



Performance Enhancement, Awareness & Knowledge

Participant's Workbook and Journal



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INTRODUCTION

mPEAK (Mindful Performance Enhancement, Awareness & Knowledge) is an intensive course in mindfulness training for those who seek a more balanced way to achieve their goals, both personal and professional, as well as attain new levels of performance and success. This cutting-edge training program is built around the latest brain research related to peak performance, resilience, focus, and “flow”. The mPEAK program enhances the human capacity of mindfulness through established and empirically supported practices and exercises. Mindfulness is effective precisely because it is a way of being and relating to all aspects of life, rather than a specific technique or tool for a particular goal. As with physical training, this brain-training program is based on the understanding that optimal outcomes occur most often when participants continue to engage in the practices and exercises on a daily basis as a part of their training regimen. The foundation of this program is drawn from the highly respected and empirically-supported Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) program, developed by Jon Kabat-Zinn, PhD. Additionally, the program incorporates specific practices and exercises formulated to correspond to recent neuroscientific findings, competitive advances, and related research regarding optimal performance.



HOW TO USE THIS WORKBOOK

This workbook is a companion to the mPEAK 3-day intensive or 8-week course. It organizes the informational material about mindfulness and performance into one resource to streamline the didactic portions of mPEAK. In the pages provided, you can also record insights and reflections on the various experiences you'll have along this journey. Your time in the mPEAK course will be distributed over the following categories:

Formal Mindfulness Meditation Practices Meditation is a specific period of practice often done in stillness and silence. Meditation training re-wires the brain through neuroplasticity to increase your capacity for presence, discernment and flow in your life, work and sport. The formal practices introduced in mPEAK are: The Body Scan, Awareness of Breath, Mental Noting, Mindful Movement and Self-Compassion.

Experiential Exercises These exercises are like a mirror to more clearly see the way you relate to various aspects of performance. By observing your own conditioned thoughts, habits and identities in the face of these challenges, you recognize what is serving your performance and what might be holding you back.

Didactic Topics Each section of this course offers just enough science and information to help you build a conceptual framework around mindfulness and ideally inspire you to practice. The emphasis of mPEAK is less on learning about mindfulness and more on actually being mindful.

Journal Exercises The workbook provides dedicated pages to reflect on your past experiences with various performance related topics. Journaling itself can be a mindfulness practice of observing and recording thoughts and feelings onto paper.

Dyads/ Triads Sharing your experience is an important part of deepening your awareness of yourself in relation to others. You are encouraged to connect with authenticity and vulnerability with as many other participants as possible. Participants often say they learn as much from the others sharing as from the course content.

Group Coaching and Discussion After each experiential exercise or formal practice, an invitation is offered for discussion and coaching around challenges or insights that may have come up. Coaching is a process of inquiry intended to deepen self-awareness and personalize strategies to integrate mindfulness into areas of life and performance. Even though only a few participants are coached after each activity, everyone can benefit from these interactions.

Operationalized Mindfulness Practices Sometimes referred to as “Informal Mindfulness Practices”, these are short, on the spot practices intended to integrate mindfulness into everyday life and performance activities. These are offered as home practices at the end of each section.





PRACTICING POSITIVITY

mPEAK lays a foundation for performance enhancement in the establishment of mindful awareness, which is allowing or accepting things as they are. When combined with the insights and practices from positive psychology, the conditions are created for making intentional shifts towards more positive mental and emotional states. This section will explore the intersections of mindfulness, character strengths and gratitude.



TOPIC: ALWAYS, ALREADY PRESENT GOODNESS

Being present to the good that exists in each moment is a capacity that can be developed in the same way that interoceptive awareness, focused attention and self-regulation can be developed. It may have taken you weeks of practicing the body scan before you could perceive a tingle in your toe or the sensations of your beating heart. Your toe has always been attached to your foot and your heart has been beating your entire life, you just may not have had enough awareness to experience it. This is similar to the practice of positivity. There is a dimension of natural reality that already includes conditions worthy of gratitude --you just don't have the capacity to experience it in its fullness...yet.

Just consider the huge amount of ordinary gifts that already exists in this moment. You've got a place to call home full of nice things. In your pocket you have a device that is simultaneously a telephone, camera, video recorder, watch, infinite music, all of your photos and all of your friends photos, your calendar, a calculator, weather predictor, the newspaper, an entire library of books, and a shopping cart. Your body breathes, pumps blood and metabolizes food. The sun shines, the seasons change, and brightly colored flowers appear out of dirt. You're educated and talented. In fact you're so good at things that people pay you for it. Believe it or not, we in fact have less famine, war, poverty and disease than any other time in history. But most importantly, people love you and you love them back. You're alive. If heaven exists, it is nothing more than the mind that can recognize that it's all already here right now.



EXERCISE: OVERCOMING NEGATIVITY BIAS

With all the natural goodness around us, why aren't we already naturally positive? Why does this have to be an intentional practice? According to evolutionary psychology, human beings inherited a "negativity bias" from our cave man ancestors. This means we are conditioned to pay more attention to negative experiences and information compared with the positive. You can likely think of plenty of examples from your own life where this is true. Looking at your body in the mirror, you probably don't automatically feel overwhelming appreciation and awe for the synchronization of your body's many complex biological systems. Instead you notice a pimple, a wrinkle or an extra few pounds along with your "Inner Critical Coaches" opinion about it. This was seen in the "performance review scenario" from section 2. Just the suggestion of feedback from a peer after a performance triggers a story that we're going to be criticized.

Neuroscientist Rick Hanson says, "the brain is like Velcro for negative experiences, but Teflon for positive ones." This makes evolutionary sense because long ago, humans needed to prioritize processing of negative information in order to survive. Here's an example that's been often used: if you ignore the signs of kindness of your neighbor, you lose a friend, but if you ignore the signs of an ambushing tiger – or an oncoming car, you may lose your life. Nature has developed our minds in such a way that pays more attention to the metaphorical stick than the carrot (punishment over reward).

This negativity bias is attributed to a part of our brain called the amygdala, which is part of the default mode network (section 5). This part of the brain uses two thirds of its neuronal power to search for bad news. The amygdala is primed to find the negative and once it does, the fight or flight alarm goes off and the negative event is immediately stored in the memory. To store a positive memory however, research suggests that you need to hold the feeling in your memory for more than a dozen seconds. Therefore, people have a tendency to blow negative information and events out of proportion and minimize or even forget positive events.

Science shows that with practice we can train our brain to improve our outlook, attitude and intentionally create a brighter experience. Barbara Fredrickson's "Broaden and Build" theory suggests that people need to experience a ratio of anywhere between 3:1 and 6:1, positive to negative emotions in order to thrive. Mindfulness can help us notice the positive moments that typically fly under the radar such as the completion of a project, a good training session or a fun conversation with a friend. When we intentionally notice and pause to savor or memorize these moments, we're practicing "taking in the good" which rewires our brain for more positivity. This "positive brain training" will be practiced in this section with intentional gratitude and use of natural character strengths.

TOPIC:

DEFINING A STRENGTH

The Center for Applied Positive Psychology, defines strengths as “our pre-existing patterns of thought, feeling, and behavior that are authentic, energizing, and which lead to our best performance”. What is meant by authentic is that the strength feels like “the real you”. These are intrinsic qualities that come naturally to you, that you enjoy using and that are often related to a sense of purpose. When it’s said that strengths are energizing, it means that when you’re using your strengths, there will be a sense of aliveness and excitement. People using their strengths tend to be more communicative, animated and enthusiastic. Using your strengths is associated with a long list of well-researched benefits including better performance and greater wellbeing. Utilizing your unique strengths enhances well-being because you’re doing what you naturally do best, which helps generate feelings of autonomy, competence, confidence, and self-esteem. Performance is enhanced because using strengths encourages the experience of “flow”, rather than struggling upriver against the currents of your natural capacities.

Character strengths are viewed as capacities of cognition, conation, affect, and behavior—the psychological ingredients for displaying virtues or human goodness.

Chris Peterson



TOPIC: MINDFULLY USING STRENGTHS AND USING STRENGTHS TO BE MINDFUL

The practice of mindfulness is strengths and the practice of strengths is mindfulness. They cannot be separated. To practice mindful breathing or walking is to exercise self-regulation. To express a curious and kindly openness to the present moment experience is to practice mindfulness. To deploy strengths in a mindful way is to strengthen mindfulness, and a strong mindfulness is a recipe for more balanced and mindful strengths use. -Ryan Niemiec

Learning how to leverage your Character Strengths can directly support your mindfulness practice by energizing your meditations and helping you creatively overcome obstacles to practicing. Let's take for example three random strengths from the Values in Action (VIA) Character survey: Love of Learning, Zest and Curiosity. A love of learning can inspire a deep dive into books about the science and philosophies underpinning mindfulness practice. This knowledge in turn can help overcome skepticism and motivate the implementation of the meditative practices. The strength of zest can be a support to the hindrances to mindfulness practice. Along the mindfulness path, there are inevitable periods of boredom, doubt and ambivalence towards one's meditation practice. During these times, zest can provide the energy to again rise with a new fresh perspective and renewed commitment to practice. Another strength, curiosity, can be the antidote to the seductive inner voice that says, "You can't meditate today, you need a cup of coffee while you get through the pile of emails." Rather than automatically abandoning your practice, curiosity says, "hmm, what's that about?" Curiosity is the willingness to explore and refute the subtle resistances to keeping your commitment to your morning meditation.

Using our personal strengths can enhance mindfulness but mindfulness can also help you better leverage your strengths in life, work or sport. In this section, mindfulness will help you become aware of what your top strengths are as well as how and when to best use them for the greatest impact on your performance and well-being.

JOURNAL:

What words would someone who knows you well (family, friend, co-worker, teammate) use to describe you when you're at your best?

How have these strengths served your performance and well-being? Give specific examples.



INFORMAL PRACTICE: STRENGTHS SPOTTING

"Strengths Spotting" is the name for the practice of purposefully bringing mindful attention to strengths that are working well in either your own performance or in the performance of others around you. Strengths Spotting can be a powerful practice for counteracting the evolutionarily inherited negativity bias and cultivating the ability to witness what is good and wholesome in yourself and others rather than what is annoying, insufficient and defective.

Strength Spotting for Yourself

Once your strengths have been identified, the next step is to intentionally become aware of when and where you're naturally using them and observing the impact they have on your attitude and energy. You may also become aware of how using your strengths impacts others around you. To practice this throughout the day, set the intention to become aware of moments of flow, effectiveness, fulfillment or any other feelings of positivity. In these moments, pause and ask yourself what strength you're currently using. Label the strength and continue "taking in the good" of what you're doing. By practicing this regularly you can learn how to recreate similar conditions, giving yourself more opportunities for peak performance and flow.

Strengths Spotting for Others (Sympathetic Joy)

According to Strength Researcher Alex Lindley, when we are practicing strength spotting with our co-workers, teammates or family, we attempt to name or label what it is about a person that shines. This can be done in conversation with someone you know but it can also be done while observing the way people interact from a distance. It requires us to take a deep and non-judgmental look at the people around us and ask the question of ourselves, "what is this person doing well?". By intentionally feeling this "sympathetic joy" for others being their best, we increase our odds of positivity by a factor of however many people we encounter each day.



EXERCISE: STRENGTH SPOTTING CALENDAR

<i>What Strength did you observe?</i>	<i>What thoughts, emotions or sensations did you notice?</i>	<i>What was the impact of using your strength on your performance well-being?</i>



TOPIC: STRENGTHS IN AND OUT OF BALANCE

You've heard the phrase, "your greatest strengths can be your greatest weaknesses." Your strengths can be both an asset and a liability to your performance, depending on how you use them. Even the Foundational Attitudes of the Mindful Performer can decrease performance and well-being when used mindlessly.

For example, the strength of "humor" has many pro-social and emotional benefits and when used under the right conditions can set a team at ease and keep spirits light. When used at the wrong time, humor can feel awkward or express an underlying cynicism, which can make a difficult situation worse. Humor can also be over-used to bypass or make light of a difficult situation that really does need serious attention. When it comes to a balanced use of strengths, discernment is the key.

Another way strengths can cause stress and decrease performance is by becoming attached or "over-identified" with them. If someone has the strength of "charisma" but becomes ill for a period, that strength may not be available. The strengths of "spotlight" or "wisdom" might be available when leading a group but nowhere to be found when at home, playing the role of parent. The ego's need to be a particular strength in order to reinforce a the illusion of a stable identity can leave people feeling lost in it's absence. This perceived loss of identity is what makes an injury, retirement or even a vacation lead to immense suffering.

The key to mindfully keeping your strengths in balance is to assess any situation and then use the appropriate strength in the appropriate amount at the appropriate time. Remember that strengths are an aspect of you self but they don't define you. Practice "non-attachment" and "non-identification" with strengths. It feels good to use your strengths when available but it causes suffering to need to be your strengths at all times. Enjoy the opportunity while it lasts, and then let it go.



USING THE FOUNDATIONAL ATTITUDES OF MPEAK OUT OF BALANCE

Foundational Attitude	<i>Underplayed</i>	<i>Overplayed</i>
Open	Closed, rigid, judgmental, narrow-minded	Lack of discernment and boundaries, gullible
Courage	Timid, "wimpy", fearful, hesitant	Dangerous, risky, reckless, oblivious, irresponsible, hasty
Non-Attachment	Attached, identified	Indifferent, un-committed
Balanced Effort	Helpless, "quitter", sluggish, lazy	Striving, ruthless, pushy, driven
Focus	Distracted, pre-occupied, confused	Narrow, myopic, exclusive
Compassion	Narcissistic, selfish vain, righteous	Enabling, push-over, martyr
Disciplined	Distracted, reactive, "weak-willed"	Hyper-vigilant, controlling



EXERCISE: STRENGTHS OUT OF BALANCE

How have your strengths become weaknesses? Be specific.

What is the impact or cost to your performance?

What is the cost to others around you?



TOPIC, EXERCISE AND JOURNAL : GRATITUDE

Another well-researched positivity practice is that of gratitude. According to Professor at UC Davis and expert on the science of gratitude, Robert Emmons, "People who are consistently grateful have been found to be relatively happier, more energetic, and more hopeful and to report experiencing more frequent positive emotions. They also tend to be more helpful and empathic, more spiritual and religious, more forgiving, and less materialistic than others who are less grateful. Furthermore, the more a person is inclined to gratitude, the less likely he or she is to be depressed, anxious, lonely, envious, or neurotic."

The practice of gratitude sharpens your attention for the good and the positive in your life, which helps you appreciate things that you'd otherwise take for granted. This power of gratitude is so profound that by simply writing and delivering a thank you letter to someone expressing why you're grateful for them and the impact they've had on your life, there was a reported increase in their level of well-being that lasted for up to two months.

When participants in an MRI reported feelings of gratitude, their brains showed activity in a set of regions located in the medial pre-frontal cortex. This area of the brain is associated with understanding other people's perspectives, empathy, and feelings of relief. This is also a primary area of the brain that is connected to the systems in the body and brain that regulates emotion and supports the process of stress relief.

Write down 10 things you're grateful for in this moment. These can be small and insignificant things that you usually overlook, including people, places, things and feelings, or states of mind

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.
- 6.
- 7.
- 8.
- 9.
- 10



- *Now read your list, one at a time, spending a few moments savoring each.*
- *Watch the thoughts, images, emotions and feelings that come up as you reflect.*
- *Allow the feelings of gratitude to wash over you. And if you don't feel anything warm or fuzzy, that's ok too. You can't force a feeling. Gratitude is a muscle and the intention to feel has value even if you don't feel it now.*

What is the experience of gratitude like in your mind, body and heart?

Were there any challenges with the practice? How did you work with them?

How might being grateful impact your performance?



TOPIC AND JOURNAL: GRATITUDE FOR DIFFICULTY

As long as you are breathing there is more right with you than wrong with you, no matter what is wrong with you.

Jon Kabat-Zinn

There is a traditional Buddhist prayer: "May I be given the appropriate difficulties so that my heart can truly open with compassion". It's fairly easy to be grateful for a beautiful sunset, good friends or life going your way. It's a far more advanced practice to be grateful for misfortune. But consider how many of your character strengths that enhance your performance today were actually formed as compensations for past vulnerabilities. Consider how much you've learned from a break up, a failed project or receiving difficult feedback. You may not be at a point where you'd ask for any of this to happen again, but can you practice gratitude for the lessons and growth catalyzed through past challenges? How about current challenges?

Write about a difficult life experience that eventually led to improved well-being and enhanced performance.

Write about a current challenge from the lens of gratitude.



TOPIC: “THE PITFALLS OF POSITIVITY”

There are very few who’ve been practicing long enough to be truly positive at all times. Life is filled with challenges and delivers a diverse array of pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral events. A truly positive person like the Dalai Lama holds an attitude of acceptance even in the face of life’s unfairness without ever denying that the unfairness exists. Many beginning mindfulness students believe that if they are “doing it right” they should always feel positive and wonder what is wrong with them when they don’t.

There is an important distinction to be made between “Positive Thinking” and what we’re calling “Practicing Positivity” in mPEAK. Practicing Positivity is “inclining the mind toward joy” by intentionally noticing the everyday gifts that are always already around you. In contrast, trying to think positively in the midst of a difficult experience can feel forced and inauthentic. Watch out for reflexive positivity or too quickly re-framing the situation with a platitude like, “it is what it is” or “this too shall pass”. This might be the “Fake Reaction” (from Module 5) masquerading as a mindfulness practice. There is a time and place where these very same statements can be an expression of wisdom and truth but when used as an automatic reaction to pain, these statements are examples of “spiritual bypassing”.

Spiritual bypassing is defined by John Welwood as “the tendency to use spiritual ideas and practices to sidestep or avoid facing unresolved emotional issues, psychological wounds, and unfinished developmental tasks.” Attempting to impose positive thinking when what is truly needed is compassion will only postpone the healing and understanding that comes through mindfully processing and being with the difficult experience. Under these conditions, equanimity may be a better practice than positivity.

Another pitfall of positivity is over-identification with being a positive person. Nobody is always ever one way- positive or negative. As Jon Kabat-Zinn says, “we live the full catastrophe”. Life is dynamic and our personalities and moods are far too complex to reduce to being a positive person. Feeling obligated, entitled or deserving of a positive life at all times will surly lead to unrealistic expectations, disappointment and suffering.

You’ve likely noticed a theme in mPEAK: balance is the key to practice. The middle path is always the way. With awareness of these potential challenges, you can trust yourself to practice positivity for the benefit of your own performance and all the people who’s lives you touch.

