

Ellen Langer: Science of Mindlessness and Mindfulness by On Being

The following is the audio and transcript of an onbeing.org interview between Krista Tippett and Ellen Langer.

ELLEN LANGER: We have these categories, work, life, and we have brains, brawn, so on. All the different distinctions that we make. We make them mindfully, and then we start to use them mindlessly, forgetting that when we're at work, we're people. We have the same needs we had when we were on vacation. And you should get to the point where you're treating yourself whether you're at work or at play in basically the same way.

[music: "Seven League Boots" by Zoe Keating]

KRISTA TIPPETT, HOST: Ellen Langer is a social psychologist who some have dubbed "the mother of mindfulness." But she defines mindfulness with counterintuitive simplicity: the simple act of actively noticing things — with a result of increased health, competence, and happiness. Her take on mindfulness has never involved contemplation or meditation or yoga. It comes straight out of her provocative, unconventional studies, which have been suggesting for decades what neuroscience is pointing at now: our experience of everything is formed by the words and ideas we attach to them. What makes a vacation a vacation is not only a change of scenery — but the fact that we let go of the mindless everyday illusion that we are in control.

Ellen Langer has shown it's possible to become physiologically younger through a changed frame of mind; to find joy in what was experienced as drudgery by renaming it as play; and to induce weight loss by substituting the label "exercise" for labor.

I'm Krista Tippett, and this is On Being.

[music: "Seven League Boots" by Zoe Keating]

MS. TIPPETT: Ellen Langer is a professor of psychology at Harvard University. I spoke with her in 2014.

MS. TIPPETT: I do always start my interviews by asking, was there a religious or spiritual or philosophical background to your childhood that had anything to do with ...

DR. LANGER: No.

MS. TIPPETT: ...what you now describe as mindfulness? I mean, was that there...

DR. LANGER: No.

MS. TIPPETT: No?

DR. LANGER: No, not at all.

MS. TIPPETT: Nothing at all?

DR. LANGER: My parents were wonderfully supportive.

MS. TIPPETT: Yeah.

DR. LANGER: And my mother was so supportive, she would have had me laminated if she could have. [laughs] Always bragging about me.

MS. TIPPETT: Yeah.

DR. LANGER: And I think it was because they were so supportive that I had the strength, courage, whatever, without feeling it that way, to ask questions and to be out in the world the way many others might have been inhibited.

MS. TIPPETT: Mm-hmm.

DR. LANGER: Also, people are constantly saying to me, why are you smiling? And so, I was aware very early on that most of the people I was meeting, in all different environments, were less than happy.

MS. TIPPETT: So, one of the things you've said is that most of us live mindlessly virtually all of the time. And you say that with a smile on your face, but you mean it.

DR. LANGER: Yes. Yes. Oh, I mean it. [laughs]

MS. TIPPETT: [laughs]

DR. LANGER: And I find that, I'm not infrequently, not frequently, but not infrequently, I, too, am mindless. As I'm fond of saying, whatever you're doing, you're doing it either mindfully or mindlessly.

MS. TIPPETT: Mm-hmm.

DR. LANGER: And the consequences of being in one state of mind or the other are enormous. So, in study after study, we plug in, you know, we manipulate this mindfulness. And change the measures from study to study. And, almost no matter what we put in, that when we encourage people to be more mindful, we find enormous improvements.

MS. TIPPETT: OK, so let me ask you the question this way. I'm just wondering, did you ever investigate this mindfulness the way Buddhism talked about, or have you always just explored it...

DR. LANGER: No.

MS. TIPPETT: ...separately?

DR. LANGER: Yeah. Well, actually, in the early '70s, I was studying mindlessness.

MS. TIPPETT: OK. OK.

DR. LANGER: And then, you know, and found and continue to find that...

MS. TIPPETT: Oh, that's so interesting.

DR. LANGER: ...mindlessness is pervasive.

MS. TIPPETT: Yeah.

DR. LANGER: Most people are just not there, and they're not there to know that they're not there. And when I address the difference between mindlessness and mindfulness — so since my mindlessness was leading in my thinking, there was no reason for me to appeal to anything Eastern. This was all a Western scientific notion I was developing.

MS. TIPPETT: Right. So interesting.

DR. LANGER: And so, mindfulness, for me, is the very simple process of actively noticing new things. When you actively notice new things that puts you in the present, makes you sensitive to context. As you're noticing new things, it's engaging. And it turns out, after a lot of research, that we find that it's literally, not just figuratively, enlivening. So the Eastern notions — I did research, again, back in the '80s, on transcendental meditation. And that's also, meditation is also useful, but it's quite different — different ways of getting to the same place. Meditation, no matter what kind of meditation, is engaged to produce post-meditative mindfulness.

MS. TIPPETT: Right. Right.

DR. LANGER: OK. And the mindfulness, as I and my students...

MS. TIPPETT: It's a means to an end and you're going...

DR. LANGER: Exactly.

MS. TIPPETT: ...straight to the end.

DR. LANGER: Exactly, exactly. So, for us, you know, you're noticing new things. You're there. And I think that over the last 10, maybe even 20 years, that if you look at all of the different forms of treatments to become more mindful, this means to the same end, that they have become more and more like what we've been studying from the beginning. Meditation that used to be required 20 minutes twice a day is slowly changing. But I find that what lots of these people do, and it's also part of folk psychology, where you tell people, you know, "be there, be in the moment." When you're not in the moment, you're not there to know you're not there. So it's really an empty instruction. So...

MS. TIPPETT: And I think, you know, some of the language you use that's just slightly different, that's slightly original, over against...

DR. LANGER: Just slightly original, excuse me.

MS. TIPPETT: Well [laughs] no, very, very deeply original. But I mean...

DR. LANGER: OK [laughs].

MS. TIPPETT: ...I mean, original. It's nuanced in a way — it's subtlety different.

DR. LANGER: Yeah.

MS. TIPPETT: So, to talk about presence, I mean, it's not that you never use the term presence, but you more often use the term noticing.

DR. LANGER: Yeah, noticing — well, because you can...

MS. TIPPETT: Noticing new things, yeah.

DR. LANGER: I don't think you can make a decision that I'm going to be present. What does that mean? You know, so that the people who tell you to meditate, there's an assumption that over time that will put you in the present. But if you're actively noticing things — so, you're going to home tonight and if you live with somebody, notice five new things about that person. It's very — it can be very specific. And what will happen is the person will start to come alive for you again. And that facilitates the relationship.

MS. TIPPETT: You also describe in a very illuminating way how this begins early, early in our lives — that the unconditional way we learn in childhood, we pick up rules before we have a chance to question them...

DR. LANGER: Yes.

MS. TIPPETT: ...we're given rules, and facts, and names for everything.

DR. LANGER: Right. And, you know, so we're led to believe that there's a single way of viewing things, but then at some point, somebody tells us that there are other people that might have a different view. So, we sort of acknowledge that. You know, if you say to somebody is there more than — is there only one way of looking at things? Everybody will say there are many ways. But then they go through their lives looking at it from a single perspective. We really — we're afraid of uncertainty, and what I say in response to that is that we need to distinguish between what I call universal uncertainty, and personal uncertainty. So, personal uncertainty is: "I don't know, I know I don't know, maybe you know, therefore I have to fake it in some way." Or feel bad about not knowing it or whatever.

MS. TIPPETT: Right.

DR. LANGER: Universal uncertainty is an awareness: "I don't know, you don't know, in some sense we really can't know." And that then the interaction proceeds differently. And so, in a personal context, when you do something that seems to me to be not right in some way, hurtful, you know, whatever, that if I'm operating within this absolute framework, this mindless framework, I then draw all sorts of negative attributions about you. I expect that you're this kind of person. I then label you that way, respond to you in the future that way, and it's almost impossible for you to break away from that. In this other way of viewing the world, where you really understand that — you come to

understand that people's behavior makes sense from their perspective, or else they wouldn't have done it.

MS. TIPPETT: Because you're not clinging...

DR. LANGER: So that when...

MS. TIPPETT: ...so tightly...

DR. LANGER: Exactly.

MS. TIPPETT: ...and in an unreflected way to what you think order and stability are about, and what you think happened as though that's the only reality.

DR. LANGER: Exactly. Exactly. Yeah, and so then, then you come to see — I mean, if you just ask yourself — what sense does that behavior make? So you might see me as gullible but in fact, what I am is trusting.

MS. TIPPETT: Mm-hmm.

DR. LANGER: I might see somebody else as — somebody might see somebody as rigid, but what they are is stable. And when you do this, you can sort of imagine how all sorts of interpersonal conflict falls by the wayside. Right? That all of the reasons you're fighting with this person, or you dislike this person, whether it's at home or at work, now you might have disliked them because they were so damned impulsive. But now you see they're spontaneous. And so if it's the case that now I see that the things that are happening to me are a function of my view of them, I needn't be so afraid.

MS. TIPPETT: Right.

DR. LANGER: So then I stand tall, and I can go out in the world, and all sorts of good things are going to happen. And, you know, each part, again, reinforcing the other.

[music: "Sunrise" by Hauschka]

MS. TIPPETT: I'm Krista Tippett and this is On Being. Today with social psychologist Ellen Langer. In one of her most famous studies, she found that it was possible to lower obesity and diabetes in chambermaids, who spent their entire days in motion, by essentially helping them name their everyday activity not as work but as "exercise." And her book, Counterclockwise, tells the story of her experiment to demonstrably turn the clock back on age with a group of men in their 70s and 80s.

[music: "Sunrise" by Hauschka]

MS. TIPPETT: You do, I think, quite often work with organizations, businesses...

DR. LANGER: Yes.

MS. TIPPETT: ...and you sometimes give very practical, kind of, exercises, thought experiments to people, to put them into this mode.

DR. LANGER: Right, and one of the things that I've recently spent some time with and have started to write about it with respect to business, is what I think started off as a

good idea, where people would say you must have work/life balance.

MS. TIPPETT: Right.

DR. LANGER: And, work/life balance is certainly better than work/life imbalance. [laughs] But I think that the concept is basically mindless. And the reason for that is that we have these categories — work, life, and we have brains, brawn, so on. All the different distinctions that we make, we make them mindfully, and then we start to use them mindlessly, forgetting that when we're at work, we're people. We have the same needs we had when we were on vacation. That when we're talking to people, the people we're talking to also have the same needs. And so on. And I can elaborate on this in a moment. But the idea, I think, to replace work/life balance, which treats these categories as independent, is work/life integration. And you should get to the point where you're treating yourself whether you're at work or at play in basically the same way.

MS. TIPPETT: Have you studied how this kind of change in the experience through just the language you're applying, whether it's work or play?

DR. LANGER: Yeah. We did a few studies where we had people do things where they were given a label. Either work or play. And in this particular study, it was interesting because what we had people do was to read and evaluate cartoons, jokes. So you would think that that content would have been fun.

MS. TIPPETT: Right.

DR. LANGER: When they were doing it under the aegis of work, what happened is their minds wandered, they didn't enjoy it. One of the ways we knew that was when we asked them how much they would need to be paid in order to do more of this. For example, they needed a lot more, you know, than the other group, who was just playing. In some environments, it's difficult, because you don't want to be joking when you're talking to this person if they have a lot of power over you. But, you want yourself never to take yourself too seriously, and to know that whatever you're doing can be done in many different ways.

MS. TIPPETT: You also did this fascinating study with chambermaids, who, if you looked objectively at the work they were doing, they were moving all day long, right?

DR. LANGER: Right.

MS. TIPPETT: They were by any definition exercising. But they thought of it as work.

DR. LANGER: Right.

MS. TIPPETT: And then, it was also this example, wasn't it, where you changed the language and it actually had these incredible physiological effects.

DR. LANGER: Yeah, and it's interesting that you're pointing this out. I was just talking to one of my graduate students right before coming to the station about several other studies that we're doing on language. And it probably runs through my whole career, where you change a word or two here or there, and you get vastly different effects. The chambermaid study was part of a series that I had begun back, I guess — started the research in '79, I remember, because we published it in '81. And that was first reported in this Mindfulness book. That was the retreat study where I took old men to a timeless

retreat that had been retrofitted to 20 years earlier and had them live there as if it was the present, speaking in the present tense, and so on, and ...

MS. TIPPETT: But as though they were 20 years younger.

DR. LANGER: Right, exactly.

MS. TIPPETT: Yeah.

DR. LANGER: And the effects from that study were phenomenal, basically because these were really old people. You know, these people were in their mid-to-late 80s, but that's when 80 was 80. Not the new 60.

MS. TIPPETT: Yeah.

DR. LANGER: This was a long time ago. But, so they — what drove that study was the same thing that drove the chambermaid study, and I can talk more about either one. But it's this — call it “the mind/body unity theory.” So, it occurred to me that mind and body are just words and that — you have a question?

MS. TIPPETT: No, no. I was just — I'm just ...

DR. LANGER: You just — you have a breath?

MS. TIPPETT: I'm breathing appreciatively. Yeah.

DR. LANGER: Oh, okay. You know, and so, it could have been mind, body, and elbow. And then we would have had a different conception of people.

MS. TIPPETT: [laughs] Right.

DR. LANGER: And so, it seemed to me that if, at least for heuristic purposes, just to see how far we could push this — if we say that mind and body are one, we're no longer asking questions like how do you get from the mind to the body? Even though the medical world — not that long ago [laughs] actually — and the medical model, believe that the only thing that's going to affect the body as far as disease is concerned, is the introduction of a pathogen. And that psychology mattered very little.

MS. TIPPETT: Right.

DR. LANGER: And now, you know, that's changed. But my view is more extreme than the way the medical world and — some of the medical world, and other psychologists studying this believe. Because they're still looking for the way the mind influences the body. But if we put them back together, then it's one, and it — the question doesn't make the same amount of sense. So what we do is we say let's treat the mind and body as one. If we do that, we put this thing in a context; both the mind and the body are in that same context. So the first test of this was this study with elderly men, where we're going to put their mind in an earlier time. And as a result of living in that environment in this retreat we had set up for a week, their hearing improved, their vision improved, their memory improved, their strength improved. At the end of this they were evaluated by people who knew nothing about the study as looking significantly younger than comparison years.

MS. TIPPETT: So they — their minds pretended that they were 20 years younger...

DR. LANGER: Well, we're hoping that...

MS. TIPPETT: ...and they started to seem 20 years younger.

DR. LANGER: Yeah, exactly.

MS. TIPPETT: ...in every way.

DR. LANGER: You know, but it's not just, you know — when we talk about pretending...

MS. TIPPETT: Right. Or placebo.

DR. LANGER: ...we have to be careful, because...

MS. TIPPETT: Yeah.

DR. LANGER: ...you know, sometimes when you're pretending, you're aware you're pretending.

MS. TIPPETT: Yep.

DR. LANGER: And so your mind is in one place, and that's where your body's going to be, not in that new state, but if you fully get into it...

MS. TIPPETT: Yeah.

DR. LANGER: So, for instance, one of the things that I would expect — and I probably should do this at some point — is we take actors that are playing the part of somebody very different from themselves, and they're good actors. That if we took all the physiological measures, we would find they were — the measures were more like the person — the role they were playing, than the person, him or herself.

[music: "Panang" by Critters Buggin]

DR. LANGER: This Counterclockwise study...

MS. TIPPETT: And that was the men — the age experiment.

DR. LANGER: Right, the people going back to the retreat.

MS. TIPPETT: Yeah.

DR. LANGER: Was then part of a — the basis of a series that the BBC put together. So the study was replicated in England, and more recently in South Korea and the Netherlands. And that feels good, because those are such different cultures, yet it seems to work the same way.

MS. TIPPETT: Well, I...

DR. LANGER: And so...

MS. TIPPETT: Yes, and I think what should also should be pretty remarkable for you is — I

mean, you were doing that study, what'd you say, 19 — in the '70's.

DR. LANGER: '79 was when we started it.

MS. TIPPETT: Right, but then you made this off-the-cuff remark a minute ago about how this is when 80 was 80 and not the new 60. And, the fact is, that now, 30 years on from when you started doing this study...

DR. LANGER: Yes.

MS. TIPPETT: ...we have had this cultural transformation in our imagination about what it means to be 40 or 50 or 60 or 80. And literally, I mean, I feel like in the last 10 years, you know, 60 is not what 60 was. Fifty is not what 50 was.

DR. LANGER: Right.

MS. TIPPETT: It's amazing.

DR. LANGER: Yeah, and I think so, too. Not about the studied effect, although I do find that amazing.

MS. TIPPETT: No, but, I mean, I'm saying that there's actually...

DR. LANGER: The culture has...

MS. TIPPETT: ...has borne out the question you were asking.

DR. LANGER: Yes. Yeah.

MS. TIPPETT: If we change our minds about it, would the body change as well?

DR. LANGER: Yeah, and that if you just look at the activities that people are willing to engage right now.

MS. TIPPETT: Yeah.

DR. LANGER: I think yoga is wonderful. I think running is wonderful. I think that anything that somebody takes on to improve themselves, that — without suffering if they're not doing it well enough or what have you — is good. I think that there's a component of it that's not at all dissimilar from everything — this mind/body unity idea. Once I decide that I'm going to start running because when I run, I'm going to be healthy, now I'm believing I'm being healthy...

MS. TIPPETT: Yeah.

DR. LANGER: ...and that should translate into greater health. What I'm saying is many of these practices have a large placebo effect and that the placebo itself can be explained by this theory. And, you had — this I found so interesting when I started to think about it — that here you have this wonderful, wonderful drug — placebo.

MS. TIPPETT: Yeah.

DR. LANGER: That because of the way it was studied in the medical world, it was —

anybody who was trying to assess the efficacy of a drug was upset when it didn't outperform the placebo.

MS. TIPPETT: Right.

DR. LANGER: However, that placebo was curing a lot of people. So it's a very, very powerful medication.

MS. TIPPETT: Yeah.

DR. LANGER: And so, my work has been devoted to try to find a way over time and all these different studies, to return that control over our health back to ourselves.

MS. TIPPETT: Right. I think it was a conversation I had with Esther Sternberg, who's an immunologist, about how — I mean, all the placebo is doing is unlocking your brain's own pharmacy.

DR. LANGER: Right.

MS. TIPPETT: But for some reason, we've never thought of placebo that way. You're right. We've thought of it as still this thing that doctors give that is illusory.

DR. LANGER: Yeah. And not just illusory, that it was a bad a thing.

MS. TIPPETT: Yeah.

DR. LANGER: You know, that if people early on — I don't think this would be the case now, but if people were told, and there's evidence for this, actually, if people are told that the pill they took is a placebo, it doesn't work.

MS. TIPPETT: Yeah. Right.

DR. LANGER: You know, um...

MS. TIPPETT: And then it doesn't work, right? If they know that.

DR. LANGER: Exactly. Exactly.

[music: "Kid A" by Punch Brothers]

MS. TIPPETT: You can listen again and share this conversation with Ellen Langer through our website, onbeing.org.

I'm Krista Tippett. On Being continues in a moment.

[music: "Kid A" by Punch Brothers]

MS. TIPPETT: I'm Krista Tippett and this is On Being. Today: a conversation with social psychologist Ellen Langer. Her unconventional, creative portfolio of studies, have long suggested what neuroscience is now pointing at: that our experiences of everything are formed by the words and ideas we attach to them.

Ellen Langer was one of the earliest pioneers in drawing a connection between

mindlessness and unhappiness — and between mindfulness and health, along with figures like Jon Kabat-Zinn and Herbert Benson. Distinctively though, her approach does not in the first instance incorporate any technique like meditation, or breathing, or yoga.

MS. TIPPETT: I want to move on and talk to you about — you said something really intriguing when we started about believing that we are at an evolution in consciousness. That mindfulness has emerged full-blown, as a word suddenly that everyone in America knows.

DR. LANGER: Yeah.

MS. TIPPETT: And I really enjoyed a blog post you wrote, I think it was a blog post you wrote about — I think this was when Arianna Huffington was first talking about the third metric, maybe before the book was published.

DR. LANGER: Yeah [laughs].

MS. TIPPETT: Right. And you went and you said [laughs]...

DR. LANGER: Oh.

MS. TIPPETT: It sounds like, you know — Katie Couric was there, and Dr. Mark Hyman was there, who's now well-known as the Clintons' physician. And they were all asking questions and batting this around, and you felt — you said, "I felt like saying, maybe shouting, 'Yes, yes, I couldn't agree more, since I've been studying this since the 1970s and making all the recommendations that were being presented as new.'"

DR. LANGER: Yeah, no, I had an ego moment. [laughs] It's funny, because when I was at that conference, I was oblivious to what was going to be going on. [laughs]

MS. TIPPETT: Oh, before you went?

DR. LANGER: Well, I knew the people that were going. I didn't know everybody was going to be talking about mindfulness.

MS. TIPPETT: Mm-hmm. And that mindfulness increases health, competence, and happiness, which you've been...

DR. LANGER: Yeah. I mean, so it was just a very...

MS. TIPPETT: Yeah.

DR. LANGER: But, anyway, so that was not one of my better moments [laughs].

MS. TIPPETT: But say some more about this notion of evolution of consciousness. I mean, really what — flesh that out, what do you mean when you say that? It's a big statement.

DR. LANGER: Yeah, it's a big statement, and maybe it's too big for what I mean by it. It's really just reflecting on what you said a moment before, that, you know, 20 years ago, or, you know, let's go back to the '70s, early '70s when I started this work, nobody was thinking in these terms. There were, you know, monks out in Asia meditating, and a few people here or there. But it really wasn't part of the culture. And now, as you've said, it's very much a part, where people have the expectation that they're supposed to live right

— whatever that means — they're supposed to take care of their bodies, and I think that one can pursue yoga mindlessly. One can even pursue meditation mindlessly.

MS. TIPPETT: Right. And again, I just want to name this. I mean, you actually are not studying or talking about meditating, necessarily.

DR. LANGER: No.

MS. TIPPETT: Or doing yoga. Or...

DR. LANGER: No, and I'm not...

MS. TIPPETT: ...being, you know, being mindful as a practice. Again, I mean, your definition is all that's necessary to seek out, create, and notice new things.

DR. LANGER: Right. Yeah, no, it's — I'm not disparaging...

MS. TIPPETT: No, no, right.

DR. LANGER: ...any of the other approaches, but it is quite different. And you know, if you thought about how to put it in place that — it's really much simpler than getting people to meditate. And the two are not mutually exclusive at all.

MS. TIPPETT: Right.

DR. LANGER: One can do both.

MS. TIPPETT: Yeah.

DR. LANGER: But if I were to consider meditation versus this direct mindfulness as I study it, I would say that for those people who think, and some people do, that unless they do something drastic, their life circumstances aren't going to change. Well, so, if somebody's living in the West, often times it's taking up a practice like meditation or yoga. You know, you change your life in some big way, and then you have the belief — which has a placebo part of it but it's as wonderful — to lead to all sorts of other big changes in your life. For other people, mindlessly as well on the other side, perhaps, that they get scared about things that are just too foreign. And so this whole idea of doing what these monks do, doesn't feel right. I think that one should be doing both, but it's good that we have so many people now from the two different approaches. I was going to say camps, but then that sounds sort of warring, which is not the case.

MS. TIPPETT: [laughs] Yeah.

DR. LANGER: Doing this to enlist more and more people into this way of being.

MS. TIPPETT: You know, this is something from, I believe from your book *Mindfulness* — you talked about doing a sabbatical at Harvard Business School. And that the students, or faculty there, helped you kind of just distill your — how you apply this to business into two sentences. I just — I thought they were really helpful. "Mindlessness is the application of yesterday's business solutions to today's problems. Mindfulness—"

DR. LANGER: Yeah, no, they didn't come up with that.

MS. TIPPETT: Oh, they didn't.

DR. LANGER: No [laughs].

MS. TIPPETT: But they helped you formulate these sentences, right? Or you said...

DR. LANGER: OK, yes.

MS. TIPPETT: ...you formulated them there in that context. "And mindfulness is attunement to today's demands to avoid tomorrow's difficulties."

DR. LANGER: Yeah. Did I say that? Yes, no, I did. And, yes I'm sure that spending the semester over there, I was teaching a course to their junior faculty, and it was interesting because they approach problems so differently. And, the problem, again, as you said, that businesses are typically applying yesterday's solutions to today's problems. And I think that in this search for the solution, they — in this mindless search, they tend to miss what's often right in front of them.

When I give talks in businesses, and I'm trying to get people first to appreciate how mindless they are, what I do is I give them many examples. For example, even a simple thing like — I might ask, "How much is one and one?" And I know there are people that are listening to this that are saying to themselves, "Oh, God. Are we going to have to listen to a whole hour of this, you know, thinking that?" Anyway, and so then they obligingly say "two," and then I inform them that, no, one and one is sometimes two. It's not always two. And I give them different examples. The easiest one to understand is if you take one wad of chewing gum and you add it to one wad of chewing gum...

MS. TIPPETT: Right.

DR. LANGER: ...you get one.

MS. TIPPETT: Right.

DR. LANGER: And so it is with each of the things. So I think that you have a belief, and then you seek out a confirmation for it. And so the more mindful approach would be to ask the question in both ways. How is it this way, and how is it not this way? We talk a lot about stress when — both in my lab, and then in a business context — that for anybody, when there's stress, there's an assumption that they're making that something is going to happen — number one — and that when it happens, it's going to be awful.

MS. TIPPETT: Yeah.

DR. LANGER: Both of those are mindless. You want to open it up, both ways. First, the belief that it's going to happen. All you need to do is ask yourself for evidence that it's not going to happen. And you always find evidence for whatever you ask yourself.

MS. TIPPETT: OK.

DR. LANGER: So if you have, you know — I'm going to be fired.

MS. TIPPETT: Yep.

DR. LANGER: Maybe it'll happen, maybe it won't, and when it happens, it'll have good

parts and bad parts. And it's just much easier to go forward then. I have a one-liner with that, you know.

MS. TIPPETT: Yeah, go ahead.

DR. LANGER: "No worry before its time."

MS. TIPPETT: Right [laughs] yeah. I remember Eckhart Tolle saying that stress is all about not wanting whatever is happening to be happening. That that is the stress. Which is another way of describing what you're talking about.

DR. LANGER: Yeah. It's interesting. I think it's more not about what's happening, but it's about the presumption of something that's going to happen. What I'm saying is that I think stress follows from the belief that this future event will happen. When you're in the middle of the event, you're dealing with it one way or the other.

MS. TIPPETT: Right.

DR. LANGER: But, yeah, I think that it goes back in some sense to Epictetus, who said, not in English, and not with my accent, but that "Events don't cause stress. What causes stress are the views you take of events."

MS. TIPPETT: Yeah.

DR. LANGER: Once people can appreciate — see, right now, almost everybody is mindlessly driven by these absolutes and part of these absolutes are these evaluations of good or bad. If it's good, I feel I must have it. If it's bad, I must avoid it. When it's neither good nor bad, I can just stay put. And just be.

MS. TIPPETT: Hmm.

DR. LANGER: So we get a lot more control by recognizing the way we're controlling our present and our future.

[music: "Ganges Anthem" by Chris Beaty]

MS. TIPPETT: I'm Krista Tippett and this is On Being. Today with social psychologist Ellen Langer, who some have dubbed "the mother of mindfulness." She was a pioneer in the science of revealing immediate life benefits of mindfulness — which she describes as "the simple act of actively noticing things" — achieved without meditation.

[music: "Ganges Anthem" by Chris Beaty]

MS. TIPPETT: You write in an interesting way about time and how our perception of time itself plays into this.

DR. LANGER: Yeah. Well, just to underscore this, that my belief is that our beliefs are not inconsequential. It's not that they matter a little. That they're almost the only thing that does matter. It's a very extreme statement. OK. So, that if you were going to say, what matters, real or perceived time? To me, it would be perceived time.

MS. TIPPETT: Right.

DR. LANGER: So, let's say we have you in the study, you go to sleep, you wake up and you see the clock. And the clock, for half of the people, is running twice as fast as normal — not for half the people, for a third of the people. For a half, the clock is slowed down. For the last third, it's accurate. So, what that means is that upon waking, a third of the people will think they got, let's say, two hours more sleep than they got, two hours fewer sleep than they got, or the amount of sleep that they actually got. And the question is, when you're then given biological and cognitive psychological tasks, do these tasks reflect real or perceived time? And, clearly, I believe that, you know, when you wake up in the morning, and you think that you had a good night's sleep, you're ready to go, regardless of how much sleep you actually had. You know, up until a point, of course.

MS. TIPPETT: I think that's, you know, somehow our perception of time, especially, in this moment where the pace of technological change seems to be so fast.

DR. LANGER: Yeah.

MS. TIPPETT: It really plays into a lot of stress, whether it's how we think about multitasking, or procrastinating, right? All these things are involved...

DR. LANGER: Right. Right.

MS. TIPPETT: ...with our relationship to time and deadlines.

DR. LANGER: Yeah, I think one of the things that we might do, when we're so worried about what's going to happen in the future, is to think about all the times we worried in the past and the thing didn't happen.

MS. TIPPETT: [laughs] Right. Well, OK, so I'd really — I want to ask you, what did you say a minute ago? That the way that you do this, this direct mindfulness, right? This is what you study. This is what you preach in your way. And so just take us through what is this application of direct mindfulness, and all these things you learn, look like in a, you know, in a day in the life?

DR. LANGER: I think that what happens is that I'm not afraid of very many things out there, because I'll be able to handle it. I'm not going to give up today worrying about tomorrow. And that's — I don't know want to get into an argument with economists, which I could, about, you know, putting money away for the future, and so on. It's — this is at a different level of analysis.

MS. TIPPETT: OK.

DR. LANGER: But that much of the worrying, almost all of the worrying we engage in is about something about tomorrow, when we can't predict what tomorrow is going to be like.

MS. TIPPETT: But you say and write again and again that this is easy.

DR. LANGER: Yes, OK. So...

MS. TIPPETT: But it doesn't sound easy. Right? And is it something — does it get easier with time? Is it...

DR. LANGER: Yeah.

MS. TIPPETT: ...something that you've learned?

DR. LANGER: Yeah. And, I think it's not easy to — where you do this for five minutes and then, you know, with respect to one kind of content, and then your whole life is going to change, although that could happen. But the practice, I said to you, just go home, or call somebody on the phone, or when we stop now, go see somebody in the next room, and notice new things about them.

MS. TIPPETT: Mm-hmm.

DR. LANGER: And this person that you thought you knew will, you know, will feel different. And that person will respond to you differently. And this happens instantly.

MS. TIPPETT: Mm-hmm.

DR. LANGER: That if you are doing something that is difficult, and you say to yourself, "What am I so worried about? What are the positive things that could happen by my not completing this?" Or, "How can I make this into a game?" "Why is it that I think my life depends on whatever this thing is?" Because very rarely does our life depend on any particular action. Do you know what I'm saying?

MS. TIPPETT: Yeah.

DR. LANGER: As soon as that — people live a life that is ongoing, but treat it as if whatever's happening at the moment is the last opportunity they're going to have.

MS. TIPPETT: Right. So, you know, it's very striking that the American Psychological Association has said of your work that it has offered new hope to millions whose problems were previously seen as unalterable and inevitable. Will therapy, 20 years from now, or 100 years from now, be — resemble at all what was in Woody Allen movies [laughs] which remains the kind of stereotype of what therapy is a couple of decades ago.

DR. LANGER: I think probably not. I think it's already changing. I think that many, many years ago, I had said that therapy should be divided into two parts. And so, we have people who can say to you, in a sophisticated way that "I know how you feel. And you'll be OK." But they're not the same people who necessarily can tell you how to get on with it, and what actually to do to be happy.

MS. TIPPETT: Right.

DR. LANGER: So they can get you from being unhappy to neutral in some sense.

MS. TIPPETT: [laughs] OK.

DR. LANGER: So, what happens is now we have a new discipline of coaches. And that's where they take off. And so, you know, I am — many of the people who are seeing coaches would have been people who would have been in therapy in the past.

MS. TIPPETT: Right. Right. That's interesting. Yeah.

DR. LANGER: And I'm sure that there will be many changes in the future. But, go on.

MS. TIPPETT: I mean, it seems like psychology — I mean, this is not my observation, it's behind a lot of, you know, like Richard Davidson's work, for example. I mean, that a lot of psychology and psychiatry was so focused on pathology. You're also — you're focusing on taking charge of, and making —

DR. LANGER: Yeah, and then I'm, from the very start...

MS. TIPPETT: ...each moment what you want to be in a positive sense.

DR. LANGER: Yeah. When I started doing research, the field was consumed with problems.

MS. TIPPETT: Right.

DR. LANGER: And right from the start my research was about well-being, and — interesting that it was too soft a word to talk about happiness. So I talked about well-being. I think that things are progressing in this way that surely, you know, we have a whole field of positive psychology.

MS. TIPPETT: Yeah.

DR. LANGER: And, I think that my last book, the Counterclockwise book, the subtitle, the psychology — or the power of possibility, is still a little different where instead of describing what is, even if we're describing it in a more positive way, that we create what we want it to be.

MS. TIPPETT: I want to say, I think it's really important when you say — you know this sentence that you spoke just a moment ago about, that we think about what is — instead of thinking about what is, it's what we want to be, what is possible. You know, we hear a lot of language like that now in kind of the self-help genre, that can be quite — that can be thin. But you say that as a scientist who's been...

DR. LANGER: Yeah.

MS. TIPPETT: ...actually seeing this actualized.

DR. LANGER: Yeah. Again, back to the study of language. Many years ago, I talked about the difference between "can" and "how can." It seems so similar, but they're vastly different. When you ask yourself how do you do something, you're bypassing your ego in some sense. You're just out there examining, fiddling with things trying to find the solution. If you ask yourself "can you do it?" then all you can appeal to is the past, and so with lots of things — when people say, "people can only do A, B, or C," the first thought in my mind is always, well, how do we know that? How could that be?

I ask my students that — I say how fast — this was around the time of the Boston Marathon — and I'll say, how fast is it humanly possible to run? And they do some strange calculations, because these are wonderful kids, they come up with things like 28 miles, 20, you know, 32.5. Who knows? And then I tell them about the Tarahumara in Copper Canyon in Mexico. And these are people who are without stopping, running 100, 200 miles a day. I had this discussion with a friend of mine when we were both part of the medical school division on aging, and I called him one day, and I said, "How long would you say — he's a physician — it takes for a broken finger to heal?" And so he said, "I'll say a week." I said, "OK, if I said to you I could heal it by psychological means in five days, what would you say?" He said, "Well, all right." "I said what about four days?" He said, "Okay." I said,

“What about three days?” He says, “No.” I said, “Okay, what about three days and 23 hours?” OK, the point being...

MS. TIPPETT: Yeah.

DR. LANGER: ...you know, when is that moment that on this side you can, on the other side, you can't?

[music: “Too Many Cooks” by Portico Quartet]

MS. TIPPETT: So, I mean, it strikes me that there are also really civic public life implications to this.

DR. LANGER: Yes. Yes.

MS. TIPPETT: And I was thinking about it, I mean, because if you think about the fact that in our public life, which is something I puzzle over a lot, we tend to only ask the can we, right? The yes/no question. And then we argue the yes or the no.

DR. LANGER: Mm-hmm.

MS. TIPPETT: And we actually don't create a lot of possibility...

DR. LANGER: Right.

MS. TIPPETT: ...on really important subjects.

DR. LANGER: Yes.

MS. TIPPETT: Which is — I mean, so I think you're putting that in a different context, which is really interesting to think about.

DR. LANGER: Yeah. I think that — here's another one that will sound strange. But, I'm against compromise.

MS. TIPPETT: Yeah.

DR. LANGER: What? Because to compromise sounds so mindful.

MS. TIPPETT: OK, say some more. I like it.

DR. LANGER: Well, the reason for that is because it's an agreement for everybody to lose. It's just reducing your losses.

MS. TIPPETT: Yeah.

DR. LANGER: You know, rather than finding the win/win solution, which is often out there.

MS. TIPPETT: Well, it seems like we could talk about that for another hour. We're coming close to the end, I want to ask you a final, kind of, big question. Talking about becoming mindful is also really talking about becoming conscious.

DR. LANGER: Yes.

MS. TIPPETT: And asking the question how can we live well, is an existential question. It's a variation, if you will, it's an evolution of this question that's been passed through human history. So, I just wonder how this work you do makes you think differently about that big question of what it means to be human, and what we may be learning about that, that we haven't grasped before.

DR. LANGER: Yeah. Interesting. Well, I was going to write a mindful utopia at one point, and eventually maybe I will, and give this sort of question real thought. But I think that most of the ills that people experience as individuals, in their relationships, in groups, in cultures, globally — and that's a very big statement — virtually all of the ills are a result of mindlessness, one way or the other. Directly or indirectly. And so that as the culture becomes more mindful, I think all of these things will naturally change. You know, on the cultural level, people are fighting over limited resources, but resources are probably not nearly as limited as people mindlessly presume. People's egos are at stake, even while they're negotiating on the level of countries.

MS. TIPPETT: Yeah.

DR. LANGER: And they're not looked at in that fashion and approached in that way. That when you have people going to work feeling good about themselves and the work life is exciting for them, fun for them, nurturing for them, they're going to be doing more work. And they're going to be less evaluative of other people. And once we all start feeling less evaluated, that allows us to become more creative, mindful, take more risks, because they're not very risky and to be kinder in our views of other people.

Ultimately I think that for me, what it means to be human is to feel unique but to recognize that everybody else is also unique. And, I think that people — right now, I think people feel that being happy, really happy in this deep way that I'm referring to — not that you've just won an award or bought something new or whatever — that that they think that this is something that one should experience sometimes. You know, maybe if you experience it a little more than other people, you're one of the lucky ones.

MS. TIPPETT: Yeah.

DR. LANGER: Where, I think it should be the way you are all the time.

MS. TIPPETT: And that — but, I mean, so you know, you said a while ago “most things are an inconvenience, rather than a tragedy.” There are tragedies. So, what is this happiness, how does this way of being...

DR. LANGER: Well, it's interesting...

MS. TIPPETT: ...function in those moments...

DR. LANGER: Yeah, let me give you an example of something. Many years ago, I had a major fire that destroyed 80 percent of what I owned. And when I called the insurance company, and they came over the next day, the person — the insurance agent, had said to me that this was the first call that he'd ever had where the damage was worse than the call. And, I thought of it, I thought, “Well, gee, you know, it's already taken my stuff, whatever that means.”

MS. TIPPETT: Yeah.

DR. LANGER: “Why give it my soul? You know, that — why pay twice?” Which is what people so often do. Something happens, you have that loss, and then you’re going to now throw all your emotional energy at it. And so you’re doubling up on the negativity. And interesting, you know, to go back to how would you take a tragedy and make — and see it — because we can say, the fire was not a simple little thing. That I stayed in a hotel for a little while. I had two dogs with me. So I was a vision as I walked through the lobby every day, while my house was being rebuilt. And it was Christmas when this happened, a few days before Christmas Eve. On Christmas Eve, I left my room, I come back many hours later, and the room was full of gifts. And it wasn’t from the management, it wasn’t from the owner of the hotel. It was the people who parked my car, the chambermaids, the waiters. It was marvelous. When you strip away all the mindless insecurity, people are quite something. And so I reflect on that. I couldn’t tell you anything that I had lost in the fire. But at this point, I have that memory that was more than positive. So sometimes the ways that things unfold can take place over a longer time.

[music: “Kepesh” by Arms and Sleepers]

MS. TIPPETT: Ellen Langer is a social psychologist and a professor in the psychology department at Harvard University. Her books include *Mindfulness and Counterclockwise: Mindful Health and the Power of Possibility*.

[music: “Kepesh” by Arms and Sleepers]

MS. TIPPETT: You can listen again and share this show at onbeing.org. On Being is Trent Gilliss, Chris Heagle, Lily Percy, Mariah Helgeson, Nicki Oster, Michelle Keeley, Maia Tarrell, Annie Parsons, Tony Birleffi, Marie Sambilay, and Hannah Rehak.

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[music: “Herstory of Glory” by Do Make Say Think]