

Mindfulness at work: What are the benefits?

With Mirabai Bush, Mobius Transformational Faculty

Mindfulness. Everybody's doing it. From Google to the NHS and Transport for London. Even Harvard Business School includes mindfulness principles in its leadership programmes.

So what is mindfulness? In its simplest form, mindfulness means awareness. Practising mindfulness offers a way to pay attention to the present moment, without judgement. The origins of mindfulness sit firmly in Buddhism but it's increasingly taught in a secular form.

Mindfulness can help to reduce stress and anxiety and conflict, and increase resilience and emotional intelligence, while improving communication in the workplace.

When trying to decide whether you are mindful, consider the following points. In the last week have you found yourself:

- Unable to remember what others have said during conversations?
- With no recollection of your daily commute?
- Eating at your desk without tasting your food?
- Paying more attention to your iPhone than to your nearest and dearest?
- Dwelling on past events or dreading what the future holds?
- Are you skim reading this article?

If you answered yes, the chances are that you're zoning out on a regular basis, spending at least some time on autopilot.

In the current economic climate, employees are being asked to do more with less, working long hours with increasingly heavy workloads. Leading mindfulness academic, Mark Williams, professor of clinical psychology at the University of Oxford, says working in a culture where stress is a badge

of honour is counterproductive. "We can spend so much time rushing from one task to another. We may think we're working more efficiently, but as far as the brain is concerned, we are working against the grain. No wonder we get exhausted."

The neurological benefits of mindfulness have been linked to an increase in emotional intelligence, specifically empathy and self regulation. It's the development of these areas that contributes to our ability to manage conflict and communicate more effectively. Mindfulness also enables us to take a step back and consider alternative perspectives rather than simply reacting to events and using the least intelligent area of our brains to make decisions. Mindfulness helps us to flick the switch back to the smart parts of our brain to put us back in control of our emotions, enabling us to choose a more appropriate response.

Mindfulness expert Mirabai Bush, famous for introducing it to Google, says: "Introducing mindfulness into the workplace does not prevent conflict from arising or difficult issues from coming up. But when difficult issues do arise... they are more likely to be skillfully acknowledged, held, and responded to by the group. Over

time with mindfulness, we learn to develop the inner resources that will help us navigate through difficult, trying, and stressful situations with more ease, comfort, and grace.

"Becoming more aware of your own emotions as they arise gives you more choice in how to deal with them. Mindfulness helps you become more aware of an arising emotion by noticing the sensation in the body. Then you can follow these guidelines: stop what you are doing. Breathe deeply. Notice how you are experiencing the emotion in your body. Reflect on where the emotion is coming from in your mind (personal history, insecurity, etc). Respond in the most compassionate way."

Regular practice of mindfulness increases the brain's ability to repair itself and grow new neural connections. But the use it or lose it approach to physical exercise also applies to our brains so it's important to practise.

A simple mindfulness practice is the one minute meditation. Find a quiet place and focus your attention on your breath. If your mind wanders (as it probably will), bring your concentration back to your breath. Then relax as the calm unfolds. ■

Excerpted from theguardian.co.uk; posted by Gill Crossland-Thackray.

Mirabai Bush is Senior Fellow and the founding Director of the Center for Contemplative Mind in Society, a nonprofit organization that encourages contemplative awareness in American life in order to create a more just, compassionate, and reflective society. She has designed and led contemplative trainings for corporations from Monsanto to Google, led a national survey of contemplative practice, and directed a Contemplative Practice Fellowship awards program with the American Council of Learned Societies to explore such practices in academic courses in more than 100 colleges and universities. She is co-author, with Ram Dass, of *Compassion in Action: Setting Out on the Path of Service*, and editor of *Contemplation Nation: How Ancient Practices Are Changing the Way We Live*. She co-founded and directed Illuminations, Inc., in Cambridge, MA. Her innovative business approaches, based on mindfulness practice, were reported in *Newsweek*, *Inc.*, *Fortune*, and the *Boston Business Journal*. Mirabai's new CD on practices for a contemplative workplace, *Working with Mindfulness*, is available at morethansound.net.