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Context to the nugget conversation

Ethan speaks about some of the strategies that he uses to manage Chatter. He speaks about effectively undertaking time travel and how we can ensure that while we undertake time travel, we don't get stuck in the time machine. He also refers to the benefits of Nature in inducing Awe and the benefit of Distance self-talk.

Transcription

Deepak Jayaraman (DJ): Just moving to one of the, some of the tools that you talk about in the book, Ethan, the one that caught my attention was time travel. You talk about mental time travel. I was also trying to reconcile that with this notion of being present and this whole discourse around mindfulness. So, can you talk a little bit about the effectiveness of time travel and dealing with chatter but also how you think about that in the context of this discussion that is happening around mindfulness today?

Ethan Kross (EK): Yeah, happy to. So, we hear a lot that you want to be in the present, focus on the present and that message is often delivered, it's wrapped around the kind of mindfulness industry and so my feelings on that are this. I think mindfulness is wonderful as a practice and I think there are many moments in life where being focused on the present, being able to refocus our attention on the present can serve a boon to our well-being. I should disclose by the way that I have been meditating on and off since the time I was five-years-old. I think I have mentioned this in the book but my dad on my fifth birthday, I desperately wanted, like, you know, a bicycle and instead he picked me up from school and said, I got a great surprise for you and he took me to the Transcendental Meditation Centre in Manhattan and I got a mantra, I learned how to meditate. So, I genuinely...

DJ: Evolved parenting I think for that time I must say.

EK: Yeah, yeah, he was an interesting guy. So, I say this to genuinely communicate that I am pro-mindfulness, pro-meditation, I have researched it myself, shown some benefits and I have done it myself. I say that because now I am going to give not a critique, but I want to make the situation a little bit more nuanced. I think mindfulness is an example of one tool amidst many that people can use to manage chatter. Likewise, I think, focusing on the present can be useful in certain contexts, but I think it is incredibly important for people to know that the human mind did not evolve to be fixated on the present, in fact, we evolved to be able to travel in time in our mind. And this capacity, I would argue is an essential feature of a human mind that lets us do remarkable things. My ability to travel in time in the mind lets me do things like learn from my past experiences so I don't repeat mistakes. My ability to travel in time in the mind lets me prepare for future engagements so I

perform well. It lets me fantasize about things that might happen in ways that enrich my well-being. Now, there is nothing wrong with mental time travel on its own. The problem is that we often get in our mental time travel machines. We go back in time to figure out something to try to learn from a past mistake and our time travel machines break down, right? That is when we get stuck in ruminating, or we go into the future to try to prepare for something maybe negative but we get stuck there too, just what if this happens, what if that happens? And when that happens, we have got a couple of options. One option is all right, well, let's just bring the time machine back to the present and that can certainly be useful for helping us. And I think that is what certain pieces of mindfulness help teach us how to do. But there is also another option which is not to come back to the present but to figure out how can you travel in time more effectively without your time travel machine getting stuck. And many of the tools I talk about in the book are designed to help us do that. They are designed to help us figure out, for example, how do you go back and think about a really painful event so that you can learn from it but without getting stuck in that moment in ways that are harmful. So, that is my feeling about mental time travel, being in the present, I don't think they are mutually exclusive, I do think however that an exclusive focus on living in the present is an unattainable goal that probably wouldn't be healthy actually.

DJ: And picking up on the point about not getting stuck, Ethan, are there easy wins, are there one or two thoughts around bringing it back that is helpful for the listeners either from the past to the present or the future to the present?

EK: Yeah, so I mean there are probably 28 more so or spare you and listeners from laundry listing them all...

DJ: Or the ones that work for you maybe if I make it simpler?

EK: Yeah, let me give you a couple of highlights. So, another physical tool, physical environment tool involves enhancing your exposure to green spaces and nature, and that can help us in a few different ways. On the one hand, there has been a lot of research which shows that going for a walk in a serene safe setting can help restore our attention. Our attention is often depleted when we are experiencing chatter because we are focusing so intently and trying to work the problem through or not making any progress. And so, we end up burning through our attentional reserves and what happens when you go for a walk in a green setting is your attention drifts away gently from the problems you are struggling with to the beauty that surrounds you. And we start focusing on the surroundings, the green spaces, but we are not doing so in a very deliberate way. It's not like when I go for a walk in the park, I am carefully studying the geometrical shape of the tree leaves and looking at their patterns I am just kind of taking it, that gives rise to this what we call a restoration effect. So, you leave the walk and you feel like you have more resources to manage the adversity you are dealing with. That is one way that nature can help. Another thing that it can do is it can put us in a position to experience the emotion of awe, which is an emotion we experience when we are in the presence of something vast and indescribable. A tree that has been here for hundreds of years or an amazing view. What happens when we experience awe is we go through something that scientists call shrinking of the self. So, you feel smaller when you are contemplating something vast and indescribable and when you feel smaller so does your chatter. So, I will give you a real-world example here. I am worried about some work, I go to the local park a few blocks from my house, I go for a walk and I look out and I am looking at this river that has been here for how many thousands of years, I am looking at these trees. Actually, in the arboretum by my house some of the trees have like a little plaque that says, how long they have been here. And I am thinking to myself, these trees are decades older than me, they have weathered so much adversity and then I think about the little problem I am dealing with. Experiencing that emotion of awe has the ability to broaden our perspective in ways that can be really helpful for keeping our chatter at bay. So, those are a couple

of physical things. You asked me about some of my other go-to strategies, when I am experiencing chatter. Mental time travel is definitely one. So, that is what I do if I wake up at 2:00 in the morning with some chatter, it happens every four to five weeks, I don't know why but I will randomly wake up in the middle of a night wide-eyed and worried. And when that happens, I will engage in a specific mental time travel strategy that we call temporal distancing. I will think about how am I going to feel about this thing that is bothering me tomorrow morning or next week and what that does for me is it makes me realize that whatever I am going through right now as awful as it feels, it reminds me that it's temporary and it will eventually pass which gives me hope that I will feel better, which makes the chatter better. Because what I have learned in my life as I think most listeners have been that we all experience adversity at times, we all experience the big emotions and deep chatter but eventually we come out of that, we move on to something else, sometimes another bout of chatter but we do eventually come out of it. We lose sight of that fact when we are in the midst of chatter and that can be really upsetting. So, I will do temporal distancing in that way, I will also do something that we call distance self-talk, which is I will try to give myself advice like I would give advice to a close friend and I will use language to help me do that. So, I actually use my name to coach myself through a problem. I won't do this in front of others out loud, of course, that would be very strange, but in my mind, I would say, Ethan, here's how you are going to manage this situation. One of the things we know about people is we are much better at giving advice to other people than we are giving advice to ourselves. And this tool, this distance self-talk, it really capitalizes on that mechanism. Because if you think about it, when do we use names and words like you, we use those parts of speech when we think about referring to other people. So, when you use your own name to refer to yourself that in a certain sense turns on the mind machinery for thinking about others, it makes you, puts you in this more objective standpoint, which makes it much easier for you to coach yourself through your problems. So, those are some of my go-to's.

DJ: Lovely. On the last point, Ethan, when I was in McKinsey, we would often say, Marvin Bower was one of the early Partners who played a big role in shaping the values and the culture of the firm. So, a tool or a ritual that the partners would urge the youngsters to engage in is what would Marvin do, you know, in this situation ask yourself the question. I don't think it's quite what you just described, but I guess that some of it is that distancing thing.

EK: It's a distancing mechanism for sure, because you are broadening the perspective and looking at it from a different angle. The difference between the tool that I described and the Marvin, Marvin?

DJ: Marvin Bower, yeah.

EK: Marvin tool is that when I am using my name, I am still thinking about the circumstances from my own perspective. So, it is freeing me up to weigh in on the situation from my own unique vantage point which would be different than had I said, what would Marvin do, what would my dad do here? That could be, that could also be quite useful but then you are adopting the lens of that other individual. Now, I assure you if I picked the wrong person to engage in that perspective taking exercise, I might not come up with the best solution.

DJ: That's a great point.

EK: But it certainly falls under this category of distancing tools.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: I must say that of the various things he says, I find that Nature is often a challenge when it comes to cities like Mumbai. I also find that some phrases that we use casually have a deeper meaning. For instance, the phrase “Go take a walk” has an interesting history to it. One of our earlier guests, Jennifer Goldman Wetzler (JGW) speaks about it here.

JGW: “Take a walk, ask someone to go take a walk rather than sitting and talking to each other, the movement, there is something about movement, especially if you are someone who you know about yourself that you are kinesthetic person. And also, you can ask yourself who are the other people involved here and who will I be talking to and are they someone who might appreciate nature or the outdoors or getting a breath of fresh air, the movement as well, that is a great question to ask.”

DJ: Like Ethan says, taking a walk – being exposed to nature and some sort of movement can help break the Chatter, I guess.

Thank you for listening.

End of nugget transcription

Nugget from Jennifer Goldman Wetzler that is referenced: [Real meaning of "take a walk"](#).

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About Deepak Jayaraman

Deepak seeks to unlock the human potential of senior executive's / leadership teams by working with them as an Executive Coach / Sounding Board / Transition Advisor. You can know more about his work [here](#).

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