

# Can an app help us find mindfulness in today's busy high-tech world?

19 September 2016, by Rafael A Calvo And Dorian Peters



We all need to seek some mindfulness. Credit: Shutterstock/dariagarnik

With the release of the latest Apple Watch this month came a new Breathe app [which promises](#) to "help you better manage everyday stress". Giving mindful breathing a place beside the alarm clock and weather app seems to prove mindfulness has truly gone mainstream.

But modern society is still strongly oriented in the opposite direction: toward speed, efficiency and multitasking. Take the [tagline for the Apple watch](#): "Do more in an instant."

Other hooks for the new watch include "Share. Compare. Compete" and "Do even more right from your wrist". So can a device that promises to optimise your productivity and competitiveness also help you non-judgmentally focus your attention on the present moment?

Or, to put it simply: can an app make you mindful?

As researchers in well-being technology, we are in constant pursuit of answers to questions like these. In our book [Positive Computing](#) we dedicate an entire chapter to mindfulness.

More recently, we had the opportunity to pose the

question to two distinguished colleagues at the intersection of mindfulness and technology. One is the world-renowned well-being psychologist, [Richard Ryan](#), the other is the Venerable [Tenzin Priyadarshi](#), director for the [Dalai Lama Center for Ethics and Transformative Values](#) at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

Their responses, based on decades of research and personal experience, yielded illuminating insights into the design of future technologies.

## Mindfulness apps can help beginners

Both agree mindfulness apps can help connect beginners to the practice, as Priyadarshi explained.

"Firstly, from a Buddhist framework, mindfulness is a much wider field than what is being spoken of in the contemporary discourse," he said.

"In the contemporary discourse on mindfulness, I do think apps are more useful, but useful mostly as an introductory phase, and in terms of creating the connection level."

Ryan added: "One of things that I've been impressed by comes from the old adage that, even when you've been well-trained in mindfulness, the trick is remembering to be mindful."

"So some of the apps, such as the .B app used as part of the [Mindfulness in Schools](#) program, is a reminder to ".B" (stop, breathe) – a recall that mindfulness is a state available."

## Meditation by definition is not exciting

A mindfulness app should motivate us to practice by making it fun, right?

According to Priyadarshi, mindfulness is by nature, not "exciting" and Ryan's research supports this. In fact, it is initially about learning to embrace and

move beyond the boredom we feel as a response to video game or watch a movie instead. lack of stimulation.

Priyadarshi said: "Part of the challenge is that if you take any kind of beginning mindfulness practice, it has elements of serenity and stillness built into it.



The Apple watch can keep us busy but can it help us find mindfulness? Credit: Apple

"Technologies are constantly trying to generate some form of mental activity to get to this exciting state, but as [Thomas Merton](#) (a Trappist monk) put it, part of the practice of meditation is to curb this appetite for excitement.

"Part of the thing that people come into mindfulness for is to restrain that excitement so that they can actually focus or be more attentive to the object at hand."

Ryan said: "Our recent research has indeed shown that states of solitude, including meditation, produce deactivated states of emotion. People are less aroused both in negative and positive emotions.

"A common outcome of meditation is in fact a calm vitality, rather than an excited one."

### Location matters

Try meditating at your work desk and you'll battle thoughts of work deadlines. Try mindfulness in the living room and you'll meet the temptation to play a

The visual cues around us prime us for certain activities and trigger memories. So according to Priyadarshi, dedicating a space exclusively to meditation (even if it's just a corner) is important for fostering mindfulness.

By extension, this suggests that our virtual work spaces (phones) could be ill-suited as mindfulness spaces. If your work tool is attached to you (in the form of a watch) the act of disassociation may be even trickier.

"At MIT we have various pods within the MIT institution – there are about five or six meditation communities across campus that use dedicated spaces [...] and it helps them to focus on whatever the object of meditation is," Priyadarshi said.

"Eventually the idea is that once the mind is trained, it is able to meditate and practice in any environment. But initially, all these things are useful in training the mind."

### Fostering mindfulness means reshaping technology and society

While mindfulness apps can be helpful, in the long run, truly improving our capacity for mindfulness relies on shifting the societal assumption that doing more is always better.

Until we reshape this orientation, our technologies will continue to foster behaviours that work against [mindfulness](#) and its benefits.

While the Breathe app may appear little more than wishful thinking as part of a device otherwise designed to optimise multitasking, its appearance is still a good sign.

It's a sign that users are pushing back and questioning the tyranny of productivity. It's a sign we may be turning a corner and taking the first step down a road to technologies that will genuinely (dare we say it?) make the world a better place.

We've got a long way to go though, and finding a quiet place to sit in stillness and bring our attention

to the [present moment](#) is probably a very good place to start.

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