

## **Shaping Mindfulness: A Behavioral Superpower that Enhances Communication & Welfare**

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### **Abstract**

Those of us dedicated to the animal field are bound to experience various challenges during our work, and oftentimes those challenges revolve around communication. When communicating with the animals we work with, it's imperative that we be clear, consistent, and effective in order to build trust accounts and to train behavior without relying on aversive methods. But what about communicating with our human coworkers? Communication is constantly happening all around us, but it isn't always clear, consistent, *or* effective, and the incorporation of mindfulness is even harder to come by. But, what does mindfulness look like? This paper will explore mindfulness as a behavior and a skill and elaborate on what that looks like in terms of successful interpersonal communication. Through accountability and repetition, we can bring mindfulness into our workplace interactions to improve our trust accounts with our coworkers, increase our capacity for empathy, effectively manage intense emotions, and increase human welfare. By doing so, we ultimately increase the welfare of our animals and our ability to be effective animal caretakers, keepers, and trainers.

### **My Mindfulness Journey**

So, why are we even talking about mindfulness and how it can impact our communication as trainers in our professional world? Mindfulness isn't just some abstract tool notion for yoga instructors, self-care gurus, or meditation classes. Mindfulness is a behavior and a skill that anyone capable can benefit from because everyone has a mind. My mindfulness journey began in 2020 as it was a year that brought many unforeseen challenges to the world and led us into uncharted territories as humans on Earth. Due to the fragile and bleak state of the world during the pandemic shutdown, my mental health and general attitude began to decline, so I embarked on therapy for the first time.

My therapist was very helped and opened my mind to new perspectives. Our weekly conversations led me to a book that had me rethinking my inner dialogue and changing my outward behavior in terms of communication. "*Say What You Mean: A Mindful Approach to Nonviolent Communication*" by Oren Jay Sofer is a game changer when it comes to shaping our interpersonal interactions. The information and exercises within the book provide ways for the reader to consciously apply mindfulness in their daily life, resulting in increased interpersonal communication and increased personal welfare. I knew I needed to share not only what I learned from this book, but what I experienced as a learner of mindfulness.

### **Defining and Operationalizing Mindfulness**

In the dictionary, mindfulness is a noun and it's defined two ways. The first definition is 'the quality or state of being conscious or aware of something'. The second definition is 'a mental state achieved by focusing one's awareness on the present moment, while calmly

acknowledging and accepting one's feelings, thoughts, sensations; often used as a therapeutic technique'. The second definition is the primary focus of this paper.

Mindfulness is a skill, yes, but it is also a behavior. We can define a 'behavior' as anything that we can see an animal do. Mindfulness is a behavior that we can certainly see within ourselves, and sometimes also in others. If I describe myself as 'mindful', however I must acknowledge that the word 'mindful' becomes a label unless it is operationalized, and labels can be very subjective and can come with undesirable connotations attached. High level trainers strive to avoid harmful labels...but if labels are used, they are at least operationalized. One can operationalize a label by describing the behavior they're actually seeing in detail. For example, if we label an animal as 'aggressive', we can operationalize that label by answering the question "what does that look like?". "Being aggressive" could look like many things – an open mouth, lunging, biting, guarding resources such as water, food, or enrichment, etc. When we operationalize what we see, we clear the waters muddied by labeling. Operationalizing the behavior we see paints a clearer picture for all involved and it helps hold the observer accountable for what they actually observed.

So, what does *mindfulness* look like? In simple terms, mindfulness looks like paying attention. It's simple perhaps, but not always easy. When practicing mindfulness, we are paying attention to what is happening in the present moment, both inside of ourselves and in the world around us. This mental presence lays the groundwork for connection, and connection is one of the ultimate consequences of mindfulness when it is intentionally used as a tool.

### **Mindfulness as a Tool**

Tools are a big part of our daily life, especially at work. Tools make our jobs easier, providing efficiency and ease into daily situations and allowing us to work smarter instead of harder. The tools we use can come in a variety of forms. Physical tools are most likely what come to mind first, as we frequently use them as they assist us with tasks throughout the day. Physical tools are items such as bait bags, radios, power tools, ladders, phones, hoses, squeegees, dust pans – the list goes on and on. Physical tools are game changers when it comes to taking care of animals and our job would be exponentially more difficult if we didn't have these items available.

However, we aren't limited to physical tools. Tools can also be mental or emotional, especially when it comes to interpersonal communication and self-care. Mental and emotional tools are readily available to most of us, but without initial guidance about *what* tools are appropriate to use in certain situations and *how* to effectively use them, they may remain an untapped resource resulting in no behavioral change.

My interest in mental tools was sparked by Sofer's book, and then the flame was fanned after watching a remarkable documentary available on Netflix. *Stutz* is a brilliant documentary that dives into Jonah Hill's therapy journey with his therapist and psychiatrist, Phil Stutz. The documentary was released in November of 2022, and I highly recommend watching it as it explores relatable life experiences in a unique and visual way. In many candid conversations,

Stutz beautifully describes mental tools in a few different ways, regarding giving his clients tools to put into practice outside of therapy:

“A tool is imperative. It gives hope, and it is something that can change your inner state immediately in real time. It takes an experience that’s normally unpleasant and turns it into an opportunity.”

“A tool is a bridge between what you realize the problem is and the cause of the problem and to actually gaining some control over the possibility.”

As with any other skill, mindfulness is a tool that must be practiced with to wield it effectively. With practice, it is fully attainable for most of us, if we are committed to the disciplined practice and application of it.

So, what’s in it for us to use mental tools? With a little motivation and continued practice mental tools, such as mindfulness, can help protect your peace of mind, your relationships, and much more.

### **Exploring Mindfulness: What are we actually paying attention to?**

In life, there are numerous distractions constantly vying for our attention. Deciding exactly what we pay attention to is a choice and we make that choice countless times each day. In our professional world as keepers and trainers, it’s quite literally our job to pay attention to the animals in our care throughout the workday. When observing our animals, we are likely paying attention to a plethora of things - behavior, body language, social dynamics, physical appearance, personal history, previous interactions, current environmental conditions, antecedents, and the general vibe of the environment. What we mindfully notice can impact our approach strategy and our further interactions with that animal.

To explore existing mindfulness within our animal relationships, it comes down to our interactions. Mindfulness moves from a general concept to a professional skill when we learn to pay attention during our daily interactions and when we commit to practicing mindfulness during those interactive sessions.

### **What Does Mindfulness ‘look like’ in terms of Expert Animal Care**

Steve Martin wrote a brilliant paper entitled ‘The Top 10 Behaviors of Expert Animal Trainers’ and presented it at the ABMA conference in 2017. In this paper, the skills of expert level trainers are explored, and the top ten behaviors mentioned require a high level of mindfulness to be performed most effectively. His list of the top ten behaviors of expert trainers is as follows:

1. Commits to using the most positive, least intrusive training methods
2. Empowers animals with control
3. Constantly adjusts what they do in response to what the animal does
4. Builds a big trust account

5. Minimizes the use of time out
6. Accepts responsibility for their animals' behavior
7. Demonstrates flexibility
8. Practices two-way communication
9. Backs up every use of the bridge with a well-established reinforcer
10. Demonstrates a commitment to welfare

Martin defines a skill as a product of learning combined with practice. None of the skills listed above come completely natural to most humans, and it's the same with mindfulness. Training is all about communication and the dual exchange of information. The trainer comes with 50% of the information and the animal comes with 50% of the information. The method by which information is exchanged matters. Martin sums up this notion up with a quote:

"The best *training* occurs when there is a clear exchange of information, both from the trainer to the animal and from the animal to the trainer. An expert *trainer* gives an animal a voice through its body language and behavioral choices. They respond to even the subtlest "tells" that the animal is uncomfortable or confused, and dynamically makes appropriate adjustments in the *training*."

During training, the consequences of mindfulness are very beneficial for all involved, people and animals alike. If you choose to practice mindfulness as a skill, think about what's in it for the animals *you* work with daily:

- More learning occurs during more effective training
- Behavior is operationalized instead of labeled
- Deposits are regularly placed in trust accounts
- Withdrawals are limited and often backed up by a high trust account
- Animals have a voice that is acknowledged and respected
- Work becomes connection and connection makes everything more fun
- Higher welfare is inevitable

At NEI, we explore new ideas constantly and we strive for welfare to always be our guide as we make decisions regarding our training and our animals. AZA's definition for welfare is "an animal's collective physical, mental, and emotional states over a period of time, and it measured on a continuum from good to poor". If welfare is our guide, then mindfulness is a must. Additionally, if high welfare is our top goal within our animal relationships, it ought to be just as important in our human relationships. So, what if we applied the same expert mindfulness to our human interactions?

### **Interpersonal Communication: Mindfulness and Mindlessness**

Are you an animal person or a people person? Or perhaps you could be both? In the professional animal field, it's common that most – if not all – of us are clearly animal people. Some of us might also be *people* people, but that kind of person can typically be harder to come

by...and for good reason. So, why is it so much easier and often so much more enjoyable to communicate with non-human animals? It's probable that humans tend to be primarily animal people because their past interactions with humans could've been punishing, while interacting with non-human animals often tends to be more reinforcing.

Communicating with a shared verbal language should lead to more cognitive understanding, but it often leads to confusion, obscurity, and frustration. Experiencing these things can be punishing, especially when one experiences them all at once and repeatedly over time. The four most common behavioral side effects of punishment are escape/avoidance behavior, generalized fear of the environment, aggression, and apathy. As we all know, interpersonal interactions between humans can be tricky and there can be a lot of moving parts.

If mindfulness is at play within our human interactions, that implies that we are paying attention to all sorts of things while interacting with others. In those cases, we would notice first impressions, general impressions, overall behavior, body language, attitude and demeanor, current environmental conditions, and even more. If we prioritize mindfulness and actively choose to pay attention to all these observable things, then our approach strategy and our subsequent interactions with that person are impacted. When mindfulness is not at play within our human interactions, communication becomes mindless, and this is where most people live. When communication is mindless, punishment comes into play and its detrimental side effects begin to take center stage. Chances are that we've all experienced the unfortunate fallouts of mindless communication throughout our personal and professional lives and it's not fun or productive to say the least. Contrasting to the behaviors of expert trainers, the top ten behaviors of mindless communicators include:

1. Often using negative, invasive, and/or passive-aggressive communication strategies
2. Hoarding power to maintain an illusion of being in control
3. Resisting change and has a fixed mindset
4. Avoiding holding themselves accountable when at fault
5. Taking frequent withdrawals from trust accounts
6. Placing blame or judgment on others instead of coming from a place of curiosity
7. An unwillingness to compromise or see other perspectives
8. Practicing one-way communication aka "my way or the highway"
9. Motivating behavior changes through punishment rather than reinforcement
10. Demonstrating a disregard for welfare (for themselves, the staff, and the environment)

### **What Does Mindfulness 'look like' in terms of Expert Human Communication and How Do You Train it?**

Let's recall what Steve Martin said about being an expert trainer:

"The best *training* occurs when there is a clear exchange of information, both from the trainer to the animal and from the animal to the trainer. An expert *trainer* gives an animal a voice

through its body language and behavioral choices. They respond to even the subtlest “tells” that the animal is uncomfortable or confused, and dynamically makes appropriate adjustments in the *training*.”

Now, let’s reframe this thought in terms of expert communication:

The best *communication* occurs when there is a clear exchange of information, from human to human. An expert *communicator* gives others a voice through their body language and behavioral choices. They respond to even the subtlest “tells” that someone is uncomfortable or confused, and dynamically makes appropriate adjustments in the *communication*.

Just like in a training session with an animal, during a conversation between two people each person comes with 50% of the information and the way that information is exchanged matters. The best communicators practice mindfulness with every interaction and the consequences are reinforcing *if you’re committed to making it a habit*. So, what does *that* look like? The best news about learning to become actively mindful is that you are training YOU, which means that you are in complete control of your approximations and your reinforcers regardless of the actions of the others around you. You can train yourself to use mindfulness constantly, even if the people around you don’t.

There are many ways to train a behavior as there are trainers to think them up. This is true for many behaviors including mindfulness. There can be several approaches to take while training a new behavior. Capturing mindfulness is more likely an option once mindfulness is established as a habit. Shaping mindfulness is a great way to turn it into a habit, but how do you do that?

There are many components to mindfulness, and I’ve found that choosing one aspect to focus on at a time is the best way to be set up for success. A great jumping off point for incorporating mindfulness into your daily routines is practicing living in the present moment. Being present is simple, but not easy; it comes with a range of benefits, giving us important information about ourselves and others. It not only provides us with valuable information, but it gives us a container for our reactivity, and it reminds us to use communication tools in real time.

We can develop a state of presence by:

- Orienting ourselves to our surroundings
- Focusing on our senses and what they’re experiencing in real time
- Identifying what keeps us connected and what disconnects us
- Physical mindfulness of the body with an anchor: focusing on grounding sensations using gravity, concentrated breathing, focusing on touch points, and more.
- Beginning and/or ending each day with an intention
- Beginning and/or ending each day with a gratitude list
- Creating a positive feedback loop by celebrating approximations of mindfulness instead of judging ourselves when we fall short of our own expectations

Besides setting the antecedents up for living in the present, there are many actions you can take that'll help you integrate mindfulness into your daily practice. Just like shaping a behavior with the animals we work with, it's best to pick one thing to shape at a time. Pick one of the following actions at a time, and then gradually add in others as you see these behaviors occur without hesitation:

- **Listen well:** give true *undivided* attention to the person you are interacting with and resist thinking of your comeback or interrupting before they are finished speaking.
- **Breathe intentionally:** pay attention to your breathing and notice if/how it's changing during interactions, intentionally take a deep breath *before* reacting; our breath is intimately connected to our voice and our voice is a huge part of our identity.
- **Assume good intentions:** without any doubt, *instantly* create a narrative in your mind that whomever you are interacting with could potentially be on your side and their perspective might add value to your present moment and your current thoughts; confidently imagine that no one is out to "get you".
- **Observe what's happening inside you:** *feel* your nervous system react and feel your emotions in real time, recognizing that it's all valid and purposeful.
- **Adjust your responses:** pause before any sort of reaction, allow yourself to notice your thoughts and impulse *before* you choose how to respond out loud, then proceed openly and honestly with kindness.
- **Tap into empathy:** be quick and willing to feel the emotions others may be experiencing; an empathetic perspective enhances connection to ourselves and others. Empathy is a quality of character that can change the world.

### Your Mindfulness Journey

Ultimately, my hope is that the information shared in this paper can be a starting line of curiosity for you as you recognize that you can train your mind to make all your interactions more meaningful and less stressful. I encourage you to test and apply different aspects of mindfulness with your non-human coworkers and your human coworkers and just start with an approach that comes easiest to you (remembering that none of this will seem easy at first). Repetition with an intentional mindfulness practice will boost your communication confidence and your effectiveness as an animal caretaker and a coworker. If you commit to making mindfulness a habit, you will witness your valuable trust accounts grow, your knack for empathy increase, your intense or uncomfortable emotions will be more easily manageable, and your overall welfare (and the welfare of those you interact with) will flourish. Trust me!

Choose mindfulness, it's silly and inefficient not to!

## **REFERENCES**

Sofer, Oren Jay. (2018) *Say What You Mean: A Mindful Approach to Nonviolent Communication*. Boulder, CO. Shambhala Publications, Inc.

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