**How to Be More Observant**

*Written by Sasha Graffagna*

I’m often told I’m the least observant person my friends know. I can have an hour-long conversation with you in a coffee shop, but if I close my eyes, I won’t remember the color of your shirt. This isn’t a memory problem; it’s the same reason you don’t know why you just walked into the kitchen. We didn’t forget – we simply never learned. We weren’t paying attention.

As shown in [*Brain Games*](https://www.nationalgeographic.com/tv/)*,*humans were once some of the most observant creatures on this planet because we had to be. We could assess where a stranger had come from and what he’d eaten with a mere glance. But in modern times, we live in closer quarters than ever and spend all day with our heads buried in our computer monitors. We no longer observe, and it’s a problem.

In 2010, [1500 pedestrians were treated in Emergency Rooms due to using their cell phones while walking](http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2013/09/17/cell-phone-walking-injuries-rise/2824515/). But paying attention to your surroundings is only half the battle. How many times have you ignored your instinct, only to later have it proven right? Your intuition is your limbic brain reacting to subtle nonverbal cues your conscious mind is missing. Time and again, we notice something’s off, but we proceed anyway.

So what can you do? Improve your powers of observation, so next time you notice something wrong you can trust your instincts – or better yet, won’t be caught off guard.

**1. Make observation a priority.**

In order to improve your powers of observation, you must make them a priority. Stop texting or Facebooking as you walk down the street, and keep your eyes on your surroundings. Do you read a book on the train to work? Spend 10 minutes each way observing other commuters. Good observation skills won’t appear overnight. You must do it little by little, day by day.

**2. Take a drawing or painting class.**

Are you a terrible artist? You’re probably drawing what you think you should be seeing, instead of what you are actually looking at. Take a drawing or painting class to shed yourself of these preconceived notions. Learning to see an object in front of you for how it truly is will help you assess other situations in your life.

**3. People watch.**

This can be a fun activity to do with a friend or significant other. Go to a public place and observe the people around you. Describe them to each other and imagine what kind of people they are. Be sure to converse in low voices, or at a reasonable distance away from your parties of interest. Not comfortable discussing people aloud? Bring a pen or paper and write down your observations instead.

**5. Give a running commentary.**

Do you tend to look down as you rush from place to place? While the sidewalk may be fascinating, it’s not helping your observation skills. Next time you walk down the street, look up and do a running commentary of everything you see in your head. This improves your memory and your concentration as you practice observing. Notice the makes and models of passing cars, what time nearby stores open, whether the woman on the corner wears a wedding ring. You could also name the street signs as you drive, or count the number of couples at the movies.

**6. Practice mindfulness each day.**

According to [Helpguide](http://www.helpguide.org/harvard/mindfulness.htm), mindfulness is “the practice of purposely focusing your attention on the present moment and accepting it without judgment.” Being mindful is associated with [several mental and physical health benefits](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/23/your-money/mindfulness-requires-practice-and-purpose.html), and helps improve your observation skills. It also asks you to pay attention to your inner states, which is crucial to learning to trust your instincts in potentially dangerous situations. Learn how to be mindful [here](http://www.rd.com/slideshows/10-steps-to-mindfulness/).

**7. Ditch the camera.**

If you’ve been to a concert recently, chances are you pulled out your smartphone. But [two studies from Fairfield University](http://www.minnpost.com/second-opinion/2013/12/were-more-observant-without-camera-study-suggests) suggest that having a camera doesn’t improve your memory of a moment, and might even impair it. Got an Instagram-worthy event coming up? Take a couple of photos then put your phone away. You can experience the world better when you’re not limited by a viewfinder.

**8. Learn how to read body language.**

If your intuition is your limbic brain responding to nonverbal cues, how helpful might it be to teach these cues to your conscious mind?  The easiest way to do this is to learn how we communicate via body language. Body language can teach you [how to spot a liar](https://web.archive.org/web/20140628022407/http%3A//delnet.wpengine.com/how-to-spot-a-liar/%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank), whether you’ll get a second date, and even how to improve your client’s opinion of you. Get a good primer on the subject [here](http://www.businessballs.com/body-language.htm).

**9. Listen more.**

Observation takes all five senses, including the sense of hearing. But how often do you really listen? Let’s find out: how many sounds do you hear right now?

How many sounds was your brain blocking out? Perhaps it’s merely the hum of the heater right now, but what about when you’re out with a friend? Are you really listening to his problem, or are you planning out where you’ll go later for dinner? Next time your friend or partner has an issue they want to discuss, devote your full attention. Resist the urge to offer advice immediately. Instead, ask questions and be sure you understand all aspects of the problem before offering your input. You can learn more about how to be a better listener [here](http://www.dumblittleman.com/2011/08/7-powerful-tips-to-becoming-better.html).

**10. Pay attention to your meal.**

We often eat meals alone, but tend to spend that time catching up on our favorite show or reading the newspaper. Next time you dine solo, pay attention to the food. Don’t wolf down your meal; eat slowly. Notice how the various tastes, smells and textures mingle in your mouth. Not only will this practice your observation skills, but eating more slowly can also help your diet.

**Do you consider yourself an observant person? How do you sharpen those skills? Did you notice the missing number in this list? Let us know in the comments!**