

## EXPAT EXPOSÉ

# TOOLS FOR CULTIVATING MINDFULNESS IN THE EXPAT LIFESTYLE

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Living or traveling abroad heightens your awareness. You notice things more. It can feel as if every time you move, your eyes are being opened anew. It makes you feel alive and immersed in the most amazing array of sights and sounds. This is likely one of the key reasons international living is so compelling. It's probably also why so many of us find it difficult to stop once we get started.

And yet, when we're constantly surrounded by change – change that draws our attention outward – we run the risk of becoming complacent to noticing our own mental and emotional experiences within. We may develop patterns of behavior that don't work well for us or we may hide or deny challenging emotions. Moreover, if we're unable to slow down and sit still with what we're thinking and feeling day in and day out, we actually miss out on becoming our best possible expat selves.

But for many of us, the idea that we should be paying more attention to our internal experience and dialogue is simply overwhelming.

We're often inclined to shut out difficult emotions. We tell ourselves that we should be strong, overcome and move on. We're living the dream and we should *feel* like we are... at all times.

We also have a tendency to become trapped by thought and over-analysis. We get hooked on our positive thoughts: Life will be perfect once I finally save enough money to move to a tropical island where I can surf and sell smoothies out of a beach hut all day. And we drown in our negative ones: My children will hate me for dragging them from place to place.

We play these mental and emotional tapes over and over again in our minds. We act on them. We react to them.

The good news is that there are ways we can get better at addressing this spinning. One increasingly popular (and scientifically proven) way is through mindfulness practice.

At its core, mindfulness is simply paying attention. It's about paying attention to what you see, hear, feel and think. It's about paying attention to these things when they feel good and when they don't. And it's about setting aside the need to judge these sensations as good or bad.

With the ups and downs inherent in the expat lifestyle, mindfulness can be an excellent tool for turning the normal expat experience into one that is more purposeful, sustainable and fulfilling.

Of course, as with any new habit, it can be difficult to know where to start. But with a bit of practice, mindfulness is something anyone can do.

Here are six simple exercises to help get you started.

### NAME YOUR EMOTIONS

Paying closer attention to the sensations of our emotions helps us to see how fleeting they can be or how much our thoughts sustain them long past their welcome. One way to do this is to take some quiet time to observe your emotions and then write them down on a piece of paper – happy, sad, anxious, etc. Then describe them. How do they feel physically? What sensations do you feel in your body as these emotions are happening? Are you moved to smile, cry, tense up? Give yourself the challenge of including both positive and negative emotions.

### NAME YOUR THOUGHTS

Each and every one of us has a sort of mini-professional working inside us. These are the parts of us that come out when we let our mental tape run amuck. There's The Fighter, The Judge, The Escapist, The Worrier, etc., etc. To get to know these parts of yourself better, start by making a list of the thoughts that play out again and again in your head – those nagging worries, arguments or fantasies that never seem to really resolve. Write a few of them down. Then, take some time to give them a name – a mini-professional's name. Maybe these thoughts represent The Fixer, The Planner, The Wanderer, etc. The next time you find yourself running through those same old thoughts, take time to greet them by recognizing them as the mini-professional you've named. Give them the space they need to run their course and then allow them to move on.

### BE QUIET

Find some time each day to sit in silence. Five or ten minutes is fine, although you can certainly choose to sit longer. As you sit, breathe naturally in and out. When you get distracted, return your attention to your breath. As you sit, you will be confronted with your thoughts and emotions. That's okay. The goal is not to eliminate thought and emotion, it's to notice thoughts and emotions as they come up. Name them and then let them pass. The practices above can be nice stepping-stones for the naming and observing you do during this quiet time.

### REPLACE JUDGMENT WITH NAMING

This takes naming your emotions or thoughts to the next level. Imagine you're walking into a meeting where you'll be presenting to a group in a foreign language for the first time. You may be feeling scared or nervous. Slow down, stand or sit quietly for a few minutes and note the sensations you're feeling – butterflies in your stomach, heart pounding, etc. And then, instead of saying to yourself, "Calm down! It's no big deal," say something like, "This is fear. It's normal. You'll be okay." In other words – be gentle with yourself. This is also a helpful exercise for when your thoughts are racing. You can practice noticing and naming your mini-professional without letting her run the show. By developing a habit of kindly acknowledging these parts of yourself, you become more in tune with what is happening in your brain and heart as you go through your day, and you develop the insight to better cope with challenging situations when they arise.

### DO THINGS ON PURPOSE

Each day take some time to do some things completely for their own sake. This means taking a break from multi-tasking. Pay attention to what it feels like to stand in a security line, brush your teeth or walk through a crowded museum. What do you hear? Think? Feel? See? If you find yourself overcome with emotions, name the emotion, observe it, but return to your task of observation. If you find your mind wandering, say hello to the mini-professional that's trying to take over, greet her and allow her to pass by as you return to the task at hand.

### CONNECT

When you develop the habit of paying closer attention, you will find you start to know yourself better. Unfortunately for many of us, our habit is to keep these parts of ourselves hidden away – especially as expats. It can take so much to trust someone we've just met. However, one of the greatest gifts of paying attention is the way in which it enables us to connect to our deeper selves and to live more authentically. Connecting to others from where we truly are (overwhelmed, scared, anxious or infinitely happy) is part of practicing mindfulness, and it's a wonderful skill for expats because it enables us to experience deep relationships even in a world of constantly changing faces. So develop the practice of sharing your thoughts and feelings with others. Seek out people you feel you can trust and open up to them.

As you try each of these, you'll have times where they come rather easily and times where you feel stuck. As an expat, it won't be the first time you've felt that way, but little by little with just a bit more attention, you'll begin to notice so much more than you ever did before... no matter where you go. ■

