

The Mindful Life

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MINDing theMIND

What Really Was the Cause?

Everyday we're on the lookout for cause-and-effect relationships. Why did Susan bite my head off when I asked for something this morning? Why do I seem to be in a better mood today than I have been for awhile? Why did my daughter eat her vegetables without a fuss when there's usually a battle? The answers to these types of questions are important because we'd like to know how to improve our lives and relationships with other people. So, without even realizing that we're doing it, we formulate answers to causal questions. How accurate are we?

The problem is that things only happen once, so we never get to perform an experiment to test whether there would have been a different outcome had we done something else. Even when two situations are very similar, they can never be exactly the same. So if there is a different outcome, we can never know the exact cause. That doesn't stop us from constructing answers to "why" questions, however. Then we revise our behavior accordingly, trying to get the same or better results.

Certainly trying to figure out what causes what in our lives and in our relationships makes sense. What is the alternative? The more difficult task is to continually remind ourselves that, just because one thing happens right before something else happens, doesn't mean that the first caused the second. That's especially difficult to do when our beliefs about what causes what happen to match the situation. So, suppose that we wake up in a grumpy mood. We ask ourselves why. We quickly conclude that, because we've had extra responsibilities at work, and we're not quite caught up, we're grumpy. That reason for feeling grumpy fits with our cultural beliefs about the kinds of things that cause grumpiness.

MIND Morsels

Just because something doesn't do what you planned it to doesn't mean it's useless.
– Thomas Edison

Most medications are first studied under the assumption that they should treat particular ailments. Research may show that they're ineffective, yet sometimes the "side-effects" of these ineffective medicines point to a benefit that ultimately ends up being what the drug is used for. How often in our own lives, however, are we so focused on the intended result of our actions that we may lose sight of positive "side-effects" that end up being more important than the intended outcome? Many times the process involved in a project that fails in the end turns out to have yielded many benefits itself. Perhaps on our way to "failure" we learned certain skills, sharpened others, and proved to ourselves that the process wasn't as intimidating as it first seemed. These benefits, accrued over time, may make "failure" an increasingly less frequent result.

You can make more friends in two months by becoming interested in other people than you can in two years by trying to get other people interested in you.
– Dale Carnegie

We live in a culture that emphasizes being impressive. So, it's easy to forget that most people would rather be around those who take interest in them, than vice-versa. Showing interest in a person typically leads that person to make positive assumptions about us. Since people generally hold a high opinion of themselves, if we're taking an interest in a person, that person will tend to see us as smart (since we recognized that this other person is worth noticing). We must also be humble, generous, and nonthreatening—all likeable qualities. Ironically, it's easier to take interest in others than to impress them. Anyone can show interest in other people, whereas no matter how impressive your credentials, there is always someone who is ultimately more impressive. Trying to impress others often elicits resentment and envy, so even though people might be polite to "impressive" individuals, they're probably not going to consider them friends.

*There is so little difference between husbands
you might as well keep the first.*
– Adela Rogers St. Johns

Whether we're talking about spouses, houses, or jobs, it's easy to get caught up in the "grass is always greener" game. The difficult realization is that the ability to be satisfied lies within us, and not in finding the "perfect" spouse, house, or job. This realization flies in the face of the messages we receive from our culture, and from our gut, which seems to say that the problem lies "out there," rather than "in" us. At what point do we quit spending our energy looking for the perfect match, and start the more difficult but more promising task of working on ourselves?