

MindfulLiving™ Module 4

Respond, Don't React Formula

Chapter 9 - Reading

Cultivating Emotional Intelligence
By Shery Clein, MindfulLiving™ Coach

The Opportunity of "The Magic Quarter Second"

Pausing... making use of the magic quarter second, choosing to be present



In her book *My Stroke of Insight*, brain scientist Jill Bolte Taylor explains that an emotion's natural lifespan—the average time it takes to move through the nervous system and body—is only ninety seconds. After that, our thoughts sustain the emotion. So, if we wonder why we get stuck in painful emotional states like anxiety, depression, or rage, the answer lies in our endless stream of inner dialogue.

Modern neuroscience reveals a fundamental truth: Neurons that fire together wire together. When we repeatedly engage in a set of thoughts and emotions, we create deeply ingrained patterns of emotional reactivity. This means that the more we ruminate on specific experiences, the stronger the memory becomes and the more easily the related feelings become activated.

For instance, if a young girl asks her father for help and he either ignores her or reacts with irritation, the emotional pain of rejection may become associated with various thoughts or beliefs: "I'm not loved," "I'm not worth helping," "I'm weak for wanting help," "It's dangerous to ask for help," "He's bad. I hate him."

The more the child experiences this response from a parent—or even imagines receiving it—the more the impulse to seek help becomes linked with the belief that she will be refused, along with feelings of fear, hurt, anger, or shame. Years later, she may hesitate to ask for help at all. Or, if she does ask, any sign of distraction from the other person might trigger old feelings: she might downplay her needs, apologise, or become enraged.

Unless we learn to recognise and interrupt our compulsive thinking, these ingrained emotional and behavioural patterns will continue to strengthen over time. Fortunately, it's possible to break out of these patterns.

Researcher Benjamin Libet discovered that the part of the brain responsible for movement activates a quarter-second before we become aware of our intention to move. There is then another quarter-second before the movement begins. This finding sheds light on what we call "free will"—our brain has already set the gears in motion before consciously deciding to act. But it also offers an opportunity.

Consider the moment you're obsessing about having a cigarette. During the space between the impulse ("I need to smoke a cigarette") and the action (reaching for the pack), there is room for choice. Author Tara Bennett-Goleman named this space "the magic quarter second." Mindfulness allows us to take advantage of it.

By catching our thoughts in the magic quarter second, we can respond from a wiser place, interrupting the cycle of compulsive thinking that fuels anxiety and other painful emotions. For example, if our child asks us to play a game and we automatically think, "I'm too busy," we might pause and choose to spend some time with her. If we're about to send an angry email, we might pause and decide not to press the send button.

The Buddha taught that to be free—not identified with or possessed by thoughts or feelings—we must investigate each part of our experience with intimate and mindful attention. The first step is pausing, using the magic quarter second, and the second step is choosing to be present with our moment-to-moment experience. We need to recognise the fear-based thoughts and tension in our bodies with accepting, curious, and kind attention.

This presence results in a capacity to release habitual reactivity, respond to life's circumstances with a wise heart, and step out of the grip of oppressive emotions.

Tara Brach is the senior teacher and founder of the Insight Meditation Community of Washington. She is the author of *Radical Acceptance* and *True Refuge*.



Shery Klein, MindfulLiving™ Coach, thank you for your valuable participation. We appreciate your dedication and commitment. Our goal is to help you address uncomfortable issues and overcome obstacles. Most importantly, enjoy, relax, and have fun! Remember to contact us if you have any questions or need assistance. Blessings. Stay Healthy ♥ Love, Shery

