

2 Getting to Know Our Minds Better

2B Lesson — Alertness Improves Self-Awareness

It is to our advantage to spend a little time sharpening the best tools we have to help us navigate our minds better. Alertness is a valuable tool that resourcefully helps us to navigate through a complex range of possible influences. Granted, alertness is an involved and precision-oriented mode of thinking and not the simplest mind exercise to practice. However, with quality direction, honing our alertness can be easier than we might think.

Are You as Alert as You Think?

The mind doesn't automatically become or remain as alert as we would like it to. Oftentimes, we only realize in hindsight that we weren't as alert as we thought we were after experiencing unfortunate consequences.

ENCUMBRANCES OF NAVIGATING OUR MINDS

As we go through each day, the most important direction of our lives takes place rather subtly right inside our heads. Unlike a computer screen, the mind's complex computing system doesn't have visual icons. How much easier it would be to navigate by simply clicking on a few icons to shortcut through the vast array of selections we need to consider each day! This lack of *visual navigational markings* can also be compared to the encumbrance of driving without an adequate road map or flying an airplane without a visual instrument panel. The lack of such enhancements makes manually navigating such a complex computing system much more difficult.

To direct ourselves, we rely on a number of sources. We depend on our vision, hearing and other physical senses. We rely on our internal thoughts, reasoning, emotions and memory, as well as reminder to-do lists, schedules or other outside sources of direction. Due to the difficulties of sorting through such a complex range of possible influences, it is to our advantage to spend a little time sharpening the best tools we have to help reduce encumbrances.

Alertness is an extremely valuable engineering-type tracking skill that helps us to, not only become more self-aware, but also to ward-off problems. It is a tuning in versus tuning down or out the important concerns of the moment. Alertness can resourcefully help us to navigate our minds better. Granted, alertness is an involved and precision-oriented mode of thinking and not the simplest mind exercise to practice. However, with quality direction, honing our alertness can be easier than we might think.

Alertness activates the mind from a somewhat more natural casual mode of thinking to a keener, tactical mode. It is an optimum habit to form that helps us pause and consider a broader scope of concerns—somewhat like adding scanning radar or other tracking devices to equipment. The practice of increasing our alertness helps to strengthen our physical senses as well as our sensibilities.

Alertness helps us to make keener visual observations and pinpoint other important considerations we can too easily miss otherwise. It can also help us to anticipate action before responding when it's important to do so and, conversely, respond more quickly with greater accuracy.

HOW ALERTNESS IMPROVES SELF-AWARENESS

Alertness can even help us understand our minds better. Practicing alertness is necessary to carefully monitor the quality of our thoughts and actions to become more self-aware. Keen attention to our behavior reduces the risk of behaviorally awkward and inappropriate mannerisms.

Without such scrutiny, we don't necessarily grade our thoughts or behavior in action—or even upon later reflection, for that matter. Without this conscientious sense of attention, far more of whatever we are doing can be acceptable than really should be. By habit, we can be less observant, less detailed and less cautious than we realize. This allows us to too easily attend to less meaningful priorities, inappropriate thoughts and behavior, and develop a false sense of security.

To sum up the importance of alertness in its broadest perspective, compare the practice of increasing alertness to the structure programmed into our computer *security* software; it's about developing a subtle conscientious-based structure to how we apply our minds that provides far greater security. Having a watchful concern toward how skillfully and appropriately we are applying our minds overall is essential to developing healthier minds. It is through this conscious concern that we track the quality of our thoughts, communications, and behavior more closely.

THE FIRST STEP TO IMPROVE ALERTNESS

One of the best ways to practice increasing alertness is to pay closer attention to how well we're driving. This increased attention also helps to provide us with a better understanding of the active detailing involved in becoming more self-aware. Even if you don't drive, understanding how the process of driving relates to self-awareness can be helpful to adapt it to other activities.

No matter how careful we think we are behind the wheel, all drivers should occasionally reevaluate the quality of their driving. It's an emotionally responsible thing to do. We endanger roadways when we don't recognize that our concern has become too casual and complacent. Also, driving performance can deteriorate with age. The practice of improving alertness while driving may even reduce the risk of such deterioration. No doubt, a requirement for safer driving is optimum attention to the job of driving.

Inattentive driving is the leading cause of most car wrecks, according to the U.S. National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) and the Virginia Tech Transportation Institute. (Even if this was the only reason, taking time to practice alertness while driving and evaluating your driving skill would be very wise to do.) Driving is a strategic activity that requires our best perception, using our physical senses as well as our sensibilities to attend to direction, courtesy and caution.

Driving can, at any time, become complex and tricky. A driver's response skills may call for split-second thinking in order to make accurate safety maneuvers. Cues of impending danger are sometimes rapid and limited, which makes the speed and accuracy of responses critical. Vehicles moving at high speeds can be like well-aimed bullets; if a bullet goes off course, it can hit other bullets and cause a tragic domino reaction. Thus, alertness can help to prevent an accident, steer a safer turn or even increase our tolerance and courtesy toward other drivers.

To evaluate our driving manner, we need to reduce casual distractions: turn off the radio and cell phone, reduce conversation and eliminate other distractions that decrease our attention span. Distractions while driving can be dangerous and even fatal. Accidents can happen within as little as three seconds of being distracted.

Top 10 Driver Distractions

(According to the United States NAHTSA and Virginia Tech Transportation Institute)

1. Using a wireless device such as a cell phone
2. Chatting and interacting with other passengers
3. Reaching for CDs or other items within the car
4. Programming radio stations, tinkering with other dashboard controls
5. Using an electric razor, checking lipstick and other actions related to hygiene
6. Unwrapping a burger or other items when eating at the wheel
7. Daydreaming
8. Talking or singing
9. Smoking
10. External distractions such as pointing out a billboard

The main objective of the driver's evaluation is to look for ways to focus intentionally toward the following: 1. being more directed in your driving, 2. being more safety conscious about driving and your vehicle and 3. being more courteous. This requires combining and coordinating with better precision a wide range of elements, rules and guidelines that you are currently aware of, as well as looking for new ways to improve these three skill sets.

Four Tips about Alert Driving

To increase how consistently you follow these tips, copy them onto a card and place it near the driver's seat to review each time you prepare to drive.

1. Increasing our alertness is an energy investment that doesn't take *extra time* to study. We can practice it while doing most anything.
2. If you haven't been exercising alertness, doing so may cause a slight headache at first, similar to muscle aches that we get in other parts of our bodies when exercising after being sedentary for a while.
3. Maintaining a healthy erect posture can improve your chances of remaining alert
4. There are four directions to scan while driving. Be aware of how frequently you visually scan peripheral areas, as well as use your side and rear view mirrors.

Disclaimer: We have provided in good faith our best suggestions for helping you increase your alertness while driving. Driving is a task that can turn complex at any time. Please understand that we cannot be responsible for driver errors that may still occur even while applying our suggestions. Since we cannot be with you to more clearly direct your actions, you will be following these instructions at your own risk. Please be most careful when practicing this exercise!

PLEASE NOTE: Remember at this point to continue reading through Lesson 3 group, if you haven't previously done so, before beginning the suggested activities.