

## Email (or Facebook or texting) Observation Exercise

Prepared for Prof. Karen Litfin's Honors 392A

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### Introduction

To be mindful is to be attentive to aspects of what is happening in the present moment. When we shine the light of mindfulness on ourselves, we have the opportunity to observe many things, including our breath, our posture, sensations in the body, our emotional state and moods, our thoughts. Observing ourselves in this way, we may notice, for example, that we are feeling anxious or happy; that our breathing is quick and shallow, or slow and deep; that our mind is noisy with thoughts or relatively quiet. If we observe these qualities over time, we will inevitably see them change. Mindfulness deployed in this way gives us the ability to assess our moment-to-moment quality of life and to see how our activities in the world affect our inner states, as well as how our inner states affect what we do and how we do it.

For this exercise, I ask you to use mindfulness as a lens through which to observe one particular cluster of activities: your email activity. (You may also choose another online practice, such as using Facebook, or texting, or some other app.) When you read and write email, how do you sit? How do you breathe? What emotional states do you find yourself in? How do your inner states change over the course of an email session? Does your mood (or your posture, or your breath) change depending on the particular email message you are dealing with? In what way? What is your emotional state when you first decide to attend to your email? What is your emotional state when you end your email session?

### The assignment

Assignment 1 has three parts:

1. To observe and maintain a **log** of your email behavior.
2. To write a short **reflection** that summarizes the patterns you observed and noted in part 1.
3. To prepare **personal guidelines** for your future email use based on parts 1 and 2.

### **1. Observe your behavior and maintain a log.**

Over the course of the next week, please take 20 minutes a day to observe and make notes about your email behavior. I suggest doing this for 3-5 days. Here are some suggestions for things you might pay attention to:

- Notice how you feel (your breathing, your bodily state, your emotions, your attentiveness) just before you start reading email, and just after you finish. Do you feel a pull (positive or negative) before you begin reading email? Do you find it difficult to stop, and if so, why?
- Notice how you feel when you first set eyes upon your inbox. Does it bring up certain emotional reactions and/or changes in body state and breathing?
- Notice how you feel when you read or write different email messages, or simply when you see them in your inbox. What kind and quality of attention do different email messages ask of you, and what kind and quality do you actually give them? How do your bodily, emotional, and attentional states change over the course of each email session? Do you become more energized or enervated? More or less alert?
- If you are multitasking while you do email, what causes you to switch between tasks and how does it make you feel?

### **2. Reflect on and write about the patterns you observe.**

After completing these observations, examine your log for regularities. What patterns do you notice around your email habits? What is working well for you and what isn't? What could you imagine changing, how, and why?

### **3. In your written reflection, include a set of personal guidelines for your future email use.**

In logging your email behavior and reflecting on it, you probably noticed some practices that are working well for you and others that could use improvement. Based on these observations, write up a set of personal guidelines for future email. These may be a combination of your prior patterns of use, as well as changes you would now like to make.