



# 5 Reasons We Can't Trust Our Wants and How Mindfulness Can Help [ebook](#)



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## The Problem with Our Wants

Wants are weird things.

We often can't tell someone why we want something, we just do. We don't know where they come from, but they have this hold over us. This unwavering, unrelenting hold.

For most people, they drive them and everything they do.

This isn't going to be a book about how wanting things is wrong. If nobody wanted anything, nothing would get done. I am writing this because I want something. I want to encourage people to examine their wants in a mindful way.

There are 5 central problems with being driven by wants.

1. Our wants are based on comparisons.
2. Our wants are driven by survival-based emotions that are often no longer relevant.
3. Our wants are heavily influenced by people who do not want the best for us.
4. We cannot tell the future.
5. Because of all of these things, we are rarely in a position to know what is best for us, or even good for us.

Let's break these down.

# 5 Reasons We Can't Trust Our Wants and How Mindfulness Can Help

## Our wants are based on comparisons.

There are so many things that we suddenly want, but not because we need them – we want them because we see someone else getting them or having them. Our thoughts kick in, asking why we don't have them too. We often don't even stop to ask ourselves if this is something that fits in with who we are or our long-term goals.

I noticed this in myself recently. I was reading *Don't Be a Jerk* by Brad Warner. In the book, Warner talks about this standing wave somewhere in Germany that the woman who was hosting him took him to see when he was a guest teacher over there (the wave isn't really important for this story, but he did use it as a great example of how to understand the nonexistence of a stable self).

Anyway, I had this moment of envy. I wanted to be invited to other countries to guest speak and see cool standing waves. My thoughts kicked in – how can I make this happen? This was all followed by the immediate realization of a few things that would make that terrible.

I don't really like speaking in front of people.

I don't enjoy traveling if it involves an airplane. I'm not afraid of dying, but I really hate the way it makes me feel, the cramped space, the terrible smell, being told what to do all day and not being in charge of where I'm going. I do not like staying with other people at all. That pretty much covers everything that a trip like that would involve, and I wouldn't enjoy any of it.

When it comes to wants based on comparison, our mind doesn't necessarily analyze whether or not we would enjoy this thing that we suddenly have to have. It just sees that we don't have it.

# 5 Reasons We Can't Trust Our Wants and How Mindfulness Can Help

## **Our wants are driven by survival-based emotions that are often no longer relevant.**

Notice I said often . I'm not saying that our survival instincts are never necessary or useful, just that they are not necessary or useful all the time. In fact, they are often detrimental. In terms of wants, they can literally be deadly.

Think of things like calories. A long, long time ago, calories were scarce so we got a shot of dopamine when we ate a bunch of them because it would give us the energy we needed to not die in a tough environment. That was an awesome adaptation when we were living in the middle of the food chain trying to use dull teeth and little fingernails against tigers and bears. It is deadly when we have massive stores of calories (often in the form of sugar) available at every supermarket, drive-through and grandma's house we pass.

This applies to our emotions as well. Fear is meant to motivate us toward immediate, unthinking action, anger to keep us from losing face in a clan or tribe-based environment and anxiety to make us alert to potential threats.

These all served important, necessary purposes in the past, and they can still be useful now, but much of what they perceive as threats are no longer relevant. It's a security system designed for the zombie apocalypse trying to function in times of peace. The Gatling guns were awesome against hordes of the undead, but they will chop Cub Scouts and Jehovah's Witnesses to pieces if we aren't careful. Much of what they tell us we want is actually unhealthy for us now. (Why Buddhism is True by Robert Wright explains this in more depth than I can here. It's not even a book about Buddhism either. Check it out).

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## **Our wants are heavily influenced by people who do not want the best for us.**

If you don't believe this, take a moment to really look at the magazines at the checkout stand. Pay attention to commercials and billboards and the logos on shirts and hats. Everything is telling us we aren't good enough, not thin enough, not ripped enough, not smart enough, not motivated enough, not rich enough, not tough enough, not happy enough. Everywhere you look are messages about what's wrong with you.

So why do they do this?

Why make us feel all anxious and scared and unsettled and insecure?

Because they love us and want us to improve our health and well-being, right?

No.

More likely because they know that these emotions make us want to buy whatever solution they are selling. They tell us we're too fat and then use the ensuing insecurity to sell us diet pills that are terrible for us. They tell us we need six-pack-abs and then sell us a useless piece of bent metal to do sit-ups better. They show us how happy couples look (usually on the beach with drinks watching the sunset) and then sell us a how-to guide.

It's all about selling you something.

It's also all about creating unpleasant emotions to cultivate a want.

We cannot trust what we want when there is a massive industry dedicated to cultivating specific wants in us for the sole purpose of selling us things we don't need.

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## We cannot tell the future.

This is simple. Our minds are bound to the present. We remember the past (very inaccurately). We think we have some idea about what will happen in the future, but this is 100% illusion. We don't know what will happen in the next second, much less in the next day or week or month or year. How can we trust our wants when they don't have any more access to our future than we do?

I used to drive through the place I live now and swear I would never live in a place like this. I hated everything about it.

I have been here for 17 years now, and in that time I have gotten a Bachelors and 2 Masters degrees, gotten married, had kids and opened my own business. These are all things that seemed out of the question for "people like me", and they all came into being in a place that I tried very hard to avoid.

I think of how many things I wanted that I am glad I never got. I think of how many things I didn't want that I got and turned out to be great things in my life. The best things in my life are things I would not have had the wisdom to choose when they were initially offered to me (or forced on me).

It's simple: we don't know what the future holds, so we don't have a lot of business investing too heavily in what we want in the present.

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**Because of all these things, we are rarely in a position to know what is best for us. Or even good for us.**

Between comparisons driving competitive urges, emotions behaving as though we are still hunter gatherers, massive corporations spending millions to exploit our limitations, and our complete lack of access to the future, our wants start to seem baseless at one end and downright dangerous at the other. Here's one of my favorite stories from the Taoist tradition that sums it all up:

There was a farmer whose horse ran away. That evening the neighbors gathered to commiserate with him since this was such bad luck. He said, "Maybe." The next day the horse returned, but brought with it six wild horses, and the neighbors came exclaiming at his good fortune. He said, "Maybe." And then, the following day, his son tried to saddle and ride one of the wild horses, was thrown, and broke his leg.

Again, the neighbors came to offer their sympathy for the misfortune. He said, "May be". The day after that, conscription officers came to the village to seize young men for the army, but because of the broken leg the farmer's son was rejected. When the neighbors came in to say how fortunately everything had turned out, he said, "Maybe."

Source: Tao: The Watercourse Way, by Alan Watts

You can see everything we've been talking about in this story: the farmer got more horses which his comparing mind would love. His son broke his leg, which had to trigger his anxiety in what sounds like an agriculturally-oriented society. He had the neighbors constantly asserting what was good and bad in his life, and there's no doubt his mind wanted to extrapolate into the future and look at the good and bad of all of this.

So are we not supposed to want anything? Are we supposed to suspect or question every little thing that flickers through our mind in this respect?

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Yes and no.

There's no denying that there is a tremendous power in not wanting things. It frees us from comparison, from what other people think, from all the little urges and cravings that make life so difficult. That being said, I doubt that any of us are free from wants. I suppose there may be people out there who are free from them, but I'm not one of them. It feels like a battle between two extremes. Luckily, mindfulness offers us a middle path here.

A mindful lifestyle helps cultivate many disciplines in ourselves. For the purposes of this blog, we will be looking at patience and equanimity.

## Mindfulness and Patience

Mindfulness teaches us to be rooted here, in this moment, with acceptance of it exactly as it is. Many of our wants, especially the unhealthy ones, are rooted in things being different immediately .

This sucks. I'm tired and I quit.

I need a cigarette.

There are other wants that might actually be skillful, but we drop the ball on achieving them because they take a long time or an investment to achieve. I'd like to write a book but it takes so long!

I could stand to lose a few pounds but I haven't seen any progress after three days so I give up.

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In reality, patience is the key to most good things in life. Our instant gratification 2-day free delivery society has robbed us of this truth, but mindfulness can help us find it again. As we learn to sit, aware of but nonreactive to all the thoughts and sensations and emotions that are always swirling around inside of us, we learn that we don't have to respond to most things right away. Then we learn that a lot of those same things go away on their own.

Patience is good.

## Mindfulness and Equanimity

This is my favorite word.

From Google:

e·qua·nim·i·ty

ˌɛkwənɪmədē/

noun

mental calmness, composure, and evenness of temper, especially in a difficult situation.

“she accepted both the good and the bad with equanimity”

That all sounds good, right?

As we sit and experience all the things mentioned above, we not only develop patience but equanimity as well. In this sense, mindfulness serves as a sort of global desensitization to the things that drive us in unhealthy ways.

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Equanimity is especially important and useful when it comes to difficult emotions. Anger, guilt, shame, fear, and anxiety all arise and carry the need to do something about them. Here's the problem though: as we discussed above, many of these emotions are rooted in survival and often have no solution. Building equanimity to them may be our only option.

It's a completely different situation when things arise, share what they have to share, and move on without any reaction from us apart from a compassionate awareness and acceptance.

It looks like this:

We are sitting there, getting ready to go to a party we were invited to. Anxiety arises, offering us little glimpses of everything that could go wrong. Our heart speeds up a little and that cold adrenaline feeling creeps into our chest. The mind suggests we skip the party and watch *The Once*. It seems like a good idea, but instead of resisting these feelings by debating the likelihood of things going horribly wrong, we simply let them be there. We explore the racing heart and clammy hands without judgment. We recognize them as simple sensations, neutral in their arising. The only problem with them is the mind's assessment of something being wrong. They are uncomfortable, but not necessarily bad.

We can do this with just about everything. The clenched fist tautness of anger, the washing over warmth of humiliation, or the sudden and overwhelming need for sugar or caffeine. These are all simply sensations – emotions and urges all meant to get us to do something. Arguing with them doesn't change anything because they aren't rooted in logic. The solution is simply letting them be, not resisting but not following either.

Equanimity .

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## Mindfulness and the Things We Want

When it really comes down to it, our wants are often baseless when we take a clear look at them. They are driven by so many different things, some of them incompetent, others actually malicious, and we have to learn to discern where the want is coming from. Mindfulness can help us do this as we learn to observe the things that arise with wants – emotions, thoughts, urges, comparisons – without attachment or opinion.

Remember, it's not about not wanting things, but about being intentional in our response to those wants. Mindfulness can help us do that.

If we want it to.



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