

## Book Review:

# The Mindful Body: Thinking Our Way to Chronic Health

By

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Psychologist Ellen Langer has been a major influence in psychology for over 40 years. In 1981, she became the first woman tenured in the Psychology Department at Harvard University, where she continues to teach today. As her website notes, Langer has published over 200 research articles and 13 books.<sup>1</sup>

Langer is probably best known for her book **Counterclockwise: Mindful Health and the Power of Possibility** (2009) which is based on Langer's 1979 experiment in which elderly men lived in a place retrofitted to suggest that time had gone backwards 20 years. Told to live as their younger selves, the men's physical bodies, including their vision, hearing, and strength, improved after only a week (Langer 2023:12). This study is so well-known that it was the basis for a 2017 episode of *the Simpsons* where the character of Granpa rediscovers his youth.<sup>2</sup> (YouTube episode: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G9etT76QaKc>)

Given the amount of work that Langer has done, it was surprising to the authors of this review that her most recent book has received no reviews in any academic journal as of this writing. Instead, Langer has given numerous interviews about her most recent book in a variety of settings and has promoted it on her Instagram page.

Langer calls **The Mindful Body...** (New York: Ballantine Books, 2023) an "idea memoir" where she sought to *reconsider* her ideas from previous work and present new ideas (p. 224). This book is also a partial autobiography as Langer shares some personal information in it. Most notable is her discussion of situations when she took risks that sometimes turned out well but at other times, they did not. In one example,

she describes an undergraduate adventure where she and a friend accepted a sailboat ride from Puerto Rico to the Virgin Islands with two strangers and, subsequently, after arriving, accepted a ride *alone* in a Jeep with two other strangers. They took her to a clearing in a remote jungle instead of to a hotel as promised. While Langer notes that this experience terrified her at the time, she now views it as an "introduction to the difficulty of decision making" (p. 28). She argues that her behavior is an example of *not always* trying to "make the right decision but make the decision right" (p. 75).

Although social scientists may know a great deal about Langer's work, the major value of her current book is the summary of research on mindfulness. Mindfulness is "the simple process of actively noticing things, no meditation required ... Everything becomes interesting and potentially useful in a new way." (p. Xvii)

Basic to Langer's approach is her understanding of the unity of mind and body. The medical model, which became "the" western model, emerged in the mid-19th century, when pathogens were discovered. The medical model assumes that pathogens introduced to the body cause disease and that psychological variables are secondary. More recently, the bio-social model of illness has become the prevalent view. This model posits that biological, psychological, and social factors all interact to cause illness, but according to Langer, this model continues to view the mind and body as separate. In contrast, Langer believes in mind-body unity. For her, "mind-body unity means that neurological changes are happening more or less simultaneously rather than sequentially. Moreover, the changes are happening throughout our bodies—even if scientists choose only to look at the brain" (p.116). She argues that by changing our minds we can change our bodies to a meaningful extent.

<sup>1</sup>Langer website <https://www.ellenlanger.me/>

<sup>2</sup>The Simpsons 2017. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G9etT76QaKc>

Like the two of us, most social scientists are knowledgeable about statistics. We know that *not all* differences are statistically significant, and that *not all* statistically significant differences are meaningful. Nevertheless, we often *do not apply* that knowledge when we are faced with a lab test that shows a result that is slightly above (or below) a borderline. When one point can put a person into the “diabetic” category, we forget that one point *less* would read “pre-diabetic.” Langer refers to this as the “borderline effect” which frequently leads to less healthy behaviors because the person internalizes the diagnosis (pp. 11-13). Those without knowledge of statistics are even more at risk of misinterpreting borderlines.

Labeling people, by putting them in clinical categories, is *not* a neutral activity because people internalize labels assigned to them. In a recent article about mental health labels, Manvir Singh refers to this internalization as “dynamic nominalism” or the “process, in which naming creates the thing named” (2024 p. 21). Psychological research is best when the individuals being studied are *not aware* of the researchers’ hypotheses. Similarly, valid medical research requires that both subject and physician *do not know* which treatment is being used (double blind) because knowing could influence the outcome of the research.

Langer discusses this idea in relation to the age categories and chronic health diagnosis. For example, Michele recently experienced a decade marking birthday. Bouquets of flowers arrived, lovely but more abundant than earlier birthdays. While some birthdays are significant because they make a person eligible to drive, or buy alcohol, or vote, this was not such an event. She had to remind herself (and others) that she was still the same person she was the day, week, month before, despite the change in number. As Langer amply illustrates, if we internalize the negative stereotypes of aging, then we are more likely to experience them.

Even if we are experiencing some changes due to age, we are likely continuing much as we were before the years accumulated. But we may selectively perceive the negative changes and overlook the consistencies or positive changes. Perception is powerful (Egeth & Bevan 1973). Langer presents a variety of studies that indicate just how powerful. For example, research found the perception of stress was more important than level of stress (p. 120); perception of hours of sleep was more influential than actual hours of sleep (p. 123); perceiving the task to be half completed was more significant than the actual amount of time doing the task (p. 123).

Langer also pays attention to variability and urges

her readers to so as well (chapter 8). Once we have a diagnosis of chronic illness, we may expect negative symptoms to develop and are less likely to notice stability or even improvement. However, if we are mindful, we may notice good days and bad days and consider how our behavior and other factors may have influenced how we feel. Symptoms are not static. If we notice variability, we may be able to find ways to reduce our symptoms. She provides many examples. A notable one was when patients with chronic pain paid attention to the variability of the intensity of their pain. This “resulted in positive changes including significant decreases in reports of pain interfering in their daily lives” (p. 173).

Langer suggests ways to live a more mindful life. Among them are:

- “Understanding that predicting risk is usually impossible” (p. 28) so don’t regret decisions. Regret “rests on the faulty assumption that the choice not made would have yielded more positive consequences” (p. 88).
- Use mindful optimism by making a useful plan, implementing it, and then expecting that all will be fine (p. 45).
- Know that “tasks are neither universally considered fun nor arduous. It depends on how we approach them” (p. 55). An example is a YouTube exercise guru who says “I get to exercise rather I have to exercise.”<sup>3</sup>
- While “sorting winners from losers in our society begins early” (p. 56), it’s better to be non-judgmental since we don’t know what they are intending (p. 58).
- Don’t make social comparisons as doing so will only make us miserable by leading to envy and guilt (p. 95).
- Don’t “try” or “hope” to do something. Instead, do it so that you focus on the process rather than the outcome (p. 102).
- Don’t focus on the external meaning or purpose of the things we do. Instead, be free to enjoy whatever we are doing (p. 110).

<sup>3</sup>Up to the Beat Fit <https://www.youtube.com/c/UptotheBEatFit>

- When making decisions, make a choice that is good enough. Learn that there is no single correct decision and if we just search hard enough we'll find (Chapter 4).

- Framing things differently makes decisions seem better or worse. Langer's example is about evaluating how we feel when people change their minds, and we decide if they are being flexible versus inconsistent (p. 75). Learning to frame or reframe things has been useful to Emily in a variety of ways. Having cancer and recovering from it helped her figure out what was really important to her and what was not. In a less dramatic example, going to a yoga class with others who were 30-40 years younger and not being able to do everything they did discouraged her until she realized she could do 90% of what they were doing.

In **The Mindful Body**, Ellen Langer challenges readers to let go of rules based upon stereotypes, especially negative beliefs and expectations. She presents numerous research findings, many from studies she and her students and colleagues conducted. The data provide evidence that mindful attention to symptoms can change outcomes in ways that are often unexpected, which in turn may promote more positive attitudes and behaviors. She argues against "certainty" and for embracing "variability" and the power of uncertainty, with particular emphasis on medical diagnoses and decisions.

Although this book is focused on aging and chronic illness-- problems we will all face if we are fortunate enough to live long lives-- it has implications and suggestions for most readers.

Langer writes in a conversational style, which makes it accessible to the general reader and may be why this book has not had professional reviews. Langer provides an overview of much of her research, without bogging the reader down in detail. Although many of the studies are small (few participants; short time frames), the abundance and consistency of them is convincing.

## References

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**About the Reviewers:** Michele Hoffnung was trained as an experimental psychologist. She is Professor Emerita of Psychology at Quinnipiac University in Hamden, CT where she taught research methods and the psychology of women for more than four decades. Hoffnung has authored many articles, books, and book reviews about lifespan development, women's roles, women's choices, and motherhood; **Emily Stier Adler** is Professor Emerita of Sociology at Rhode Island College. Since retirement, she devotes her spare time to family and friends and social justice activism with her faith community. Drs. Adler and Hoffnung are the authors of **Being Grandma and Grandpa: Grandparents Share Advice, Insights and Experiences**.