

COMMENTARY

# The ART of mindfulness skills in making the most of intentional silence at work

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The focal article's (Asselineau et al., 2024) evidence-based case for silence at work motivates interest in *how* to be silent. The *how* is of particular importance when considering the pressure to be not quiet at work: We chatter and communicate constantly, fueled by work cultures that highly value collaboration, instant responsiveness, and blurred work–life boundaries. This observation suggests we need skills that allow us to recognize and respond to our habitual urges to engage in unfettered communication, and mindfulness skills—with their emphasis on noting and reorienting behavior around often-ignored cognitive routines and unopposed impulses—support this aim. Furthermore, an untrained silent, wandering mind can be an unhappy mind as rumination, anxiety-provoking mental time travel, and related pathological states disrupt productive concentration (Christoff et al., 2016), so clarifying *how* the silence should unfold—even if the goal is free association or the beauty of enjoying silence for its own sake—appears key to making the most of it. Here, too, mindfulness skills provide relief: They support you in clarifying your cognitive intentions. As such, in describing *how* to be silent, we use the S-ART (self-awareness, -regulation, and -transcendence) framework of mindfulness skills (Vago & Silbersweig, 2012), which describes how layering self-focused awareness, regulation, and transcendence skills enables (a) mindfulness of the current moment, inclusive of internal provocations to *not* be quiet or use quiet time unproductively (awareness); (b) cognitive space to consider possible choices in how to respond to urges (regulation); and (c) reflection of why you would expend effort against urges given how uncomfortable and effortful it can feel to dissuade yourself from habitual behavior, even when that behavior does not serve you (transcendence; Schuman-Olivier et al., 2020). Building these skills is particularly important when an organization develops intentional periods of quiet because, as the focal article remarks, such cultures can be imposed (rather than elected) and can include mandates to “reflect,” leaving employees needing direction as to how to cope with their internal urges to detour into “nonquiet” routines and a guiding reason to cultivate silence beyond acquiescence.

## Self-awareness mindfulness skills

To engage in purposeful silence requires cognitive control: First, to enter into silence; second, to remain there; and third, to engage in intentional activity within the silence. Self-awareness skills start this sequence of events by encouraging you to attend to your own experience: Here and now, what are you experiencing in your mind (emotions, moods, thoughts) and body (sensations)? The following discussion centers on those self-awareness skills central to transitioning from unadulterated communication to purposeful quiet, empowering employees, as the focal article describes, to be active architects of their silence.

Self-awareness begins with connecting to the present moment by noting your current experience; without self-awareness, the cultural tides pressing against silence will go unacknowledged, leaving you, as the focal article suggests, feeling voiceless rather than voluntarily muted. Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (“ACT”) suggests a key first skill: The skill of *contact with the present moment* asks you to focus your attention on here and now rather than time traveling to the past or future (Hayes et al., 2012). In the here and now, you note what arises in your mind and body when you engage in purposeful quiet (e.g., boredom, anxiety, tension). This contact facilitates the second self-awareness skill of *meta-awareness*. Building *meta-awareness* means developing an applied understanding that you can observe conscious processes within your mind, inclusive of attentional dysregulation, from a position of bare awareness—in other words, awareness without conscious intent to respond to the content of experience (Bernstein et al., 2015). For example, I can simply take in the fact that I feel an urgent need to break my silence, not shifting to fixing or fighting the urge. Or, although I might find silence easy, I can use mindfulness when the content of that silence is misaligned with personal goals, such as becoming aware of the dual urges to let my mind wander to tonight’s date and also make progress on my long-delayed speech outline. With meta-awareness, you see a glimmer of choice between stimulus (urge to break or waste quiet) and response (actually breaking my silence or filling quiet with disarrayed thought; Good et al., 2016). With self-awareness skills, attention is trained on the choice to lean into or out of silence and its goals, and thus, setting the table for self-regulatory processes that support purposeful silence.

### Self-regulation mindfulness skills

Self-regulation mindfulness skills “provid[e] a degree of choicefulness over whether to allow the automatic responses to run or to consciously regulate behavior in the service of more adaptive outcomes (Good et al., 2016, p. 121).” Many technical neurological processes undergird self-regulation, and such processes indicate the use of executive control capacities to make intentional choices (Vago & Silbersweig, 2012). We note here that, in step with the focal article, self-regulation skills help make the quiet “dose” clearer: Only with self-regulation can the intended quiet emerge, allowing the employer (and employee) to assess if appropriate benefit is gained, or if more/less quiet is necessary. We highlight here specific mindfulness skills that support regulation that help you respond appropriately when you feel an urge to avoid/escape quiet or otherwise use your quiet time for nonproductive purposes.

Again drawing from ACT theory, the skill of acceptance helps you to coexist with an uncomfortable cognition without it derailing your goal of remaining quiet (Hayes et al., 2012). *Acceptance* as a skill means allowing urges to avoid or disengage with silence to simply be in one’s mind, alongside any attendant uncomfortable physical sensations (e.g., restlessness, tension), without actively trying to fix, resolve, or avoid their discomfort. Acceptance teaches you that, sometimes, pursuing silence brings unsettling experiences, and you can weather their discontent. Maintaining self-awareness through the process of acceptance brings a bonus: You observe that feelings of discomfort from not giving into urges to end your silence *always* fade, as is the nature of human experience, making acceptance tolerable because discomfort is viewed as temporary. It also provides pretext for the next self-regulatory skill: *decentering*, which is the active separation of the self from all internal experience (Bernstein et al., 2015), such as: I am experiencing the urge to break my evening communication silence by sending an instant message to my coworker after hours, but I am not a bad person for that impulse, nor do I need to feel upset by it. This urge is a normal, natural habit built through years of positive reinforcement meted out by social structures that reward “always on” communication and the pleasures of my professional identity as an “always reliable coworker.” Decentering helps you reframe the urge as distinct from the core you and instead see it as passing cognition, enabling you to transform awareness of your choice (give in or not) into active regulation (act or not).

### Self-transcendence mindfulness skills

Self-transcendence involves being aware of the interconnectedness of yourself to others, including future versions of yourself, and often reflects a fidelity to prosocial concerns (Kang, 2019; Reina et al., 2022). Self-transcendence skills inspire the difficult work of breaking habits that urge the absence of silence, as well as provide some guidance as to what you can do with the internal space silence provides. This skill is particularly important because, generally, applying mindfulness to encourage productive silence requires not only intention to become and remain silent but also a motivating reason why that silence is appropriate. As the focal article points out, motivations vary for silence, making silence inherently active. Although communication may not occur outside of the self, certainly communication within the self continues unabated even in the absence of verbalization. Self-transcendence both starts and shapes this internal conversation.

Self-transcendence skills of particular importance to improving self-understanding are explored here. We begin with the skill of *committed action*, which in the parlance of ACT theory means engaging in goal-directed behavior consistent with *a priori* value identification (Hayes et al., 2012). This skill requires working knowledge of one's own purpose-driven aims in life and development of strategies to reach such aims. When applied to the pursuit of productive silence, this skill prompts you to reflect on how silence aligns with personally meaningful values (e.g., I am choosing to be silent from 1–3 pm so that I have the cognitive space to integrate new understandings of my area of study, reflecting my value of being a sought-after expert. Or, in pursuit of an organizational value, I am choosing to be silent for 10 minutes midmeeting to achieve the critical organizational value of measured, thoughtful decision making). Reminding yourself of this value when the siren call of your WhatsApp notification breaks your afternoon deep-thinking reverie helps reinvigorate your motivation to remain quiet by restarting the chain of mindfulness skill. This skill includes bringing awareness to the urge to look at your phone, the regulation to sit with that urge without responding, and reflection on the transcendent reason for exposing yourself to that discomfort—a three-step approach thought sufficient to extinguish unwanted habits (Vago & Silbersweig, 2012). The self-transcendence skill of *wisdom* also supports purposeful-driven silence. As a skill, you can cultivate wisdom by engaging in sustained attention that allows for keen observation of insight and connection between concepts (Verhaeghen, 2021). Wisdom enables more extraction from the silence itself. In skillfully pursuing wisdom, you give your mind a particular sandbox to play in while silent (up to and including enjoying the mental refresh of just watching one's own breath), and distractions from that sandbox—through urges to communicate or otherwise just stop thinking so hard—are more easily discerned and skillfully dismissed as misaligned with personal values or goals.

### Conclusion: reconsolidation around the meaning of and motivation for silence

The foregoing discussion of mindfulness skills suggests the pursuit of silence by employees can be learned, leaving clear direction for organizations interested in investing in cultures of quiet. Three practical implications emerge: Organizations should make an effective case for the pursuit of periods of quiet so as to both motivate the building of the skills and inform the “self-transcendence” mindfulness skill component; employers should invest in skill-based training to build each of these skills in the context of intentional and purposeful quiet; and employers should recognize the fundamental change they are asking of employees: To be quiet is counterculture, and a neurological rewiring of the brain in support of quiet habits will take time. To the latter point, with dedicated and purposeful investment, employers can expect to achieve cultural change around silence when their employees experience *reconsolidation* (Vago & Silbersweig, 2012). As employees experience urges to disrupt purposeful quiet, they can show themselves there is another, more productive series of habits to develop when they (a) affirm *why* they do not indulge the urge to break purposeful quiet (e.g., consistent with a particular personal or organizational

value) and (b) allow themselves to feel pleasure when they arrive at a sought-after outcome of that purposeful quiet (e.g., feeling relaxed if they value high-quality recovery and allowing pride in that feeling of relaxation). It is at this point of reconsolidation that the potentiality of silence is achieved.

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