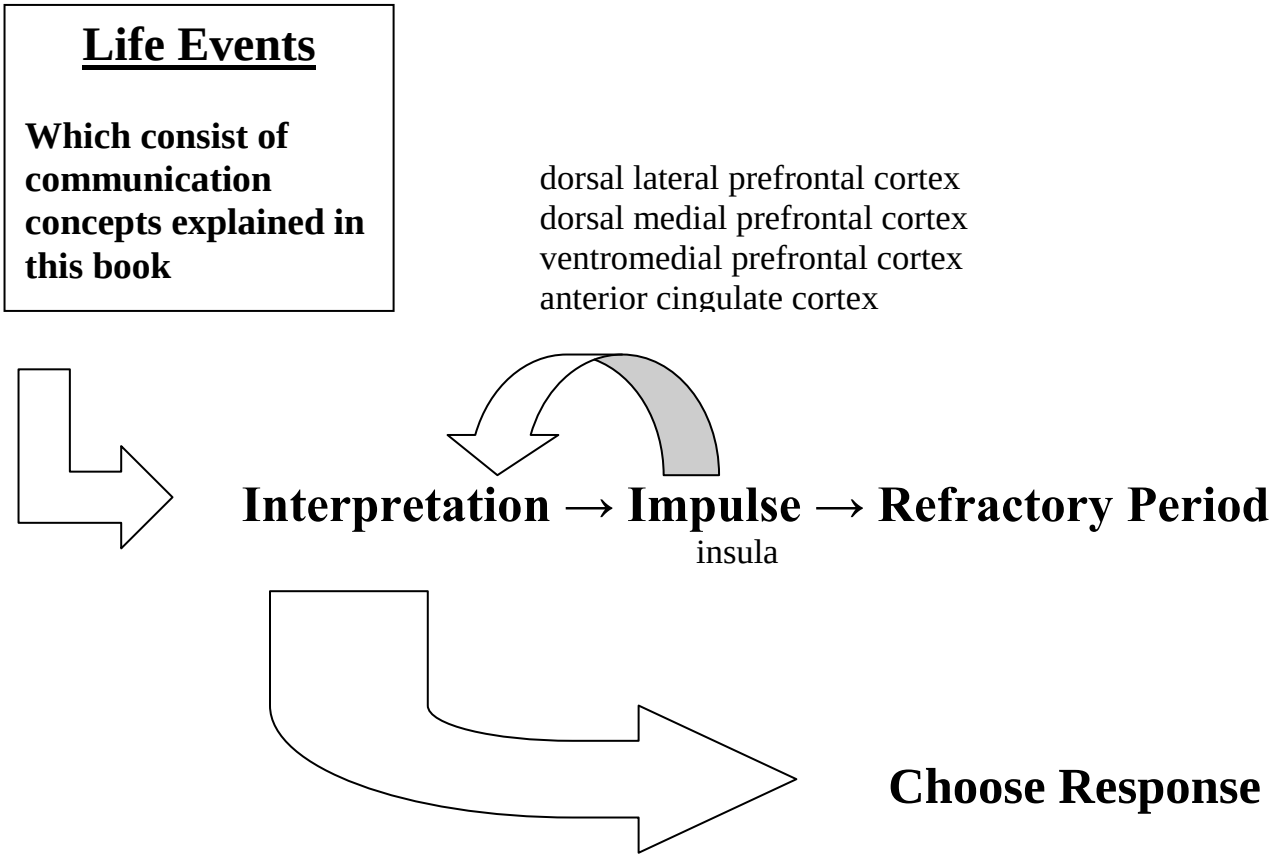
Just what is involved in this decision-making process, neurologically speaking, is a question scientists are trying to answer. Research is in its early stages, but scientists in the emerging field of contemplative neuroscience are beginning to investigate how meditation impacts parts of the brain involved in the process of observing and regulating our response to stimuli. As you might suspect, it is a complex process, and there is still much we don't know. However, a recent study suggests that the anterior insula may be the essential part of the brain involved in observing our initial impulse to act once we have interpreted events in our lives (Craig, 2009). Studies have shown that meditation appears to activate this part of the brain and may even alter it, just as athletes alter the muscles that are specific to their sport (Hölzel et al., 2008; Lazar et al., 2005). It is important to point out that—although most of us cannot observe our initial interpretation of stimuli while it is going on because it simply happens too quickly—it *is* possible to think back on what just occurred and how we interpreted the situation once we have observed our initial impulse to act and successfully avoided entering what Ekman (2003) calls the refractory period. At that point, we can choose which course of action to take. Garland et al. (2009b) theorize that mindfulness plays a key role in this reappraisal process by increasing "attentional flexibility" and broadening one's awareness. They go on to state that receiving training in and practicing mindfulness meditation may therefore increase one's ability to regulate emotions.

Various parts of the brain that appear to be involved in this type of reappraisal (or "meta-consciousness") include the dorsal lateral prefrontal cortex, the dorsal medial prefrontal cortex, the ventromedial prefrontal cortex, and the anterior cingulate cortex (Banks et al., 2007)—all of which also appear to be activated during meditation (see Brefczynski-Lewis et al., 2007; Hölzel et al., 2007; Hölzel et al., 2008). With an awareness of the initial impulse we feel after we have interpreted something that just occurred in our lives, we can avoid entering the refractory period and thus avoid reacting based on our initial narrow

interpretation of events. In so doing, we open our mind (or at least avoid becoming "narrow minded") to other information that is available to us. We may even notice that the initial impulse we feel is very familiar to us and, if we follow its chain reaction, it would lead to a habitual pattern of behavior. With that insight we are now free to choose *not* to engage in our habitual behavior, and we can choose a conscious, informed response to the events we are experiencing. A study by Heidi Wenk-Sormaz (2005) found that meditation helps reduce our dependency on habitual patterns of behavior, by "increasing the number of response alternatives, thereby reducing the prominence of a habitual response" (p. 44).

(Note: The science of meditation's impact on the brain is relatively young, making it difficult to draw any definitive conclusions. However, the studies that have been done suggest that different forms of meditation may activate different parts of the brain; not all the parts of the brain discussed above are activated during just one type of meditation. All together, however, the meditation instructions on the CD that accompanies this book appear to activate the parts of the brain discussed above. The CD includes instructions in Focused Attention Meditation, Open Presence Meditation, Body Scan, and Loving Kindness Meditation. These types of meditation are typically included in mindfulness-based programs such as this one.)

Avoiding the Refractory Period:
Parts of Brain Activated Through Meditation



I see the process described above—the use of mindful awareness to inform our moment-to-moment responses to stimuli—as a form of "self-regulation," which some EI researchers consider to be a form of emotional intelligence (Goleman, 2002; Pearman, 2002). Such self-regulation gives us increased flexibility in our responses to the situations we experience and increased resilience to the challenges we face in our lives. In their article, "The Benefits of Being Present: Mindfulness and Its Role in Psychological Well-Being," Brown and Ryan (2003) discuss self-regulation in terms of "facilitating the choice of behaviors that are consistent with one's needs, values, and interests," (citing Deci & Ryan, 1980). Making a conscious choice about our words and actions based on an awareness of how we are interpreting the events of our lives, as described above, is consistent with their definition. The moment we observe how we are interpreting the events of our lives is a moment of self-awareness. With that awareness comes increased "flexibility" and "resilience" as we choose behaviors that are consistent with our needs, values, and interests:

- Choosing a response instead of acting habitually gives us more flexibility—and a broader perspective.

- When we approach setbacks or frustrations in life with an awareness of the beginnings of unproductive, reactive emotions, we can choose another response instead—not by denying the emotions are there, but by not allowing ourselves to be consumed by them, not fixating on those emotions as they arise. Thus we acquire a certain degree of resiliency.

Furthermore, I believe the self-awareness that is inherently part of the "stimuli→ mindfulness→ response" experience helps to increase our capacity for empathy, for the more in touch we are with our own emotions the more we tend to observe and understand those of others. Our propensity for unconsciously interpreting stimuli and reacting habitually appears to be human nature. The more we experience these moments and observe them mindfully, the more "in touch" we become with a universal trait of humanity, which also results in increased empathy for others.

Although Mayer and his colleagues would probably accuse me of falling into the group of academics with an overly broad definition of emotional intelligence, for reasons mentioned above—and others that will be explained throughout this book—I believe the following abilities represent a type of emotional intelligence that is strengthened by the combined study of mindfulness meditation and communication theory:

- **Self-Regulation**
- **Self-Awareness**
- **Flexibility**
- **Resilience**
- **Empathy**

I refer to these as abilities because they hinge on the central ability that mindfulness fosters, as previously mentioned: to catch ourselves before we fully engage in our habitual reaction to our interpretation of events in our lives and reappraise those situations. Having the opportunity to observe our original appraisal of events and feel the related emotions, we can then use that awareness to make conscious, informed decisions about how to communicate in that moment. I also suggest that these abilities are closely aligned with the sixteen that Mayer and Salovey identified.

Furthermore, recent studies in neuroscience take a look at this type of self-regulation as it applies to mindfulness meditation and its effect on the brain. Results suggest that it assists with the regulation of emotions. In one study, Britta Hölzel (2007) and her colleagues, found increased activity in the dorsal medial prefrontal cortex and the anterior cingulate cortex in meditators. According to the authors, these results suggest "meditation training leads to more cortical processing of emotional conflict during mindfulness" (p. 18) and "leads to increased activation of structures known to be relevant for attention and emotion regulation" (p. 21).

The popularity of EI marks a turning point in our culture in that it has given mainstream society a vehicle for recognizing the important role emotions play in our lives. It has allowed businesses, schools, and other organizations to accept that emotions exist in the workplace and educational institutions. Business leaders and administrators are beginning to recognize the importance of acknowledging emotions. Perhaps more importantly, it has given us all tools for increasing our level of emotional maturity (not just within the confines of therapists' office walls but within boardrooms and bedrooms, as well) and it seems to be helping individuals recognize and value emotional experiences in general—their own and those of others. When we make room for such experiences, we make room for empathy, compassion, and understanding. I believe all of those abilities are essential to effective communication, and I believe use of mindfulness meditation can help to nurture them.

Mindfulness is not simply a matter of positive thinking. There is much more to it than that, which will be discussed throughout the chapters in this book. The point, for now, is that emotions play an important role in the ways we

communicate, and mindfulness can help us be more aware of them, their causes, and the way they are expressed—by us and by others. Thus emotional intelligence can be seen as being a key factor in mindful communication.

Using EI in Application Journals:

Most of the Application Journals in this book include a question or two that relate to emotional intelligence behaviors listed in Appendix C: "Emotional Intelligence To-Do's," written by Roger Pearman, businessman, author, and educator. Pearman's list provides readers with suggesions for what to continue doing, start or stop doing in order to maximize their emotional intelligence as they are communicating. Appendix C also provides further guidance for developing emotional intelligence competencies that are fostered through mindful communication:

- **Self-Regulation**
- **Self-Awareness**
- **Flexibility**
- **Resilience**
- **Empathy**

[Note: Many of the sample journals include observations based on students' emotional intelligence strengths and challenges as determined by their Myers-Briggs Personality Type. Those students are referring to pages from Roger Pearman's book *Introduction to Type and Emotional Intelligence*, which can be used in conjunction with this book.]

Please feel free to contact Dan Huston if you:

- Are a teacher interested in receiving a desk copy of *Communicating Mindfully*
- Would like information on his trainings

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