

Mindfulness at Work: Handling Stress and Changes Gracefully and Be the Leader You Were Born To Be

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ABSTRACT

In the pharmaceutical industry, change has become the norm and the pace is getting faster. Based on a PwC National survey, chances are you are part of the 1/3 of Americans who feel burnt out at work. But considering we spend about half of our waking life at work, why not change the attitude? In this paper, we discuss some of the latest research surrounding Mindfulness and how we can use this method to help us break unhelpful stress patterns, deal with changes gracefully and to let the leader within you shine forth in even the most stressful times.

INTRODUCTION

When thinking of the word “mindfulness”, what image would your mind conjure up? Perhaps an image of a group of “hippies” sitting cross-legged under a tree? Or perhaps not much of an image, for those unfamiliar with the concept. What if I offer you these images instead - a group of world leaders at the World Economic Forum at Davos¹, cultivating compassion through mindfulness; Or, a group of children at a lower-income elementary school², to help improve classroom behavior? What about corporate campuses of companies like Google³ – to help boost employee performance and manage stress with mindfulness?

Let's set those aside for a moment and come back to the basics, what is mindfulness? The Webster dictionary tells us that, it is:

“The practice of maintaining a non-judgmental state of awareness, of one’s thoughts, emotions, or experiences on a moment to moment basis”.

It is a practical definition that captures the essence of mindfulness and its applicability to everyday life. There is nothing mystical about it and everyone is equally capable of it.

MINDFULNESS AS A SCIENCE – LATEST RESEARCH

Although the concept of mindfulness has its roots from ancient far-east philosophies, the practice of mindfulness has recently sky-rocketed in the West. Over the past few decades, mindfulness has gained wide acceptance in diverse areas of society, primarily because of the introduction of the Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction Program (MBSR). The MBSR program was founded by a Molecular Biologist – Jon Kabat-Zinn who was introduced to the benefits of Mindfulness while he was a graduate student at MIT. He used a scientist’s rigor to apply the practice of mindfulness to into modern day life as a way to help his patients treat pain in a hospital setting. This work ultimately became the MBSR program at the University of Massachusetts Medical Center, which has championed the practice and study of secular mindfulness over the past decades.

The MBSR program is an 8-weeks course - incorporating mindfulness into daily lives both as formal practice, i.e. dedicated time for contemplation, as well as informal practice such as mindful eating and mindful communications. With a curriculum that is simple and accessible while providing practical benefits to individual practitioners and group setting, MBSR instructors are inspired to take the practice into numerous settings, from hospitals to schools, from prisons to parliament.

With the expansion of audience and a defined method, interests in studying mindfulness from a scientific perspective also blossomed. One particular area of interest is neurobiology and examining how mindfulness affects the brain. Thanks to advances in science: improvements in neuroimaging and discovery of neuroplasticity, we can now get a glimpse on how mindfulness changes the brain.

There are several areas of the brain that are activated or changed from consistent Mindfulness practice:

1. Activation of the dorsolateral prefrontal cortex⁴: This is a newly evolved area of the human brain, with primary functions in executive functions, e.g. working memory, decision making, and cognitive flexibility.
2. Activation in the anterior cingulate cortex (ACC)⁵: This area of the brain has main functions in self regulation. For example, to deliberately control attention and is also associated with learning from prior experiences.
3. Long term changes on the brain structure was also studied and observed, this includes the thickening and increased gray matter density in several areas of the brain⁶ – areas that are associated with learning, memory and emotional regulation.

Overall, the study of Mindfulness as a science is still in its infancy. The initial scientific results are encouraging and provide glimpses on how mindfulness benefits practitioners, however challenges exist in studying the effects of mindfulness. For example the experience of mindfulness can be complex – because mindfulness is about being in tuned to moment-to-moment experiences, this means brain activities can also change from moment to moment within the subject. More research and studies to understand long term changes and on the biological mechanisms will still be needed and are certainly in progress – each year, more and more scientific research take place and are published in various journals.

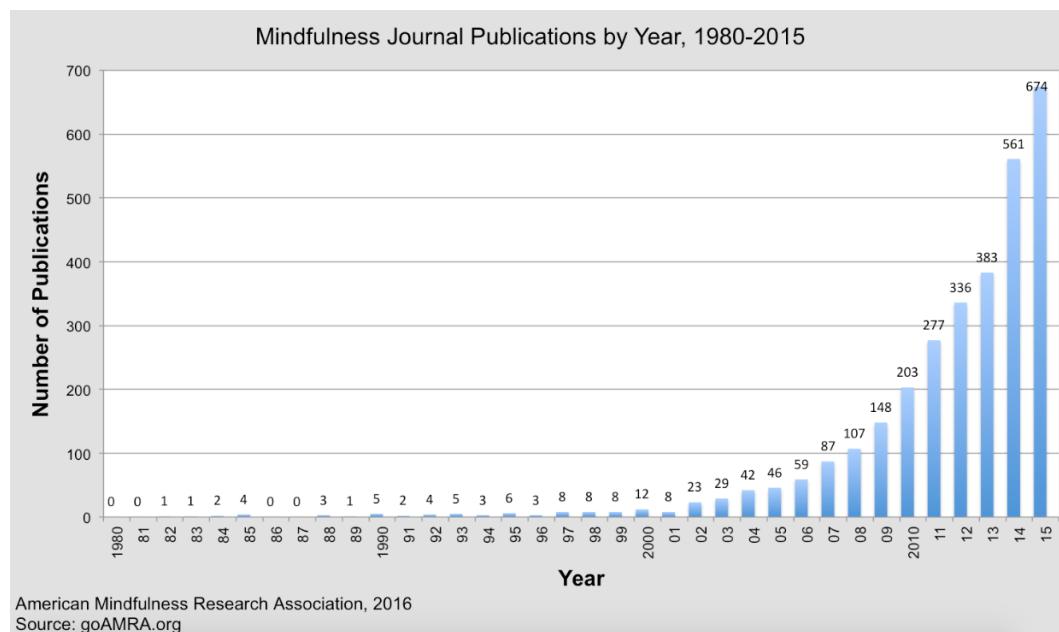


Figure 1. Number of mindfulness journal publications steadily increases over the past 2 decades.

WORK STRESS AND THE PERCEPTION OF STRESS

So far we have touched upon the history and science of Mindfulness, but what does that mean for you?

In a survey performed by the American Psychological Association in 2012⁷, 65% of Americans reported work as the main source of stress, but only 37% reported that they are doing a good job handling the stress. No matter what job or role we have, every one of us have encountered work pressure at some time in our career. Perhaps the stress from deadlines, organizational changes or more workload. Equally common is the anxiety experience by us by the seemingly relentless pace of change to our jobs, our careers, and our industry. The jobs we hold today are very different than even a decade ago. The acceleration of demands and advances in information technology, means that we often face fast-paced changes, more responsibilities and perhaps less security. All these translate into work-related stress and a decrease in our overall satisfaction with our careers.

It has been long thought that chronic stress is harmful to our health and a recent study⁸ of 28,000 US adults, show that this is particularly true for those who experience high level of stress and who also perceive stress to be bad. This combination increased the risk of death by 43% as compared to people who reported neither. The authors of the paper estimated that this combination of high stress and strong perception, attributed to an estimated 20,000 premature deaths per year. Controlling for a single factor, individuals experiencing high stress or having strong perception against stress alone still reported poor physical health and/or psychological distress, but not the same number of premature death. So, long story short, our beliefs or perception about stress, can have a strong impact on our mortality.

Stress has gotten a bad reputation over the years – it has become synonymous to something that we need to avoid. However stress has its benefits as well. It is a marvelous pathway that allowed human beings to survive through the ages. When faced with a threat, our bodies get pumped with adrenaline, our hearts race faster to deliver blood and oxygen to prepare for action; Our vision focus to better see the threat; Muscle tension increase for higher strength and stamina; Our minds experience heightened emotions and senses and we are ready to make fast decisions. It has been and continues to be a complex and effective mechanism for performance and human survival.

WHY IS MINDFULNESS A GOOD TOOL?

So how can mindfulness help us reconcile these seemingly conflicting ideas?

LOWERING STRESS

The Fight or Flight response is extremely useful as a survival tool, but it may not be ideal for modern human lives where threats are not mortal but rather chronic and sometimes unavoidable – for example, when dealing with irritating or negative people in the work environment. Do we really need to “fight or flight” when dealing with these types of stress?

“Between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom.” - Viktor E. Frankl

Although we may feel that the stress pathway is automatic, the reality is that it is far from the truth. We do have control of our responses and have the ability to modulate its effects.

Practicing mindfulness can be a way to help us be more aware of what our stress triggers are, reduce the “knee-jerk” stress response, and recover from it faster. On a physiological level mindfulness practices help us activate the natural relaxation pathway⁹ that is inherent in each of us. Just like the stress pathway, the relaxation pathway affects our physiology – by lowering heart rate and blood pressure, helping muscles relax and increase circulation to the brain.

LESS WORRYING

Cultivation of mindfulness allows us to see our experiences more objectively. Although this is particularly helpful in clinical patients¹⁰, less worrying is beneficial to all of us. It gives us more room to focus on the present experience and to take appropriate action, rather than spending too much time and energy on negative thoughts or worrying about past experiences or imagined outcomes in the future.

BEING HAPPIER

The practice of mindfulness has been associated with greater equanimity and general well-being¹¹. But how?

When we cultivate mindfulness, we cultivate non-judgmental awareness. This means that we are more willing to better understand and to befriend our inner selves. We learn to “beat up ourselves” less by reducing self doubt, and have a clearer clarity and acceptance of who we are.

HOW TO TURN STRESS INTO EUSTRESS WITH MINDFULNESS

So, if you are one of those who experience a lot of stress, and/or have strong perceptions against stress, here are a couple of tips on how to use mindfulness to take better inventory of stress, and perhaps nudge your response towards a new direction:

DISCOVERING STRESS TRIGGERS

Pay attention throughout your work day or reflect upon the experiences in recent past: What are the things that cause you stress? Take a few conscious breaths as you notice these stress triggers. Are there common themes on what “get on your nerves”?

BEFRIENDING BODY SIGNALS

When you feel stress, notice how it manifests in your body. Initially it may be challenging to do it in “real time” – so once again a reflection of a stressful event in recent past may help us understand these signals. Observe, as though with a scientist’s curiosity – and simply acknowledge the experience and feelings of stress on a physical level. Some common stress patterns are – increased heart rate, tension at the neck, throat, shoulders or gut; sweaty palms and etc. Take a few conscious breaths as you notice these physical symptoms of stress, and remind yourself that these signals serve a positive purpose – to inform us that something is bothering us so that we can respond better. Remember to use non-judgmental awareness – no point in beating yourself up, simply acknowledge and take a few conscious breaths. Notice that perhaps as you take the conscious breaths, that these physical feelings of stress may gently subside.

UNDERSTANDING MOTIVATIONS

As you meet the experience of stress, do so in a befriending manner. Begin to ask yourself, why am I feeling this way? Is there a positive motivation here that cause this to feel so important? Alternatively, you can also evaluate the importance – Is this really worth getting stressed out? Sometimes we will realize that the stress triggers are not really important in the grand scheme of things.

INVESTIGATING COPING MECHANISMS

Other times, we may discover that there is a good reason behind why we are stressed by certain triggers. In those situations, investigate how you currently cope with it. It could be a reflexive way of handling a particular colleague. Or if it is chronic work stress, some may cope by working even harder, some may use Netflix or a glass of wine as distractions after a long work day. Examine these coping mechanisms and ask - Is this serving me? Or, is there perhaps a better way to respond?

CHANNEL ENERGY PROACTIVELY

Mindfulness is an inner science – a form of empirical inquiry. Only by understanding and befriending ourselves better, can we then consciously decide and choose whether to handle these triggers differently. Perhaps the trigger can be avoided. Perhaps the trigger really is not that important to us. It is also possible that the motivation behind a trigger is truly important. If so, then consider the actions that can be taken now that align with your values – channel that stress energy into thoughtful actions that are beneficial to your motivation, rather than habitual or reflex reactions to stressful situations.

CONCLUSION

MINDFULNESS AT WORK AND LEADERSHIP

Besides improving your stress resilience and preventing burnout, what else can mindfulness offer to improve your work life, and to bring out the inherent leader within you?

Cultivating Space and Improving Focus

If we were to sum up mindfulness in a nutshell, it is about cultivating space. Space to make deliberate decisions – which applies both on a personal level and inter-personal level. This space breaks us from habitual patterns and allows us to examine our assumptions. By shifting the focus outside of our own narrative and reflexive responses, we can better understand the “bigger picture” and improve situational awareness. Having that internal space as a resource also allows us to operate with a heightened sense of concentration.

All these aspects are fundamental to sound decision making and better focus – whether it is leading our personal work life on how to best utilize time and resources, or, on an organizational level – how to generate streamlined strategies¹² for the team or company.

Positive Connections with Mindful Communication

Communication is a fundamental building block of human connection. When we approach exchanges with a non-judgmental attitude, it allows us to deeply listen and understand others' viewpoints.

Consider this regarding communications at work: How often may we feel as though the other person is not listening? Or, how often may we find ourselves thinking about something else, or about how to respond during a conversation, rather than truly listening? Both of these, are two sides of the same coin, and often leads to ineffective meetings and conversations that “go around in a circle”.

Not all of us are people-managers, but all of us are leaders in our own way, having direct influence over the teams we are a part of and the work that we do. When applying mindfulness to communications, we bring attention, care, clarity and flexibility into the human connections – which ultimately builds trust and reduce conflicts.

Finding Meaning and Gratitude

The truth is, stress and change is a fact of life – we cannot completely eliminate them. So often we would like to have control to feel safe, or to fill our “voids” with more “stuff”. With the practice of mindfulness, we allow ourselves to be fully present and not be overwhelmed by change or deal with it by distracting ourselves. Allowing the space for us to be connected with our deeper motivations and to the things that we find meaningful. When we are focus less on the “what's wrong”, this gives us the space to appreciate the “what's well” – in fact many who start embarking on the journey of mindfulness, will discover that there is truly more right with our lives than there is wrong. In other words – we gently take better care of ourselves and in turn have greater appreciation in our lives.

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RECOMMENDED READING

- Learn more about Mindfulness, and for more tips on how to incorporate it into your life at this wonderful site compiled by Stanford University <https://wellmd.stanford.edu/healthy/mindfulness.html>
- Learn more about MBSR at <http://www.umassmed.edu/cfm/mindfulness-based-programs/mbsr-courses/about-mbsr/>

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