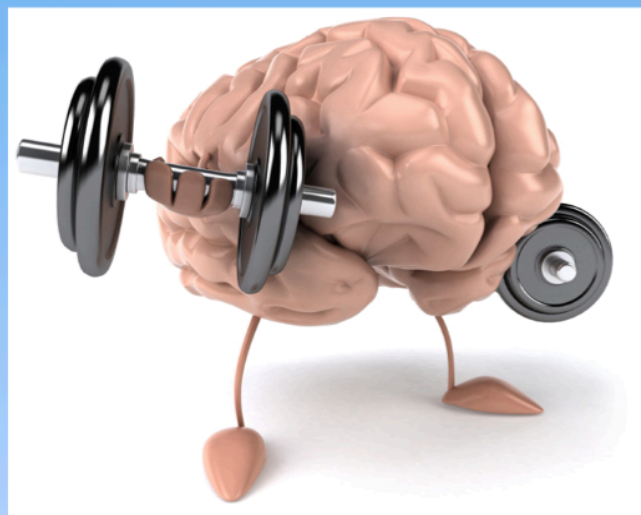




# Pause

**Mindfulness@Work**



**JOHN SHACKLETON**

# PAUSE

## Mindfulness@Work

### Introduction

Mindfulness is rapidly becoming a buzzword in the world today, in business, education and personal lives, but what is it and how does it work? And probably most importantly how can it help us in this increasingly frantic world?

The dictionary definition is 'the quality or state of being conscious or aware of something' or 'a mental state achieved by focusing one's awareness on the present moment, while calmly acknowledging and accepting one's feelings, thoughts, and bodily sensations, used as a therapeutic technique'. However, to be honest, those definitions don't really make things any clearer and they certainly don't show how they could be relevant in an everyday business environment.

This book aims to give you some of the background on mindfulness and how it can play a role in both your work and home life. It's not going to be long, involved, or use big words. Instead it is intended to clear up some preconceptions that you may have and give some practical insight into how mindfulness can be incorporated, usefully, into your everyday life.

## Why has mindfulness become so important?

One of the biggest problems in our society today is stress. Stress occurs when the frantic pace of the world we live in overloads us. Combining this with the fact we can rarely get away from work or other people because we are readily accessible 24/7 on our smartphones means that overload happens all too frequently.



Way back in time when our biggest problem was whether or not we were going to be eaten by a sabre-toothed tiger our stress response was extremely useful, causing us to run, literally, for our lives when the tiger came round the corner. Our adrenal glands produced a quick burst of adrenaline and cortisol, and allowed us to switch to flight mode immediately. Then, once we had taken action and the danger had passed, adrenaline stopped being produced and we calmed down again.

Whilst we have evolved and moved on in many ways over the last few thousand years it seems our adrenal glands have yet to adapt to the lack of life threatening circumstances we generally find ourselves in now. For most of us the worst we can expect these days is a threatening look or nasty comment, neither of which require much activity. Consequently we produce adrenaline that isn't used up in physical activity as it was in stone-age times, and so we remain in a state of stress and anxiety. Stress and anxiety leads to all manner of further problems, none of which are conducive to good health – sleep deprivation, depression, weight gain, and other mental disorders dramatically increase in individuals who are stressed.

In the workplace a stressed employee is not a productive employee. They cannot concentrate on the task in hand, they are more likely to be taking sick days, and lots of them, and that costs businesses millions of dollars every year. Clearly, it will be wise for employers to consider the sources of stress within the business and work to reduce or eliminate them so that the working environment is more productive and harmonious. In truth we all create our own stress but in a toxic environment it's easier for our minds to latch onto the negative things around us and produce high levels of stress.

The New Zealand government has taken legislative action on this, enacting the Health and Safety at Work Act 2015, which came into effect in April 2016, and provides for mental health issues at work, so that organisations will have to consider that too when creating a safe workplace. Previously workplace harm has been defined as physical, but mental harm is now also a factor and employers will be penalised if the workplace is not considered safe from that point too, so bullying, performance targets, KPI's etc. can all be examined to see if they are causing mental health to be adversely affected. The Employment Relations Authority and Employment Court have

already ruled that it is a breach of contract to provide a safe working environment if an employee suffers mental harm, which is defined as 'stress' or 'fatigue' etc.

So, employers are going to be burdened with additional responsibilities for their employees in what could, arguably, be considered a grey area, as stress is much less visible than a physical injury and potentially easier to cover up until a tipping point is reached.

Managers will need to put processes into place so that employees know the path they need to follow if they feel they are experiencing bullying, undue stress or fatigue, and they need to ensure that employees can feel comfortable using these processes, without fear of retribution. I would suggest though, that managers can go a step further than this and actively utilise methods to help the employees manage and reduce their stress levels, and a proven way of doing this is to use mindfulness techniques. Companies can run in-house courses, or send employees to external training and the benefit is that their employees will be less stressed and more productive, and, also, that the employer will be able to demonstrate that they are taking steps to ensure the mental well-being of their team.

Aside from the potential legislative benefits of implementing mindfulness practices in the workplace there are numerous documented benefits to the individuals. These include improved attention spans, mental focus and memory, better sleep patterns and ability to relax, the potential to slow the heart rate and reverse heart disease, an increase in energy levels and reduction in stress levels, enhancement of the immune system, assistance in overcoming drug and alcohol addictions, reduction in feelings of depression and anxiety, improved decision making and creativity, increased levels of tolerance towards others and potential for happiness. If you

could provide these benefits for your employees wouldn't you consider putting mindfulness into practice for them? The long term cost benefits for a company will be huge, and, in the wider sense, for the economy too.

## Who is using mindfulness in the workplace?

Mindfulness is something that we seem to have heard a lot about in the last couple of years but some of the world's largest companies have actually been implementing it in the workplace for several years now.

One of the world's most recognisable names, Google, has been offering its employees a number of mindfulness courses since 2007. Participants have reported that the courses have helped them become calmer, more patient, better able to handle stress and defuse emotions so their relationships with colleagues are stronger. Nine years later employees still enjoy the perk of mindfulness courses. It isn't a surprise then, that Business Insiders have named them number one in their list of the 50 best companies to work for in the USA.



Another company, influenced by Google's reported success with mindfulness courses, has also implemented its own

programme. Intel now provides Awake@Intel for their employees, which combines yoga and mindfulness practices. The employees, many of whom were sceptical scientists, have been surprised, and pleased, to report that after the course they had reduced stress levels, increased enthusiasm, enjoyed greater levels of creativity and improved feelings of well-being.

Twitter, too, has dedicated a room at their headquarters to mindfulness and meditation classes, which run several times a week during the working day, that any employee is welcome to attend.

The list goes on. Steve Jobs, when he was with Apple, allowed employees 30 minutes every day to meditate, providing a dedicated room for meditation classes on site. During his lifetime he often took part in retreats and credited the mental control he learnt through meditation with his ability to innovate. Nike also provides relaxation rooms for employees, and meditation and yoga classes in the office.

Mindfulness in the workplace is being implemented in many different industries, from Deutsche Bank to Carlsberg, from Target to Astra Zeneca, from Ikea to Sony. It is beneficial in any environment and any workplace conditions and the effect on employees is positive and proven. The fact that this has been taking place for ten or more years now is proof that companies do see value in this for their employees – they are not going to spend large sums of money on providing courses, meditation spaces etc. in the workplaces unless they are getting a return on their investment.



## How is mindfulness viewed?

In this day and age we are constantly bombarded with 'facts' and opinions by the media, who often seem to want to force their own agenda on us. Surprisingly the press surrounding mindfulness has generally been overwhelmingly positive, possibly because the science and statistics behind it cannot be interpreted any other way.

Here is a selection of quotations from articles from reputable publications:

*'It promotes psychological flexibility, awareness, resilience, better decision-making, better job performance, reduced absence rates and the ability to learn new tasks. No wonder business are interested'*

**Financial Times Magazine**

*'Study after study shows that mindfulness makes people less stressed, more productive and healthier, and maybe even happier too.'*

**Wall Street Journal**

*'Among senior executives who took the (mindfulness) course, 80% reported a positive change in their ability to make better decisions, while 89% said they became better listeners.'*

**Financial Times**

*'Mindfulness, once considered a fringe movement in the Western world, is now being incorporated into medicine, science and the workplace.'*

**Forbes Magazine**



Meditation in the past has often been viewed as just hippy nonsense, where you might head off to India to sit around cross-legged, in a circle, chanting with a group of like-minded, longhaired beardies. But no longer. It has become almost mainstream now and this has come about because of the drastic change in our lifestyles over the last 10 years or so. Prior to this we were able to go on holiday and not see an email for a fortnight, if we wanted news we could buy a paper or watch TV. But now, in the age of the smartphone, our emails pop up constantly, as do Facebook updates, newsflashes, text messages, calendar reminders, and the never-ending influx of information is overwhelming. And so we turn to mindfulness to remind ourselves how to switch off and be present, to take time away from the technology and the stress it creates. As smartphones are unlikely to go away any time soon then the smart answer is to be able to find something to counteract them, and mindfulness provides this.

There has actually been an attempt at legislating the intrusion of email on employees lives, by the French Government, who have proposed a law that will allow employees NOT to have to

answer work related emails in the evenings and over weekends, but this will probably have limited success if it is passed, just because we are so used (addicted even) to checking our phones constantly. So, perhaps the answer isn't to try and ban the phones and emails but to teach methods to cope with the resulting stress from our 24/7 availability.

## The neuroscience behind mindfulness

Did you know that stress is on track to be the second highest cause of cost to business by the year 2020? In the USA the figure is currently estimated to be \$300 billion per year in lost income! The current approach from many in the corporate world is to teach people a stress management approach to help 'control' their stress levels. This approach is the ambulance at the bottom of the cliff. Surely we should be looking at teaching people how to stop thinking their way into the stress in the first place, and this is what mindfulness does.

High levels of stress in an individual can, if not kept in check, lead to depression and anxiety. A recent statistic from Radio New Zealand is that 8 million prescriptions for anti-depressants were dispensed during 2011-2012 – this in a nation that has 4 million residents. Approximately 10% of the population are currently taking anti-depressants, and they are twice as likely to be women – although this figure may not be truly reflective, as women are considered more likely to discuss their problems and seek help than men.

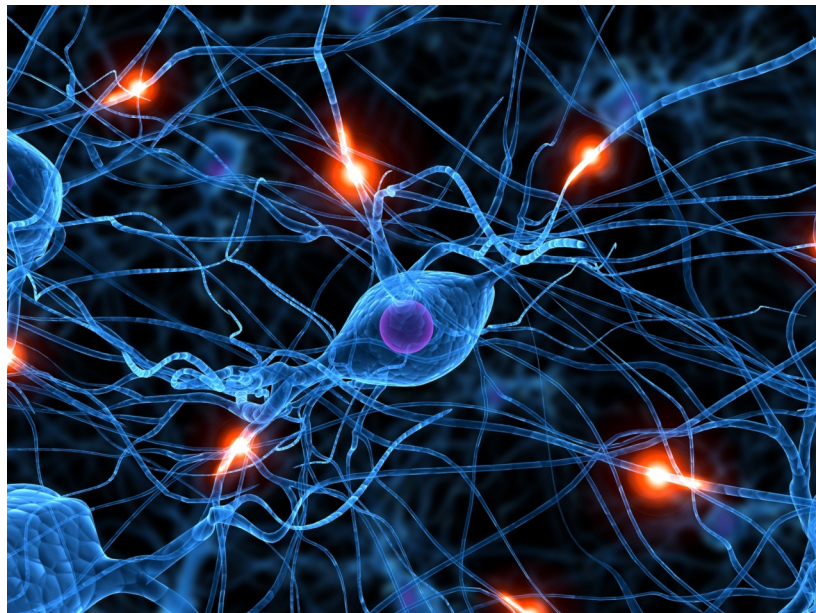
These statistics are really quite frightening. And they are rising each year. Medication can be extremely helpful to stabilise people and allow them to function on a daily basis, but the list of side effects of these drugs is long, and who would choose to add suicidal thoughts, sexual dysfunction, nausea, weight gain, insomnia or constipation to their depression problems? Not only this, but the cost to the health service is enormous – anti depressants cost Pharmac in the region of \$20million each year in New Zealand.

Mindfulness is now being prescribed by health professionals as an alternative or addition to medication to help those with

depression or anxiety and, possibly more importantly, as a method to prevent these things occurring in the first place.

So what have studies shown about mindfulness meditation? There have been numerous studies completed and it would take hundreds of pages to look at them all, so I am just including some of the more business related results.

One study looks at the amygdala which is the stress response region of the brain – the ‘fight or flight’ centre if you like. As mentioned earlier, because we rarely need to utilise this response for actual survival we can end up with an overload of adrenaline and cortisol, leaving us feeling stressed and anxious. Studies have shown that after a two month course of mindfulness meditation the amygdala can actually shrink. MRI scans were taken before and after a meditation course, and showed the amygdala shrinkage and a corresponding increase in the thickness of the pre-frontal cortex which is associated with higher order functions like awareness and concentration.



At the same time the connection between the amygdala and the rest of the brain (neural pathways) began to weaken, and

the connection between the pre frontal cortex and the rest of the brain began to strengthen. Thus, the instinct that we have retained from years ago can be overridden by more considered responses.

Scientists from the University of British Columbia and Chemnitz University of Technology gathered data from over 20 mindfulness studies and examined them for points of similarity. They identified eight regions of the brain that were consistently affected by mindfulness practices, two of which would be particularly important in business practices.

The first was the ACC (anterior cingulate cortex), located behind the frontal lobe, which assists with self-regulation – directing attention, preventing inappropriate responses, and developing coping strategies. Meditators were compared to a control group of non-meditators and were found to be able to resist distractions and solve problems correctly or more effectively. The ACC also assists with learning from past experiences so that future decisions can be effective, and the non-meditators, during the tests, held on to their problem solving strategies, even when they didn't work, rather than adapting them and trying something new as the meditators did.

Another region affected was the hippocampus, which is associated with emotion, in particular stress, through its receptors for cortisol. Meditators showed increased amounts of grey matter in the hippocampus, allowing them to cope better in stressful situations and develop resilience, qualities particularly important in our high-stress business world today. Non-meditators had smaller amounts of grey matter and people suffering from depression and PTSD also have smaller hippocampi, decreasing their ability to cope with stress and, in fact, producing a downward spiral where the increased stress

continues to shrink the hippocampus grey matter and further reduce the ability to cope.

So, mindfulness meditation is a way in which we can maintain our brain's health and make it more effective at creativity, decision-making and stress reduction. In my experience there is never a point at which you have gone too far in a negative direction to be able to start mindfulness training and put your brain back on track.

## **How does mindfulness training work?**

Mindfulness can be defined as thinking and meditation practices that help us to focus on the here and now.

Mindfulness ISN'T sitting cross-legged on the floor, burning incense and chanting 'ohmmm', it's not just for new age yoga type people nor is it a religion or cult! Mindfulness exercises are simple but effective ways of helping us to be present, to let go of the past and stop stressing about the future. In short they make us more relaxed and able to function better.

Maybe a better way to think of it is as weight training for the mind – to make the mind stronger and more resilient, and it only takes 10-20 minutes a day. Some people say that 'they haven't got time to meditate' but given the huge benefits of this approach, I'm sure you could find that small amount of time to set aside for your mental health.





The easiest mindfulness exercise is mindful breathing and is simply focusing your attention on your in-breath and then your out-breath. Nothing else. Try this exercise:

Sit in a quiet comfortable place, where you will not be interrupted, and ensure that you have set aside about twenty minutes for your meditation. Sit upright with your hands in your lap, (eyes may be open but for most of us it's easier to start with them closed) and then take some deep breaths. Bring your awareness to each breath, noticing the air coming in and filling then lungs, and then being released.

When you find your attention wanders away from your breathing (when you notice a thought) don't judge or explore it, just be aware that it has happened and simply bring your focus back to your breath. Sometimes this happens hundreds of times in a 20-minute session, and sometimes only a few times, depending on the speed your mind was working at when you approach the session. You can practice observing your breath for your whole meditation period; it is one of the most powerful forms of mindfulness meditation.

As you focus on your breath you may notice many different thoughts creeping into your head. Realise that you cannot control or stop these thoughts from arriving but you can choose to just observe them and not engage with them. Just continue to breath and bring the focus back to the here and now. Do not pass judgement on the thoughts that come into your head, or score yourself on how 'well' you think you are meditating! Distraction is extremely common but can be counteracted by continually returning our focus back to the breathing.

When you practice mindfulness in this way and bring your attention from a thought back to the breath, you are

strengthening the mind. You are starting to create new neural pathways in the brain and eventually these will allow you to disassociate from the thoughts that creep in and ensure that they have less influence over your mood and your stress levels. With continued practice this will become easier and easier.

Mindful breathing is a great meditation to use every day, but you may want to use additional techniques to increase your skills. Other techniques include mindful eating:

Take a piece of chocolate, observe the colour, the texture, the shape, feel how hard or soft it is, it's temperature, smell it and notice your body's response and then, after a long evaluation, finally bite it, enjoying the taste, the texture, the melting sensation and finally the swallow. Take the time to savour the food and you will realise how mindless your eating often is!

Try mindful walking:

Slow your pace down, feel your muscles stretch out with each step, notice the ground, whether it is hard or soft or bumpy, take off your shoes and socks and feel the sensation of the grass or sand under your feet.

Make everyday tasks into mindfulness meditation:

In the shower feel the sensation of the water hitting your skin, notice the temperature, smell the soap or shower gel, enjoy the warmth and then notice how the texture of the towel, the cooler air touching your warm skin afterwards.

If you feel you don't have time to sit and meditate you can find numerous opportunities through the day that you can turn into a mindfulness exercise.

## Useful books and apps

Obviously the more information you can consume about mindfulness the more benefits you can gain. A great book to start with is **Mindfulness, a practical guide to finding peace in a frantic world**, by Mark Williams and Danny Penman. Not only does this give you some excellent beginners background to the subject but it also comes with a CD of guided meditations, which you can use to develop your practice.

If you wish to go further then I would recommend two books by Eckhart Tolle, **The Power of Now** and **A New World** both of which will take you to the next level.

There are a number of apps that you can download to help you practice mindfulness. As with all apps it pays to be careful and choose the right one – there are over 700 out there but only 4% actually provide training. There is little evidence at this point (in part due to the lack of studies) of how effective the apps are in the development of mindfulness, however I personally have found the use of these apps very helpful. I use Headspace, which is ranked number 1 by the study, and I also use Calm and Smiling Mind. iMindfulness, Mindfulness Daily and Buddhify 2 are also highly rated.

## Finally

If you are looking for a quick fix to your stress problems then unfortunately mindfulness isn't the approach for you. I don't actually know of a quick fix for curing our stress creation habits but mindfulness will solve the problem if you can get into the habit of using it on a regular basis. Like just about everything, with regular practice of a new approach we gradually get better and better at it.

When I started on this pathway I used to do three or four days of meditation in a row and then fall back into my old habits, only noticing my lack of practice when the old stressful feelings returned. At that time I was thinking of meditation as a **treatment** for my problems, which was reasonably successful. However it didn't give me the long-term effects I was looking for so I changed my thinking and started to regard meditation as **prevention** rather than a cure.

After experimenting with different regimes I realised that I needed to change my habits and practice meditation much more frequently if I wanted to avoid the build up of stress and the unhelpful experiences that happened as a result of that. Doing this provides you with a cumulative effect and you seem to build up protection against the negative effects of an active mind that seems to want to dominate and have the last word!

I now meditate for 10-20 minutes at a set time everyday (as I'm not into the idea of chastising myself for failure I will describe this as 'almost everyday!'). For me the best time to meditate is just after my first cup of tea in the morning. At this time of the day it's easy to find a quiet place where I can sit and not be interrupted, plus I am unlikely to fall asleep while I'm practicing.

Along with this regular practice I also try to have a one or two top up sessions during the day when I have a couple of minutes to spare. Perhaps when I'm in a queue, sitting quietly with a cup of tea or waiting for a meeting to start. Rather than spending that time looking at my emails, catching up with the news or reading Facebook, I just focus on the present moment and think about what is happening around me right here, right now. With practice you won't need to close your eyes to get into the moment and you'll be able to create a 'quiet mind' within a few seconds.



For a couple of periods recently I have meditated for at least ten minutes, every day, for over a month and have found the benefits to be massive. My stress levels have dropped dramatically and I have found myself smiling and enjoying the simple things in life much more. I hope you'll agree that twenty minutes a day is a very small price to pay for a more peaceful and happy existence.

Finally try not to look on mindfulness as a short-term solution for your stress problems, but view it as a long-term change in the way you live your life as a whole. The positive effects on your business life can be dramatic but, if you think about it, life is more than just your job and stress can come from many other areas. Mindfulness can help smooth out the ups and downs in your personal life, your relationships, your physical life and your social life too. In this way you'll feel a positive benefit in all areas of your life not just stress reduction at work. In essence mindfulness can bring a sense of peace and tranquillity to every area of your life and help you feel much more 'in control' of where you are going.

One of my favourite sayings which helps me progress along this new path is:

**Success is not the key to happiness.  
Happiness is the key to success.**

When we strive to be successful then we often sacrifice our immediate happiness for the happiness we think will happen when we've finally succeeded. We can spend all our time working really hard to achieve a fantastic new car with the idea that it will change our lives and make us happy. However most of us find that within a couple of weeks of achieving our goal, the wonderful new car has become just like the old car, full of used coffee cups, needing a wash and too expensive to service or fill up with petrol! In truth happiness doesn't happen in the future after we have achieved a goal, it happens now. Although it's really important that we know where we are going we need to understand that arriving won't give us long-term happiness. We must learn to enjoy the journey.

So, if we strive to be happy NOW (the only time we can be happy), then success will invariably follow. This is where

mindfulness can give you the peace and happiness that we all seek so desperately.