

# **Summary of “10% Happier” by Dan Harris**

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Learn How to Tame the Voice in Your Head, Reduce  
Stress Without Losing Your Edge, and Find Self-  
Help that Actually Works.



# QuickRead

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# Introduction

On June 7, 2004, Dan Harris was on the set of *Good Morning America* filling in for his colleague Robin Roberts as the News Reader. Essentially, the job was to come in and anchor brief news updates at the top of each hour. As he was sitting in Robin's spot inside the second story of ABC's glass-encased studio in New York's Time Square, his co-anchor Charles Gibson tossed it over to Dan to read a series of six news items, about twenty seconds apiece. It started fine as he stated, "Good morning Charlie and Diane. Thank you." But then, out of nowhere, Dan felt as if he was being stabbed in the brain with raw animal fear. A wave of panic rolled over him causing him to stammer and lose his voice altogether. That morning, about five million people tuned in to ABC News to watch him have a live, on-air panic attack.

Dan's on-air meltdown was the direct result of an extended run of mindlessness that began on March 13, 2000, his first day at ABC News. At just twenty-eight years old, Dan found himself working under his idol, Peter Jennings. Then, following the 9/11 attacks, the network sent Dan to Pakistan where he spent the next three years becoming a war correspondent. An experience he was largely unprepared for and he underestimated the psychological consequences that came with it. Instead, he was hooked on the danger and publicity that came with such reporting. In 2003, Dan returned to New York where he was subsequently diagnosed with depression, the psychiatrist speculating it was either the trauma from war reporting or the withdrawal from his addiction to thrilling assignments. Eventually, Dan began experimenting with drugs like cocaine to feel that euphoric bliss once again. Dan allowed the voice in his head to run amok, he got swept up and swept away in the thrill of being a reporter. Now, he plans to demystify meditation and show that if it can work for him, then it can work for you too.

# The Ego is The Voice In Your Head Causing You to React to Your Impulses

The word *ego* is used often throughout society. You hear it all the time as people describe others as *egocentric* or even *egotistical*. You often associate ego with words like pride, conceit, self-love, or even narcissism. However, the ego is more complicated than you might think. When Dan was in Jersey City on assignment, he learned of a book about controlling your ego. Fascinated by the book's thesis, Dan promptly ordered *A New Earth: Awakening to Your Life's Purpose* by Eckhart Tolle.

According to Tolle, the ego is a sense of "I" that most people take for granted. It's an incessant voice that governs your life, it's the negative voice that judges and labels everything it encounters. Dan recognized that the voice in his head, his ego, was the one that led him to drug addiction and the pursuit of thrilling, dangerous reporting. The ego, however, is never satisfied. "No matter how much stuff we buy, no matter how many arguments we win or delicious meals we consume, the ego never feels complete."

The ego thrives on drama and dwells on the past and the future, it rarely focuses on the present. Suddenly, Dan realized his life was simply chasing deadlines and checking things off his to-do list. He was constantly fantasizing about his next assignments and searching for something bigger and better. It finally dawned on him that he had been sleepwalking his entire life. The ego is the reason you complain about a work problem to your spouse over dinner, and it's what causes you to feel resentment towards your ex despite being happily married. It's constantly assessing your self-worth, your appearance, your wealth and social status. And no matter how smart, beautiful, and wealthy you may be, your ego is the one telling you that you are not enough.

While Dan was reading Tolle's book, he discovered a small white patch on his right cheek. As it turns out, the patch was a benign form of skin cancer,

so he arranged for its removal. Dan realized the incision would leave a scar and his ego caused him to visualize the end of his T.V. career. Somehow, perhaps through Tolle's wisdom, Dan was able to calm himself and hush the anxious voice inside his head. However, when he failed to contain his disappointment in not being chosen to cover the inauguration of President Barack Obama, he realized Tolle's book failed to offer any practical advice for real-life situations. So he decided to set up an interview.

He prodded Tolle for ways to stop the voice inside his head. In response, Tolle asserted that he had to take a conscious breath and observe his pattern of thoughts. You must embrace the present. But how?

# Use RAIN to Help Control Your Ego and Achieve Mindfulness

About eight months after Dan discovered Tolle, he was in a hotel in Manhattan ready to meet Dr. Mark Epstein, a trained psychiatrist and practicing Buddhist. Dan once again wanted to learn more about how to quiet his inner voice. Epstein explained to him that the inner voice is a childish protagonist, constantly scheming and selfishly wanting more. As a result, human beings are prone to jumping from one experience to the next without ever truly achieving satisfaction. Dan had recognized this tendency in himself.

According to Epstein, you don't need to be a practicing Buddhist to benefit from the philosophy. In fact, Buddhism is better than seeing a psychiatrist. While therapy can offer an understanding of the human condition, it doesn't offer the relief that Buddhism does. You see, Dan's psychiatrist could only help him identify his mindless behavior and encourage him to quit drugs. Buddhism, however, could help him learn more. The Buddha argues that true happiness comes only from understanding and embracing the constant state of impermanence in your life, allowing you to distance yourself from the drama in your life and simply let go. While Dan was able to change his perspective, he still had a lot of questions. Wouldn't letting go undermine his ambition and his will to strive?

Epstein eventually encouraged Dan to meditate, which would be the only way to tame the restless voice inside his head. Dan decided to try meditation while at a beach house with some friends. The meditation instructions were simple: sit comfortably, feel your breathing sensations, and refocus your breathing whenever the mind begins to wander. Dan tried meditation for five minutes and failed. He struggled to calm the chatter in his mind. While he was frustrated with the practice, he recognized its difficulty and developed a new respect for it. He then tried meditating for ten minutes every day; however, calming the mind didn't seem to get any easier.

To meditate properly, Dan realized he would need to focus on *mindfulness*. That is, the ability to respond to your surroundings with a clear mind as well as the ability to control your impulses. It begins by making nonjudgmental notes of things, like that itch on your leg, and avoiding the temptation to react. Mastering these simple things prepares you to master your thoughts and emotions. Later on, Dan attended a Buddhist conference in which one of the co-speakers presented an effective method for applying mindfulness using the acronym: RAIN.

- R: Recognize - Pause and acknowledge your feelings.
- A: Allow - Let your feelings be.
- I: Investigate - Check how your feelings are physically affecting your body.
- N: Non-identification - Understand that your feelings are passing states of mind.

Over the next few weeks, Dan practiced this method when he became anxious over an upcoming promotion. As he lay anxiously on the couch, he took note of the pounding in his head, the worry in his thoughts, and the buzzing in his chest. While mindfulness eased his mental anguish, he still felt it wasn't helping him solve his real-life problems. He asked for the advice of Epstein, who explained that mindfulness would allow him to respond, not react, to his feelings. Additionally, it would allow him to see a problem clearly and prevent him from acting on his impulses. To improve mindfulness, Dan would need to meditate.

# Letting Go Doesn't Mean You Stop Caring About Your Goals and Ambitions

As Dan began to practice meditation, he still questioned the Buddhist concept of “letting go.” He feared that he would lose his ambition and his will to strive. Would he simply become a pushover? Controlling your ego doesn’t mean that you have to lose your ambition or simply get walked all over. According to Professor Jon Kabat-Zinn, practicing mindfulness can actually make you more creative and more productive. This is a result of a clear mind that makes room for new ideas and thoughts.

Dan decided to take Epstein’s advice and signed up for a meditation retreat organized by Joseph Goldstein. On the first day, the teacher informed Dan and the other attendees that there would be no talking, reading, or sex throughout the 10-day retreat. The goal for participants was to become mindful of everything they did and become aware of the things they usually do automatically, like eating or using the bathroom. Throughout the first meditation practice, Dan’s mind wandered most of the time, he became most aware of the pain in his back and neck from sitting on an uncomfortable cushion for so long. When was the final bell going to ring?

Around day five, Dan increased his awareness of his thoughts. He became flooded with ideas and began writing furiously in notebooks that became filled by the end of his retreat. In his state of peace and mindfulness, Dan became more productive since his mind was free of clutter and chaos. Additionally, Dan discovered that he no longer needed the competition or high-stress assignments to fuel his ambition and drive. Instead, he found it much more satisfying to control his urges than to indulge in them. In other words, mindfulness doesn’t mean that you have to be unproductive.

For example, shortly after Dan returned from his retreat, Dan was offered the job of becoming the weekend co-anchor of *Good Morning America*. Throughout the following weeks, negotiations on the new contract were at a standstill. Eventually, the executive producer of GMA called Dan into his



office to inform him that he would never be the anchor of a major weekday newscast, he had neither the looks nor the voice. The old Dan would have unleashed his anger, his ego was telling him to lash out; instead, he calmly asked his boss how he could improve. For the first time, Dan used mindfulness to control his ego and his impulses.

# The Benefits of Mindfulness Are Both Mental and Physical

While meditation made Dan more mindful, it didn't completely quiet the voice inside his head or help him loosen up at work. But Dan didn't stop his quest to achieve mindfulness. As he continued attending meditation seminars, Dan learned the benefits of meditation go beyond controlling your impulses and making rational decisions. In fact, studies suggest that meditation has beneficial health effects on depression, drug addiction, cancer-related stress, ADHD, and even IBS or Irritable Bowel Syndrome. Another study revealed that mindfulness made workers more focused and even led to improved test scores on the GRE.

A Harvard MRI study observed that people who had undergone an eight-week mindfulness course developed thicker gray-matter in the areas of the brain associated with self-awareness and compassion. Similarly, the MRI revealed that the regions in the brain associated with stress had gotten smaller. After learning this new knowledge, Dan was able to convince others around him to start meditating. Corporate attorney for General Mills, Janice Marturano, adopted meditation in hopes of increasing her creativity and focus.

You see, the human brain is unable to multitask because it has a single processor. When you keep switching tasks, the brain struggles to get back to where it was. The result? A loss in productivity. Mindfulness, however, allows you to focus on one task at a time, thus increasing your productivity. Marturano suggests taking short mindfulness breaks throughout the day. On these breaks, you can watch your breath and take note of your bodily sensations.

Eventually, meditation even gained traction in Silicon Valley. *Wired* magazine even went on to call mindfulness “the new caffeine.” However, people were forgetting one major component of meditation: compassion. In an interview with the Dalai Lama, Dan learned that while loving oneself is

natural, the key is to become compassionate about the welfare of others. A study at the Emory campus conducted a study in which researchers placed subjects in stressful scenarios. They found that those who took part in compassion meditation released lower levels of the stress hormone, cortisol. Additionally, those who participate in volunteer work tend to be happier, healthier, and more successful at work.

Dan decided to start practicing compassion meditation, or Metta meditation, in which he would sit and send positive emotions to the people in his life, both people he cared about and people he struggled to get along with. As a result, he realized that being nice had become a daily priority for him. Of course, sometimes he wondered if his career clashed with compassion. For example, he was once interviewing Paris Hilton when he asked a question that Paris refused to answer and caused her to walk off the set. Her manager and publicist asked the crew not to use the tapes; however, the network aired the incident anyway. As the video went viral, Dan was seen as rude and unkind.

# **Mindfulness Can Lead to Impartial Judgment and a Non-attachment to Results**

When you take on a new project at home or work, you imagine the end result. For example, when renovating your bathroom, you have a vision that you are aiming for, right? What happens when something goes wrong? How do you react when you realize the deadline must be pushed back? Or that your dream bathtub is out of stock? Your ego likely wants to get angry, disappointed even. According to Epstein, however, you can use the Buddhist practice of nonattachment to control your reactions to situations like these.

You see, Dan continued to struggle with striking a balance between ambition and mental calmness; therefore, he asked for advice from Epstein. He advised Dan to nurture a healthy nonattachment to the results. This confused Dan even more. How can he devote his time and energy to a project and not be attached to the outcome? The key, according to Epstein, was to give the project the best chance for success and let it have its own life because no outcome is guaranteed. When you let go of uncontrollable variables, you allow yourself to spend your energy on what you can control. Lessen your attachment to the results because obsessing won't change the outcome!

According to Buddhist teachings, we respond to experiences in three different ways. We either want it, think about the desire to indulge in that delicious cookie. We reject it, imagine swatting at mosquitos. Or we zone out, imagine ignoring airplane-safety demonstrations by flight attendants. Mindfulness, however, gives us a fourth option: to observe without judgment. When we become impartial to experiences, we can detach ourselves and not worry about the outcome.

With this approach, failure won't be as devastating or as scary as it seems.

## **Final Summary**

In today's fast-paced world, it's hard to calm our minds and quiet the voice telling us to act on all our impulses. As a result, we live in a constant state of stress and panic which leads to even more critical mental and physical illnesses. Dan Harris realized he needed to change his fast-paced life after suffering a panic attack on national television. Before his humiliating experience, Dan was constantly searching for the next best thing, trying to satisfy his ambitious needs through dangerous assignments and chasing euphoric highs through drugs. Through the practice of meditation, Dan was able to achieve mindfulness. As a result, he has been able to lead a more compassionate, productive, happier, and healthier lifestyle. Through meditation, you too can become 10% happier.



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