

time, we are liable either to miss a lot of the texture of our life experience or to discount its value and meaning. For example, let's say you are not too preoccupied to look at a sunset and are struck by the play of light and color among the clouds and in the sky. For that moment you are just there with it, taking it in, really seeing it. Then thinking comes in and perhaps you find yourself saying something to a companion, either about the sunset and how beautiful it is or about something else that it reminded you of. In speaking, you disturb the direct experiencing of that moment. You have been drawn away from the sun and sky and the light. You have been captured by your own thought and by your impulse to voice it. Your comment breaks the silence. Or even if you don't say anything, the thought or memory that came up had already carried you away from the real sunset in that moment. So now you are really enjoying the sunset in your head rather than the sunset that is actually happening. You may be *thinking* you are enjoying the sunset itself, but actually you are only experiencing it through the veil of your own embellishments with past sunsets and other memories and ideas that it triggered in you. All this may happen completely below the level of your conscious awareness. What is more, this entire episode might last only a moment or so. It will fade rapidly as one thing leads to the next.

Much of the time you may get away with being only partially conscious like this. At least it seems that way. But what you are missing is more important than you realize. If you are only partially conscious over a period of years, if you habitually run through your moments without being fully in them, you may miss some of the most precious experiences of your life, such as connecting with the people you love, or with sunsets or the crisp morning air.

**Why?** Because you were "too busy" and your mind too encumbered with what you *thought* was important in that moment to take the time to stop, to listen, to notice things. Perhaps you were going too fast to slow down, too fast to know the importance of making eye contact, of touching, of being in your body. When we are functioning in this mode, we may eat without really tasting, see without really seeing, hear without really hearing, touch without really feeling, and talk without really knowing what we are saying. And of course, in the case of driving, if your mind or somebody else's happens to check out at the "wrong" moment, the immediate consequences can be dramatic and very unfortunate.

So the value of cultivating mindfulness is not just a matter of getting more out of sunsets. When unawareness dominates the

mind, all our decisions and actions are affected by it. Unawareness can keep us from being in touch with our own body, its signals and messages. This in turn can create many physical problems for us; problems we don't even know we are generating ourselves. And living in a chronic state of unawareness can cause us to miss much of what is most beautiful and meaningful in our lives. What is more, as in the driving example or in the case of alcohol and drug abuse or habits such as workaholicism, our tendency toward unawareness may also be lethal, either rapidly or slowly.

again reading here

When you begin paying attention to what your mind is doing, you will probably find that there is a great deal of mental and emotional activity going on beneath the surface. These incessant thoughts and feelings can drain a lot of your energy. They can be obstacles to experiencing even brief moments of stillness and contentment.

When the mind is dominated by dissatisfaction and unawareness, which is much more often than most of us are willing to admit, it is difficult to feel calm or relaxed. Instead, we are likely to feel fragmented and driven. We will think this *and* that, we want this *and* that. Often the *this* and the *that* are in conflict. This mind state can severely affect our ability to do anything or even to see situations clearly. In such moments we may not know *what* we are thinking, feeling, or doing. What is worse, we probably won't know that we don't know. We may think we know what we are thinking and feeling and doing and what is happening. But it is an incomplete knowing at best. In reality we are being driven by our likes and dislikes, totally unaware of the tyranny of our own thoughts and the self-destructive behaviors they often result in.

Socrates was famous in Athens for saying, "Know thyself." It is said that one of his students said to him: "Socrates, you go around saying 'Know thyself,' but do you know yourself?" Socrates was said to have replied, "No, but I understand something about this not knowing."

As you embark upon your own practice of mindfulness meditation, you will come to know something for yourself about your own not knowing. It is not that mindfulness is the "answer" to all life's problems. Rather it is that all life's problems can be seen more

Robert - Zinn, J. (1990) Full Catastrophe Living

clearly through the lens of a clear mind. Just being aware of the mind that thinks it knows all the time is a major step toward learning how to see through your opinions and perceive things as they actually are.

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One very important domain of our lives and experience that we tend to miss, ignore, abuse, or lose control of as a result of being in the automatic-pilot mode is our own body. We may be barely in touch with our body, unaware of how it is feeling most of the time. As a consequence we can be insensitive to how our body is being affected by the environment, by our actions, and even by our own thoughts and emotions. If we are unaware of these connections, we might easily feel that our body is out of control and we will have no idea why. As you will see in Chapter 21, physical symptoms are messages the body is giving us that allow us to know how it is doing and what its needs are. When we are more in touch with our body as a result of paying attention to it systematically, we will be far more attuned to what it is telling us and better equipped to respond appropriately. Learning to listen to your own body is vital to improving your health and the quality of your life.

Even something as simple as relaxation can be frustratingly elusive if you are unaware of your body. The stress of daily living often produces tension that tends to localize in particular muscle groups, such as the shoulders, the jaw, and the forehead. In order to release this tension, you first have to know it is there. You have to feel it. Then you have to know how to shut off the automatic pilot and how to take over the controls of your own body and mind. As we will see farther on, this involves zeroing in on your body with a focused mind, experiencing the sensations coming from within the muscles themselves, and sending them messages to let the tension dissolve and release. This is something that can be done at the time the tension is accumulating if you are mindful enough to sense it. There is no need to wait until it has built to the point that your body feels like a two-by-four. If you let it go that long, the tension will have become so ingrained that you will have probably forgotten what it felt like to be relaxed, and you may have little hope of ever feeling relaxed again.

One man who came to the stress clinic ten years ago with back pain put the dilemma in a nutshell. While testing his range of motion and flexibility, I noticed that he was very stiff and his legs

were as hard as rocks, even when I asked him to relax them. They had been that way ever since he was wounded when he stepped on a booby trap in Vietnam. When his doctor told him that he needed to relax, he had responded, "Doc, telling me to relax is about as useful as telling me to be a surgeon."

The point is, it didn't do this man any good to be told to relax. He knew he needed to relax more. But he had to learn *how* to relax. He had to experience the process of letting go within his own body and mind. Once he started meditating, he was able to *learn* to relax, and his leg muscles eventually regained a healthy tone.

When something goes wrong with our body or our mind, we have the natural expectation that medicine can make it right, and often it can. But as we will see farther on, our active collaboration is essential in almost all forms of medical therapy. It is particularly vital in the case of chronic diseases or conditions for which medicine has no cures. In such cases the quality of your life may greatly depend on your own ability to know your body and mind well enough to work at optimizing your own health within the bounds, always unknown, of what may be possible. Taking responsibility for learning more about your own body by listening to it carefully and by cultivating your inner resources for healing and for maintaining health is the best way to hold up your end of this collaboration with your doctors and with medicine. This is where the meditation practice comes in. It gives power and substance to such efforts. It catalyzes the work of healing.

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The first introduction to the meditation practice in the stress clinic always comes as a surprise to our patients. More often than not, people come with the idea that meditation means doing something unusual, something mystical and out of the ordinary, or at the very least, relaxing. To relieve them of these expectations right off the bat, we give everybody three raisins and we eat them one at a time, paying attention to what we are actually doing and experiencing from moment to moment. You might wish to try it yourself after you see how we do it.

First we bring our attention to seeing the raisin, observing it carefully as if we had never seen one before. We feel its texture between our fingers and notice its colors and surfaces. We are also aware of any thoughts we might be having about raisins or food in general. We note any thoughts and feelings of liking or disliking

raisins if they come up while we are looking at it. We then smell it for a while and finally, with awareness, we bring it to our lips, being aware of the arm moving the hand to position it correctly and of salivating as the mind and body anticipate eating. The process continues as we take it into our mouth and chew it slowly, experiencing the actual taste of one raisin. And when we feel ready to swallow, we watch the impulse to swallow as it comes up, so that even that is experienced consciously. We even imagine, or "sense," that now our bodies are one raisin heavier.

The response to this exercise is invariably positive, even among the people who don't like raisins. People report that it is satisfying to eat this way for a change, that they actually experienced what a raisin tasted like for the first time that they could remember, and that even one raisin could be satisfying. Often someone makes the connection that if we ate like that all the time, we would eat less and have more pleasant and satisfying experiences of food. Some people usually comment that they caught themselves automatically moving to eat the other raisins before finishing the one that was in their mouth, and recognized in that moment that that is the way they normally eat.

Since many of us use food for emotional comfort, especially when we feel anxious or depressed, this little exercise in slowing things down and paying careful attention to what we are doing illustrates how powerful and uncontrolled many of our impulses are when it comes to food, and how simple and satisfying it can be and how much more in control we can feel when we bring awareness to what we are actually doing while we are doing it.

The fact is, when you start to pay attention in this way, your relationship to things changes. You see more, and you see more deeply. You may start seeing an intrinsic order and connectedness between things that were not apparent before, such as the connection between impulses that come up in your mind and finding yourself overeating and disregarding the messages your body is giving you. By paying attention, you literally become more awake. It is an emerging from the usual ways in which we all tend to see things and do things mechanically, without full awareness. When you eat mindfully, you are in touch with your food because your mind is not distracted. It is not thinking about other things. It is attending to eating. When you look at the raisin, you really see it. When you chew it, you really taste it.

Knowing what you are doing while you are doing it is the essence of mindfulness practice. We call the raisin-eating exercise

"eating meditation." It helps make the point that there is nothing particularly unusual or mystical about meditating or being mindful. All it involves is paying attention to your experience from moment to moment. This leads directly to new ways of seeing and being in your life because the present moment, whenever it is recognized and honored, reveals a very special, indeed magical power: *it is the only time that any of us ever has*. The present is the only time that we have to know anything. It is the only time we have to perceive, to learn, to act, to change, to heal. That is why we value moment-to-moment awareness so highly. While we may have to teach ourselves how to do it through practicing, the effort itself is its own end. It makes our experiences more vivid and our lives more real.



As you will see in the next chapter, to embark on the practice of mindfulness meditation it is helpful to deliberately introduce a note of simplicity into your life. This can be done by setting aside a time during the day for moments of relative peace and quiet; moments which you can use to focus on the basic experiences of living such as your breathing, the sensations you feel in your body, and the flowing movement of thoughts in your mind. It doesn't take long for this "formal" meditation practice to spill over into your daily life in the form of intentionally paying greater attention from one moment to the next, no matter what you are doing. You might find yourself spontaneously paying attention more of the time in your life, not just when you are "meditating."

We practice mindfulness by remembering to be present in all our waking moments. We can practice taking out the garbage mindfully, eating mindfully, driving mindfully. We can practice navigating through all the ups and downs we encounter, the storms of the mind and the storms of our bodies, the storms of the outer life and of the inner life. We learn to be aware of our fears and our pain, yet at the same time stabilized and empowered by a connection to something deeper within ourselves, a discerning wisdom that helps to penetrate and transcend the fear and the pain, and to discover some peace and hope within our situation *as it is*.

We are using the word *practice* here in a special way. It does not mean a "rehearsal" or a perfecting of some skill so that we can put it to use at some other time. In the meditative context practice means "being in the present on purpose." The means and the end of meditation are really the same. We are not trying to get somewhere

else, only working at being where we already are and being here fully. Our meditation practice may very well deepen over the years, but actually we are not practicing for this to happen. Our journey toward greater health is really a natural progression. Awareness, insight, and indeed health as well, ripen on their own if we are willing to pay attention in the moment and remember that we have only moments to live.

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## The Foundations of Mindfulness Practice: Attitudes and Commitment

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To cultivate the healing power of mindfulness requires much more than mechanically following a recipe or a set of instructions. No real process of learning is like that. It is only when the mind is open and receptive that learning and seeing and change can occur. In practicing mindfulness you will have to bring your whole being to the process. You can't just assume a meditative posture and think something will happen or play a tape and think that the tape is going to "do something" for you.

The attitude with which you undertake the practice of paying attention and being in the present is crucial. It is the soil in which you will be cultivating your ability to calm your mind and to relax your body, to concentrate and to see more clearly. If the attitudinal soil is depleted, that is, if your energy and commitment to practice are low, it will be hard to develop calmness and relaxation with any consistency. If the soil is really polluted, that is, if you are trying to force yourself to feel relaxed and demand of yourself that "something happen," nothing will grow at all and you will quickly conclude that "meditation doesn't work."

To cultivate meditative awareness requires an entirely new way of looking at the process of learning. Since thinking that we know what we need and where we want to get are so ingrained in our minds, we can easily get caught up in trying to control things to make them turn out "our way," the way we want them to. But this

attitude is antithetical to the work of awareness and healing. Awareness requires only that we pay attention and see things as they are. It doesn't require that we change anything. And healing requires receptivity and acceptance, a tuning to connectedness and wholeness. None of this can be forced, just as you cannot force yourself to go to sleep. You have to create the right conditions for falling asleep and then you have to let go. The same is true for relaxation. It cannot be achieved through force of will. That kind of effort will only produce tension and frustration.

If you come to the meditation practice thinking to yourself, "This won't work but I'll do it anyway," the chances are it will not be very helpful. The first time you feel any pain or discomfort, you will be able to say to yourself, "See, I knew my pain wouldn't go away," or "I knew I wouldn't be able to concentrate," and that will confirm your suspicion that it wasn't going to work and you will drop it.

If you come as a "true believer," certain that *this* is the right path for you, that meditation is "the answer," the chances are you will soon become disappointed too. As soon as you find that you are the same person you always were and that this work requires effort and consistency and not just a romantic belief in the value of meditation or relaxation, you may find yourself with considerably less enthusiasm than before.

In the stress clinic, we find that those people who come with a skeptical but open attitude do the best. Their attitude is "I don't know whether this will work or not, I have my doubts, but I am going to give it my best shot and see what happens."

So the attitude that we bring to the practice of mindfulness will to a large extent determine its long-term value to us. This is why consciously cultivating certain attitudes can be very helpful in getting the most out of the process of meditation. Your intentions set the stage for what is possible. They remind you from moment to moment of why you are practicing in the first place. Keeping particular attitudes in mind is actually part of the training itself, a way of directing and channeling your energies so that they can be most effectively brought to bear in the work of growing and healing.

Seven attitudinal factors constitute the major pillars of mindfulness practice as we teach it in the stress clinic. They are non-judging, patience, a beginner's mind, trust, non-striving, acceptance, and letting go. These attitudes are to be cultivated consciously when you practice. They are not independent of each

other. Each one relies on and influences the degree to which you are able to cultivate the others. Working on any one will rapidly lead you to the others. Since together they constitute the foundation upon which you will be able to build a strong meditation practice of your own, we are introducing them before you encounter the techniques themselves so that you can become familiar with these attitudes from the very beginning. Once you are engaged in the practice itself, this chapter will merit rereading to remind you of ways you might continue to fertilize this attitudinal soil so that your mindfulness practice will flourish.

## THE ATTITUDINAL FOUNDATION OF MINDFULNESS PRACTICE

### 1. Non-judging

Mindfulness is cultivated by assuming the stance of an impartial witness to your own experience. To do this requires that you become aware of the constant stream of judging and reacting to inner and outer experiences that we are all normally caught up in, and learn to step back from it. When we begin practicing paying attention to the activity of our own mind, it is common to discover and to be surprised by the fact that we are constantly generating judgments about our experience. Almost everything we see is labeled and categorized by the mind. We react to everything we experience in terms of what we think its value is to us. Some things, people, and events are judged as "good" because they make us feel good for some reason. Others are equally quickly condemned as "bad" because they make us feel bad. The rest is categorized as "neutral" because we don't think it has much relevance. Neutral things, people, and events are almost completely tuned out of our consciousness. We usually find them the most boring to give attention to.

This habit of categorizing and judging our experience locks us into mechanical reactions that we are not even aware of and that often have no objective basis at all. These judgments tend to dominate our minds, making it difficult for us ever to find any peace within ourselves. It's as if the mind were a yo-yo, going up and down on the string of our own judging thoughts all day long. If you doubt this description of your mind, just observe how much you are preoccupied with liking and disliking, say during a ten-minute period as you go about your business.

If we are to find a more effective way of handling our lives, the first thing we will need to do is to automate judgments so that we can see through our own and fears and liberate ourselves from their tyranny.

When practicing mindfulness, it is important to judge the quality of mind when it appears and to maintain the stance of an impartial witness by reminding ourselves to observe it. When you find the mind judging, you can step back from doing that. All that is required is to be aware of it. No need to judge the judging and make it more complicated for yourself.

As an example, let's say you are practicing mindfulness breathing, as you did in the last chapter and as we discussed in the next. At a certain point you may find yourself doing something like, "This is boring," or "This isn't what I can't do this." These are judgments. When they arise in the mind, it is very important to recognize them as judgments and remind yourself that the practice involves suspending and just watching *whatever* comes up, including your thoughts, without pursuing them or acting on them. Then proceed with watching your breathing.

## 2. Patience

Patience is a form of wisdom. It demonstrates a willingness to stand and accept the fact that sometimes things must wait for their own time. A child may try to help a butterfly to emerge from its chrysalis. Usually the butterfly doesn't emerge. Any adult knows that the butterfly can only emerge when the process cannot be hurried.

In the same way we cultivate patience toward ourselves and bodies when practicing mindfulness. We often find ourselves impatient because there is no need to be impatient. We often find ourselves tense or agitated or frightened, or because we have been impatient for some time and nothing positive seems to have happened. We give ourselves room to have these experiences. When we are having them anyway! When they come up, they are part of our life unfolding in this moment. We are ourselves as well as we would treat the butterfly. When we have some moments to get to other, "better" ones? After all, it is your life in that moment.

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to achieve your own goals is to back off from striving for results and instead to start focusing carefully on seeing and accepting things as they are, moment by moment. With patience and regular practice, movement toward your goals will take place by itself. This movement becomes an unfolding that you are inviting to happen within you.

#### 6. Acceptance

Acceptance means seeing things as they actually are in the present. If you have a headache, accept that you have a headache. If you are overweight, why not accept it as a description of your body at this time? Sooner or later we have to come to terms with things as they are and accept them, whether it is a diagnosis of cancer or learning of someone's death. Often acceptance is only reached after we have gone through very emotion-filled periods of denial and then anger. These stages are a natural progression in the process of coming to terms with what is. They are all part of the healing process.

However, putting aside for the moment the major calamities that usually take a great deal of time to heal from, in the course of our daily lives we often waste a lot of energy denying and resisting what is already fact. When we do that, we are basically trying to force situations to be the way we would like them to be, which only makes for more tension. This actually prevents positive change from occurring. We may be so busy denying and forcing and struggling that we have little energy left for healing and growing, and what little we have may be dissipated by our lack of awareness and intentionality.

If you are overweight and feel bad about your body, it's no good to wait until you are the weight you think you should be before you start liking your body and yourself. At a certain point, if you don't want to remain stuck in a frustrating vicious cycle, you might realize that it is all right to love yourself at the weight that you are now because this is the only time you can love yourself. Remember, now is the only time you have for anything. You have to accept yourself as you are before you can really change.

When you start thinking this way, losing weight becomes less important. It also becomes a lot easier. By intentionally cultivating acceptance, you are creating the preconditions for healing.

Acceptance does not mean that you have to like everything or that you have to take a passive attitude toward everything and abandon your principles and values. It does not mean that you are

satisfied with things as they are or that you are resigned to tolerating things as they "have to be." It does not mean that you should stop trying to break free of your own self-destructive habits or to give up on your desire to change and grow, or that you should tolerate injustice, for instance, or avoid getting involved in changing the world around you because it is the way it is and therefore hopeless. Acceptance as we are speaking of it simply means that you have come around to a willingness to see things as they are. This attitude sets the stage for acting appropriately in your life, no matter what is happening. You are much more likely to know what to do and have the inner conviction to act when you have a clear picture of what is actually happening than when your vision is clouded by your mind's self-serving judgments and desires or its fears and prejudices.

In the meditation practice, we cultivate acceptance by taking each moment as it comes and being with it fully, as it is. We try not to impose our ideas about what we should be feeling or thinking or seeing on our experience but just remind ourselves to be receptive and open to whatever we are feeling, thinking, or seeing, and to accept it because it is here right now. If we keep our attention focused on the present, we can be sure of one thing, namely that whatever we are attending to in this moment will change, giving us the opportunity to practice accepting whatever it is that will emerge in the next moment. Clearly there is wisdom in cultivating acceptance.

#### 7. Letting Go

They say that in India there is a particularly clever way of catching monkeys. As the story goes, hunters will cut a hole in a coconut that is just big enough for a monkey to put its hand through. Then they will drill two smaller holes in the other end, pass a wire through, and secure the coconut to the base of a tree. Then they put a banana inside the coconut and hide. The monkey comes down, puts his hand in and takes hold of the banana. The hole is crafted so that the open hand can go in but the fist cannot get out. All the monkey has to do to be free is to let go of the banana. But it seems most monkeys don't let go.

Often our minds get us caught in very much the same way in spite of all our intelligence. For this reason, cultivating the attitude of letting go, or non-attachment, is fundamental to the practice of mindfulness. When we start paying attention to our inner experience, we rapidly discover that there are certain thoughts and feelings and situations that the mind seems to want to hold on to. If



they are pleasant, we try to prolong these thoughts or feelings or sensations, stretch them out, and conjure them up again and again.

Similarly there are many thoughts and feelings and experiences that we try to get rid of or to prevent and protect ourselves from having because they are unpleasant and painful and frightening in one way or another.

In the meditation practice we intentionally put aside the tendency to elevate some aspects of our experience and to reject others. Instead we just let our experience be what it is and practice observing it from moment to moment. Letting go is a way of letting things be, of accepting things as they are. When we observe our own mind grasping and pushing away, we remind ourselves to let go of those impulses on purpose, just to see what will happen if we do. When we find ourselves judging our experience, we let go of those judging thoughts. We recognize them and we just don't pursue them any further. We let them be, and in doing so we let them go. Similarly when thoughts of the past or of the future come up, we let go of them. We just watch.

If we find it particularly difficult to let go of something because it has such a strong hold over our mind, we can direct our attention to what "holding on" feels like. Holding on is the opposite of letting go. We can become an expert on our own attachments, whatever they may be and their consequences in our lives, as well as how it feels in those moments when we finally do let go and what the consequences of that are. Being willing to look at the ways we hold on ultimately shows us a lot about the experience of its opposite. So whether we are "successful" at letting go or not, mindfulness continues to teach us if we are willing to look.

Letting go is not such a foreign experience. We do it every night when we go to sleep. We lie down on a padded surface, with the lights out, in a quiet place, and we let go of our mind and body. If you can't let go, you can't go to sleep.

Most of us have experienced times when the mind would just not shut down when we got into bed. This is one of the first signs of elevated stress. At these times we may be unable to free ourselves from certain thoughts because our involvement in them is just too powerful. If we try to force ourselves to sleep, it just makes things worse. So if you can go to sleep, you are already an expert in letting go. Now you just need to practice applying this skill in waking situations as well.

## COMMITMENT, SELF-DISCIPLINE, AND INTENTIONALITY

Purposefully cultivating the attitudes of non-judging, patience, trust, beginner's mind, non-striving, acceptance, and letting go will greatly support and deepen your practice of the meditation techniques you will be encountering in the following chapters.

In addition to these attitudes, you will also need to bring a particular kind of energy or motivation to your practice. Mindfulness doesn't just come about by itself because you have decided that it is a good idea to be more aware of things. A strong commitment to working on yourself and enough self-discipline to persevere in the process are essential to developing a strong meditation practice and a high degree of mindfulness. We have already seen in Chapter 1 how important self-discipline and regular practice are to the work undertaken by the patients in the stress clinic. Self-discipline and regular practice are vital to developing the power of mindfulness.

In the stress clinic the basic ground rule is that everybody practices. Nobody goes along for the ride. We don't let in any observers or spouses unless they are willing to practice the meditation just as the patients are doing, that is, forty-five minutes per day, six days per week. Doctors, medical students, therapists, nurses, and other health professionals who go through the stress clinic as part of an internship training program all have to agree to practice the meditation on the same schedule as the patients. Without this personal experience, it would not be possible for them really to understand what the patients are going through and how much of an effort it takes to work with the energies of one's own mind and body.

The spirit of engaged commitment we ask of our patients during their eight weeks in the stress clinic is similar to that required in athletic training. The athlete who is training for a particular event doesn't only practice when he or she feels like it, for instance, only when the weather is nice or there are other people to keep him or her company or there is enough time to fit it in. The athlete trains regularly, every day, rain or shine, whether she feels good or not, whether the goal seems worth it or not on any particular day.

We encourage our patients to develop the same attitude. We tell them from the very start, "You don't have to like it; you just have to