

# Your Car Commute Is a Chance to Practice Mindfulness

by Maria Gonzalez

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Unconscious thinking often takes the form of reliving something over and over again – something you regret or some injustice you experienced. It can also be worrying or obsessing about the future, an endless stream of “what ifs.” Either way, unconscious thinking is often negative thinking. And of course, since life exists in the present – and not the future or the past – if you don’t make a habit of living consciously in the present moment, you are missing out on life... *your* life.

By training yourself to remain in the present moment, you train yourself to avoid unconscious thinking. This frees up a great deal of energy, allowing your brain to become more creative and effective once you resume conscious thinking. You will have more mental firepower left for planning, figuring things out, and solving problems. It’s as if by giving your mind a break you are able to tap into a deeper intelligence within yourself.

To use your daily driving commute to help you practice conscious thinking and improve your mindfulness, start by getting into the car and acknowledging the intention that you aspire to be mindful during the commute. Take a few deep breaths. Once buckled up, but before you start to drive, become aware of your body. Feel your hands on the steering wheel, the contour of your body on the seat, your foot on the pedal. Make an effort to be aware of the body and feel present. Start to drive and notice that you are “looking” as you drive: through your windshield, into your mirrors. Now become aware that you are “listening.” Notice the sounds you hear.

The idea is that you are continuously aware of three things: your body, what you see, and what you hear. This is what it is to be mindfully present as you drive. Do your best to stay present for the entire commute.

For those who drive to work, the daily commute is often a tense time of bumper-to-bumper gridlock, erratic and dangerous driving, delays, road closures, and construction. And best of all, we get to do it twice a day. Concerned about wasting time, we often try to catch up on all the “little” things we think we can do while stuck in traffic or at a red light – jotting down to-do lists or reading email.

I’d argue that there’s a better use of your daily commute: practicing mindfulness.

The daily commute is a great opportunity to train the mind. And mindfulness, in essence, is just mind training. By using specific techniques, repeatedly, we train the mind in three specific areas: 1. to be more focused and better able to concentrate; 2. to experience more clarity in our thinking and decision making, benefitting from better judgment; and to approach all of life with equanimity, which in essence is a state of balance, whereby, we can “go with the flow” when a situation can not be changed in the moment.

By practicing mindfulness throughout your commute, you can develop focus and create calm and relaxation, arriving at the office refreshed and ready for the day, and at the end of the day, arriving at home ready to enjoy the evening. Since we commute twice a day, it’s a powerful opportunity to form new habits.

To be clear, I’m not talking about “emptying your mind” or focusing on a single fixed point – both popular meditation techniques – while you drive. I’m talking about mindfulness, which is all about being in the present moment. That, in fact, is the safest way to drive.

Being present matters greatly, quite simply, because life only happens in the present moment. If you are not in the present moment, your mind is in “memory” (the past) or “fantasy” (the future).

When you are in “memory” or “fantasy” you are often thinking unconsciously.

If that sounds too simple - like there should be more steps involved, or a framework or checklist - just give it a try. It's harder than it sounds. It is normal that your mind will wander and that you may be tempted to check your phone, or succumb to some other distraction. When that temptation arises, deliberately pull yourself back. It takes practice, but as you do this you are training the mind to be present.

Once you have completed a few mindful commutes and feel comfortable with them, you can turn on the radio, a book on tape, or a podcast. If you choose to do this, keep in mind that the primary focus will still be the road ahead; what you are listening to should only ever be secondary and not distract you from the driving. As you do this, if your mind wanders, take a breath and gently bring your attention back to the road ahead (what you see), your body on the seat, hands on the steering wheel, foot on the pedal, and only then, begin to listen to the story or music once again. The idea is that every time the mind wanders you bring yourself back and become fully established in the "present moment" before you start sharing your attention, in any way.

When your mind controls you, it is very stressful; but when you are able to control your mind, it can be very relaxing. A mindful commute will help you become more focused, relaxed, and effective once you get to your destination.

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Maria Gonzalez, MBA, is Founder and President of Argonauta Consulting Inc. Her most recent book is *Mindful Leadership: The 9 Ways to Self-Awareness, Transforming Yourself, and Inspiring Others*. She has recently launched the Mindful Leadership App.

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Figuring out how to consistently incorporate mindfulness practice into your daily routine is the key to reaping its benefits. Transforming your commute, what is for many a mindless time of stress, into a purposeful drive into your present moment and self is a smart re-frame.

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