

Meditation in the Workplace

Proposal

by

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1. Why Meditation in the Workplace?

We are living in a period of exceptionally rapid change. There is often a feeling of not catching up, which can lead to frustration, anxiety and tension or as we often label it, stress. In today's busy world, people are constantly contending with increasing demands on their time and energy. Every day we are required to:

- Prioritise and set boundaries around competing tasks and requests for our attention
- Develop successful personal and working relationships with many different types of people
- Make decisions quickly
- Respond flexibly to a constantly changing environment
- Process a never ending stream of information

Stress can lead to overload, burnout and depression, reducing our effectiveness in meeting organisational, team and personal goals.

By developing the practice of meditation and the resulting mindfulness, we can improve our ability to stay focused under pressure. We can learn how to deal with the many demands on our attention and the significant volume of tasks facing us, improve our resilience and respond effectively to change without burnout.

As an aid to professional development, mindfulness practice can result in:

- Reduction of occupational stress
- Better relationships with colleagues
- Greater capacity for dialogue within teams
- Enhanced creativity for generating ideas and business solutions
- Reduced absenteeism (see article 5)
- Increased productivity (see article 5)
- Happiness and improved teamwork in the workplace
- Reduced anxiety, depression and aggression (see article 3)

Many businesses in response to stress in the workplace have run meditation programs for their executives and staff. These include NAB, **Victorian Police**, Diabetes Australia, Origin Energy, McKinsey & Co and the CEO Institute. Tech companies such as Google, Apple and Yahoo have begun offering meditation courses, as have Unilever, Proctor & Gamble, Nike, Toyota, Walt Disney, AT&T, and Deutsche Bank. (See *attached article, Resilience for the Rest of Us, Article 2 and Australian work-based research, Article 3*).

Workforce surveys with Medibank Private found that in relation to Australian workers: 53 per cent felt overwhelmed with stress and pressure for a significant proportion of the time. Mental stress claims continue to be of concern, with the estimated financial cost at more than \$14 billion annually, according to the Australian Services Union.

Reducing stress, anxiety and distraction in our work helps us to become more effective and create happier lives. The practice of meditation and the resultant increase in mindfulness helps team leaders to manage work pressures and stressful situations with calmness, control and focus. These positive role models influence teams and other team leaders to be more professional, creative and effective in achieving their goals.

2. Program Design and Costs

Meditation and mindfulness programs are designed in consultation with the organisation to determine the particular issues relevant to the participants.

Draft Meditation Course Outline

Week 1

- The principles of meditation and the various types of meditation practices.
- How meditation is used as a method for stress management
- The practice of breathing meditation
- Introduction to mindfulness
- Discuss a daily practice CD + handouts + workbook
- Homework

Week 2

- 10 minute meditation practice
- Discuss participants' experiences during the week
- An explanation of brain wavelengths in relation to meditation
- Methods for overcoming insomnia
- 10 minute meditation practice and discussion

Week 3

- 10 minute meditation practice
- Discuss participants' experiences
- The benefits of mindfulness for better communication
- Meditation and neuronal plasticity of the brain
- Introduce and practice other types of meditation
- Give a simple exercise in mindfulness to be completed during the week

Week 4

- 15 minute meditation practice
- Discuss participants' experiences during the week
- Sustaining a meditation/mindfulness practice
- Review and conclusion

Working Balance Meditation Program

Working Balance bases its training approach on principles of meditation and mindfulness. The program examines how we limit ourselves by habitually becoming distracted and unfocused and identifies the causes that are creating stress in our lives. We teach ways



to improve our ability to deal intelligently with emotions, listen perceptively and communicate concisely. During the program we also examine our interaction with colleagues in the work environment based on a mindfulness perspective.

We show the results of the latest scientific research on meditation and mindfulness and how they have a positive effect on the mind and body. Topics covered include the relevance of meditation in a business environment and how training the mind helps develop resilience. (See *attached article, Resilience for the Rest of Us Monday, by Daniel Goleman, Article 2*).

3. Evaluation

Participants are asked to fill out a questionnaire at the beginning of the course and again at the end to evaluate their progress in mindfulness training. A typical questionnaire that would be tailored to the participants after consultation would be the Mindful Attention Awareness Scale, or MAAS.

The MAAS is a 15-item scale designed to assess a core characteristic of dispositional mindfulness, namely, open or receptive awareness of and attention to what is taking place in the present. The scale shows strong psychometric properties and has been validated with college, community, and cancer patient samples. Correlational, quasi-experimental, and laboratory studies have shown that the MAAS taps a unique quality of consciousness that is related to, and predictive of, a variety of self-regulation and well-being constructs. The measure takes 10 minutes or less to complete. Please see attachment for the MAAS evaluation assessment itself.

Materials

Participants are given a kit which includes a personal journal, handouts, and meditation CD, as well as coaching reminders throughout the course. The combination of these materials provides a rigorous and effective introduction to meditation and mindfulness, and extends the efficacy of participants' learned tools. Given the aim is to establish an ongoing habit of mindfulness practice, the tools have been designed to assist with the integration of a meditative practice into everyday life.

4. Clients



Designed and presented for 5 years an in-flight meditation program for international and domestic travelers.



Delivered stress management/meditation program for 15 staff.



Designed and presented an in-flight meditation program for international travelers for the last 8 years, still running.

Captive Media

Delivered a meditation program for 6 executives and 20 staff.

Trowbridge Consulting

Delivered a stress management/meditation program for 4 executives and 33 staff in Sydney and Melbourne.

Stanton Consulting

Delivered a stress management/ meditation seminar to 25 executives and staff.



Delivered meditation seminar to 40 participants.



Australian
Competition &
Consumer
Commission

Delivered a course meditation/ meditation to 20 participants

5. Meditation Research: Evidence of Efficacy

- 1. Victorian State Government Research (Better Health Victoria) Page 10**
- 2. Resilience for the Rest of Us (Daniel Goleman) Pages 11-12**
- 3. Meditation, Back to Basics (Sydney University Research) Pages 13-14**
- 4. Meditation, The New Balm for Corporate Stress (Business Week) Pages 15-16**
- 5. Learning to Tune Out Distraction (Chatter Blocker) Page 17**
- 6. Meditation for the Rest of Us (James Baltzell) Pages 18-24**
- 7. A Bigger Brain with Meditation (Body and Soul) Pages 25-26**
- 8. The Happiest Man in the World (University of Wisconsin) Page 27**

1. Victorian State Government

(Source: <http://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/bhcv2/bhcarticles.nsf/pages/Meditation>)

The Victorian State Government has stated in their information on meditation that: Scientific studies show that the regular practice of meditation can be a powerful healing tool. In fact, there is now clear evidence from studies of long-term meditators that meditation produces profound changes in the brain, and that recovery from some physical and emotional illnesses is assisted by the practice of meditation.

A range of disorders

Regular meditation can be used to help assist in the treatment a range of disorders including:

- Anxiety
- Chronic pain
- Depression
- Headaches
- High blood pressure
- Insomnia
- Migraines
- Stress
- Recovery from accident or illness
- A sense of purposelessness.

Benefits of meditation

The direct benefits of meditation can include:

- Improved physical, emotional and mental health
- Focused and clear thinking
- Enhancing a sense of self and personal presence
- Increased emotional balance
- Greater relaxation and ease
- More equanimity in the face of challenges
- Reduction in anxiety and panic
- Reduction in chronic pain and illness
- Reduction in headaches and fatigue
- Lowered blood pressure
- Fewer sleep disturbances

2. Resilience for the Rest of Us

by Daniel Goleman (Source:

http://blogs.hbr.org/cs/2011/04/resilience_for_the_rest_of_us.html)

There are two ways to become more resilient: one by talking to yourself, the other by retraining your brain.

If you've suffered a major failure, take the sage advice given by psychologist Martin Seligman in the HBR article "Building Resilience." Talk to yourself. Give yourself a cognitive intervention and counter defeatist thinking with an optimistic attitude. Challenge your downbeat thinking and replace it with a positive outlook.

But, fortunately, major failures come along rarely in life. What about bouncing back from the more frequent annoying minor setbacks and irritating upsets that are routine in any leader's life? Resilience is, again, the answer — but with a different flavour. You need to retrain your brain.

The brain has a very different mechanism for bouncing back from the cumulative toll of daily hassles. And with a little effort, you can upgrade its ability to snap back from life's downers.

Whenever we get so upset we say or do something we later regret (and who doesn't now and then?), that's a sure sign that our amygdala — the brain's radar for danger, and the trigger for the fight-or-flight response — has hijacked the brain's executive centers in the prefrontal cortex. The neural key to resilience lies in how quickly we recover from that hijacked state.

The circuitry that brings us back to full energy and focus after an amygdala hijack concentrates in the left side of our prefrontal area, finds Richard Davidson, a neuroscientist at the University of Wisconsin. He's also found that when we're distressed, there's heightened activity on the right side of the prefrontal area. Each of us has a characteristic level of left/right activity that predicts our daily mood range — if we're tilted to the right, more upsets; if to the left, quicker recovery from distress of all kinds.

To tackle this in the workplace, Davidson teamed with the CEO of a high-pressure, 24/7, biotech start up and Jon Kabat-Zinn of the University of Massachusetts Medical School. Kabat-Zinn offered the employees at the biotech outfit instruction in mindfulness, an attention-training method that teaches the brain to register anything happening in the present moment with full focus — but without reacting.

After eight weeks, and an average 30 minutes a day of practicing mindfulness, the employees had shifted their ratio from tilted toward the stressed-out right side to the resilient left side. What's more, they said they remembered what they loved about their work — they got in touch with what had brought them energy in the first place.

To get the full benefit, a daily practice of 20 to 30 minutes works best; think of it like a mental exercise routine. It can be very helpful to have guided instructions, but the key is to find a slot for it in your daily routine. (There are even instructions for using a long drive as your practice session.)

Mindfulness has been steadily gaining credence among hard-nosed executives. There are several centres where mindfulness instruction has been tailored for businesspeople, from tony resorts like Miraval to programs in mindful leadership at the University of Massachusetts Medical School in Worcester. Google University has been offering a course on mindfulness to employees for years.

Might you benefit from tuning up your brain's resilience circuitry by learning mindfulness? Among high-performing executives, the impacts of stress can be subtle. My colleagues Richard Boaties and Annie McKee suggest as a rough diagnostic of leadership stress asking yourself, "Do I have a vague sense of unease, restlessness or the feeling that life is not great (a higher standard than "good enough")?" A bit of mindfulness might put your mind at ease.

Daniel Goleman is Co-Director of the Consortium for Research on Emotional Intelligence in Organizations at Rutgers University, co-author of Primal Leadership: Leading with Emotional Intelligence, and, most recently, author of The Brain and Emotional Intelligence: New Insights.

3. Meditation Back to Basics

(source:<http://sydney.edu.au/news/84.html?newsstoryid=7087>)

Fulltime workers who used a traditional 'silent' form of meditation became much less stressed and depressed compared to more conventional approaches to relaxation or even placebo, according to a paper published today in the online journal *Evidence Based Complementary Medicine*, a leading publication in its field.

A team of researchers, led by Dr Ramesh Manocha of the Meditation Research Program in Sydney Medical School, monitored stress levels of fulltime Australian workers in Sydney's CBD to determine the effectiveness of meditation in combating this widespread and expensive problem.

The eight-week clinical trial provides strong evidence that there are measurable, practical and clinically relevant effects of meditation, and particularly those that are aimed at achieving the experience of mental silence, states Dr Manocha.

The study looked at a specific definition of meditation based on the authentic understanding of meditation as the experience of 'mental silence'. Dr Manocha says his team chose to use the ancient eastern understanding of meditation, rather than trendy modern methods that have become popular amongst modern consumers, because the modern methods performed poorly when subjected to rigorous scientific evaluation.

"What we wanted to know was whether this style of meditation was more effective in reducing occupational stress than placebo, and if it is, do different approaches to meditation have different effects?" says Dr Manocha.

"What we found was mental silence orientated meditation is a safe, highly effective strategy for dealing with work-related stress and depressive feelings. And it is something you can teach yourself.

"We divided our volunteers into three groups, and those who used mental silence meditation showed significant reduction in their stress levels compared to those who used other methods such as relaxation or visualisation, which often only generate a placebo effect at best.

"It's one of only a few meditation studies that clearly demonstrates an effect that is much greater than just placebo, and the implications of this study are wide ranging and worthy of further in depth investigation."

According to Manocha's study work stress is described by many experts as a modern epidemic. It costs the Australian economy \$15 billion per year. It is a leading cause of absenteeism, causing both mental health problems such as anxiety and physical problems such as heart disease. Meditation can now be put forward as a simple, low cost intervention that can help prevent this.

The strategies currently available to tackle work stress often have limited effectiveness says Dr Manocha. "This is where this study is remarkably relevant. It shows that a simple, mental silence orientated meditation skill, reduces stress significantly more than other often more expensive approaches to stress management.

"Another remarkable aspect of the study was the impact on depressive mood. Depression is a major problem in our society, so any low cost intervention that reduces the risk of depression is of great public health significance.

"This study, along with the evidence from other research that we have done, indicates that strategies like meditation should be used to prevent some of the major mental health problems that are facing our community."

A substantial proportion of depression in the community starts as work stress, says recent Australian research. "Given the shortage of other options to prevent the mental health epidemic that threatens the younger generation, I think we should seriously examine the potential of this unique finding to stem the tide," says Dr Manocha.

"Stress is not just limited to the workplace. In Australia, 40 percent of the population experience significant stress, the majority seek help from GPs who are often at a loss to know what to recommend that is safe, effective and scientifically evaluated. Our study clearly says that this is something that health professionals can confidently recommend to both prevent and reduce stress."

4. Meditation, The New Balm for Corporate Stress

(source: <http://www.businessweek.com/archives/1993/b331869.arc.htm>)

An odd thing happens almost every day at consulting firm Symmetrix in Lexington, Mass. Some of its 125 workers shut their office doors, hold their calls, and spend 20 minutes sitting quietly, meditating.

They began doing this after going through a four-week program in which an instructor from Harvard's Mind/Body Medical Institute taught them a variety of techniques for relaxation, including meditation and guided visual imagery. George Bennett, Symmetrix's CEO, says he signed up his company for the \$3,000 program because employees complained of being too stressed out. "There's no question employees who do this are more relaxed, and some are even more productive," he says. One diabetic worker noticed a big health benefit: His need for insulin injections dropped 15% after using the relaxation techniques for three weeks.

Bennett is not practicing some New Age religion or oddball management strategy. His approach to easing job stress is based on the modern health-care principles of mind/body medicine. Meditation, one of the field's key methods, is often used in combination with other therapies--such as exercise, nutrition, and support groups--to deal with a host of problems, including stress, heart disease, insomnia, and anger.

BEYOND THE FRINGE? Companies such as Marriott, Polaroid, and Boston Co., an investment firm, have all offered mind/body training to their employees. Adolph Coors Co. has one of the most extensive "wellness" programs anywhere, with a separate building and a full-time staff. Among its many services, the program combines meditation, nutrition, and exercise to help treat any ailment. "The best way to control health-care costs is to prevent costs from occurring in the first place," says Chairman William Coors, who himself meditates regularly.

The field is still considered fringe medicine in some quarters--notably the insurance industry. But mind/body techniques are making inroads into the business world based largely on new credibility gained from recent scientific studies that suggest strong links between mental attitudes and physical health.

At Stanford University, a psychiatrist has used meditation, hypnosis, and group therapy for women with advanced breast cancer--helping to prolong their lives by an average of 18 months, compared with women who did not receive the treatment. Another report, published in the journal *Lancet* by the Preventive Medicine Research Institute in Sausalito, Calif., showed that yoga and meditation, used in conjunction with a low-fat diet, can reverse heart disease. Scores of other studies document a relationship--still not well understood--between thought patterns and the immune system.

FOCUS WORD. Specialists say anyone can use meditation to deal with workday and personal stress, whether their company has a formal program or not. A key is getting the body and the mind to relax completely for a few uninterrupted minutes. In the 1970s, Dr. Herbert Benson developed the "relaxation response," which can be elicited at any time

with two types of mental focusing--repetition of a single thought or phrase and disregarding other thoughts.

To assist in the process, you should sit quietly, in a comfortable position, with your eyes closed, relaxing your muscles and breathing slowly. If you've never meditated before, you may need practice. A problem for beginners is that various thoughts may break their concentration. If that happens, don't get anxious; just shrug it off and gently return to the repetition of the focus word. Ideally, you should meditate once or twice a day for at least 10 minutes a session. If you want to do it at work, it helps if you have a private office with a door you can close, but you can also try it in a quiet corner of the cafeteria or outside on a bench during lunchtime.

If you own a business and want to promote the benefits of meditation and other relaxation techniques to your workers--or if you just want to learn more for yourself--you can turn to several sources. Dr. Benson's Mind/

Body Medical Institute (617 632-9525) at Boston's Deaconess Hospital gives guidance and holds training sessions, starting at about \$300 for individuals and running into the thousands for customized corporate programs.

Some insurance companies offer stress-reduction seminars, meditation classes, or other mind/body approaches to preventive medicine. And many health clubs and private practitioners teach meditation and yoga, as do self-help books and tapes.

A good source of practical information on the topic is a new book called Mind/Body Medicine (Consumer Reports Books, \$24.95). Articles from leading scientists describe the state of the art in this field, and there is a long list of resources for people with specific concerns. Healing and the Mind, by Bill Moyers (Doubleday, \$25) offers an engaging narrative based on a recent PBS series. The book describes techniques used in major U.S. hospitals and in China.

People who have the most success with meditation make a point of incorporating it into their daily routines, whether at home or on the job. That way, it becomes second nature. So if your boss blindsides you at 5 p.m. with a 20-page report that's due tomorrow, you have a better chance of staying calm and keeping your blood pressure down.

Edited by Amy Dunkin & Geoffrey Smith

5. Learning to Tune Out Distraction

(source http://chatterblocker.com/whitepapers/tune_out_distractions.html#9)

by Earl Vickers, The Sound Guy, Inc.

A companion article, "[Coping with Speech Noise in the Modern Workplace](#)" [1], examined the problem of office noise and the resulting stress, distraction and loss of productivity. Irrelevant speech was found to be the most distracting type of sound, because the mind tends to follow the unwanted conversation instead of the worker's own thoughts.

The article reviewed the acoustical limitations of cubicles and open-plan offices and recommended a number of possible remedies, including minimizing the problem at the source (by [encouraging a culture of acoustic courtesy](#)) and masking unwanted conversations with nature sounds, instrumental music, and/or distant chatter.

This article will focus on a complementary approach to the problem. Since some people are less disturbed and distracted by extraneous conversation than others, it seems possible that the ability to tune out noise might be a learnable skill. We will explore the practice of mindfulness as a way of learning to reducing the stress and distraction of office noise.

A Startling Discovery

The startle reflex is just that — a reflex, an involuntary response to a sudden unexpected stimulus. Within the first third of a second after a surprising sound, everyone responds in the same way: the same five facial muscles contract, and we experience an increase in heart rate, blood pressure and sweating. Since it is a function of the reptilian brain, the startle reflex cannot be suppressed by force of will. [2, 3]

At least, that's what scientists believed until they tested Öser, a European-born Tibetan monk, in the laboratory. When a very loud sound (equivalent to a firecracker or gunshot) was played while Öser practiced "one-pointed" meditation, his facial movements were quite small, and his heart rate and blood pressure actually decreased. And when the sound was played while he practiced "open state" meditation, his face did not move a muscle [3].

Öser said, "When I went into the open state, the explosive sound seemed to me softer, as if I was distanced from the sensations, hearing the sound from afar.... If you can remain properly in this state, the bang seems neutral, like a bird crossing the sky." [3]. While these are impressive findings, suggesting that the ability to tune out noise may indeed be a learnable skill, what are the implications for those of us who are unlikely to spend months or years in intensive meditation practice?

6. Meditation for the Rest of Us (James Baltzell M.D.)

"Attention is the key to learning, and meditation helps you voluntarily regulate it." — Richard Davidson, director of the Laboratory for Affective Neuroscience, University of Washington [29]

Since occupational stress is a leading cause of disease, absenteeism and lowered productivity, research has focused primarily on meditation's ability to reduce stress at work [4]. Numerous studies have shown that even a relatively short training in meditation can reduce stress, anxiety and burnout, while increasing employee satisfaction and creativity [5, 6, 7, 8].

Less research has been done regarding meditation's impact on the ability to concentrate, but studies have shown:

- Increased concentration scores after 20 minutes of meditation each day for six weeks [9]
- Improved academic performance when meditating prior to studying and taking exams [10, 11]
- More alertness, productivity, and willingness to collaborate with others [12]
- Improved attention scores [13, 14]
- A decline in mental acuity after a mid-afternoon nap, but a significant increase after 40 minutes of meditation, even though none of the volunteers were experienced meditators [15, 29]

Other research has focused on the structure of the brain. Just as MRI studies have found that in violinists, the part of the brain that controls finger movements grows in size [3], recent experiments have shown that meditation actually increases the thickness of the part of the cortex relating to attention and sensory processing [15].

Since a common element in all meditation is the retraining of attention [13], it seems likely that the practice of meditation could be helpful in learning to focus on one's own thoughts and tune out distractions.

Meditation at Work

"There's no question employees who do this are more relaxed, and some are even more productive." — George Bennett, CEO of Symmetrix [16]

While some companies (and employees) are skeptical about the idea of meditation in the workplace, others are being won over by its benefits. Given that 70% to 90% of employees

hospital visits are stress-related [18], the value of stress-reduction should be apparent. Articles in *The Washington Post* [19] and *Business Week* [16] have emphasized that meditation-based stress reduction programs can improve corporate productivity and reduce expenses from health care, employee turnover and absenteeism.

Insurance companies, which have a clear financial incentive to minimize health care costs, have begun offering meditation classes and stress-reduction seminars [16]. After a majority of Tower Companies' employees began meditating, health care costs dropped so much that Great West Insurance covered most of the costs of the meditation course and dropped the company's premium by 5% [19].

Tech companies like Google, Apple and Yahoo have begun offering meditation courses, as have Nike, Toyota, Walt Disney, AT&T, Deutsche Bank, Hughes Aircraft, the Chicago Bulls, General Electric, and many others [18, 20]. When the chemical manufacturing company R.W. Montgomery instituted a meditation program in 1983, they found that over the next three years productivity rose 120%, absenteeism fell 85%, injuries and sick days declined, and profits increased by 520% [19].

Work as Meditation

"I'm able to sort through work challenges in this state of calm much faster than trying to fight through it. And I make fewer mistakes." — Dave Jakubowski, VP of Business Development, United Online Inc. [18]

Peak performance at complex tasks such as programming, engineering and writing often involves a state of "flow," defined by Csikszentmihalyi as:

"Being completely involved in an activity for its own sake. The ego falls away. Time flies. Every action, movement, and thought follows inevitably from the previous one, like playing jazz. Your whole being is involved, and you're using your skills to the utmost." — Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi [21]

The workday is most productive and least tedious when you are in flow, "in the zone." The capacity to focus attention and achieve a flow state can be cultivated by training in mindfulness meditation, yoga, martial arts and other disciplines. [22, 23] Peak performance is, itself, a type of meditation, where you are at one with the present moment, focused on your task with a one-pointed awareness.

The state of flow is somewhat fragile, however, and can be disrupted by boredom (too easy a task) or frustration (too hard a task), as well as by noise and other distractions.

Internal and External Chatter

"Meditation is based on the simple principle that clearing away clutter is enough for clarity to surface spontaneously." [24]

Irrelevant speech distracts in two separate ways. First, our minds start listening to the unwanted speech instead of our own thoughts. Then, when we notice that a co-worker has disrupted our task, we have an emotional reaction.

Especially if we are under a deadline, we may feel angry or frustrated. We may think, "I shouldn't have to listen to this," or "Why can't I just be left alone to work in peace and quiet," or "Now I'll never get this done on time." Often the emotional reaction is more distracting, and certainly more stressful, than the speech sound itself.

Similarly, beginning meditators often get frustrated when their minds wander, and blame themselves for meditating incorrectly. In reality, wandering is what minds tend to do (just as chatting is what co-workers do), and the essence of meditation is the practice of gently, repeatedly, bringing the mind back to the breath or other object of meditation. Instead of getting frustrated or angry at the intrusion of unwanted thoughts or sounds, simply return the attention to the meditation object, over and over.

Mindfulness Meditation, as practiced in the Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction course taught in over 200 medical centers in the United States, promotes an attitude of acceptance, which means seeing things as they actually are in the present [25]. Some of the exercises involve listening:

"... try just listening to sound when you meditate. This does not mean listening for sounds, rather just hearing what is here to be heard, moment by moment, without judging or thinking about them. Just hearing them as pure sound." [25]

If you notice unwanted sounds during the practice, pay attention to your reaction to the sounds. How can these sounds disrupt your meditation, if the object of the meditation is to be mindful of sounds and your reactions? This practice can help desensitize us to intrusive speech and defuse our emotional response.

Other meditation exercises involve withdrawing the attention from external sounds and internal chatter, focusing instead on a specific object or one's own breathing:

"Sounds abound even in a quiet environment.... Pratyahara involves a gentle withdrawal of attention from these sounds in an attempt to cultivate a studied indifference to the source and significance of these sounds. In addition to thoughts triggered by sensory stimuli, is the spontaneous flow of thoughts often manifesting as rumination. The person learns to ignore these thoughts as well during pratyahara." [24]

Meditations on Work

A recent study showed that the average American worker wastes over two hours per 8-hour workday, not counting lunch and breaks. The biggest distraction was personal Internet use (surfing the web, like you're doing right now) at 45%, followed by socializing with co-workers (23%), conducting personal business (7%) and the ever-popular "spacing out" (4%) [26].

Not all of the wasted time is intentional. But just as the mind tends to wander from one thought to the next, the mouse clicks from one web link to the next, and soon an hour has passed. The primary time-wasting excuses were "Not enough work to do" (33%), "I'm underpaid for the amount of work I do" (23%), and "My co-workers distract me" (15%) [26].

"Wasted time" is not necessarily a bad thing, of course; we all need some play and a little slack. Furthermore, a good deal of problem solving happens while socializing with co-workers, spacing-out, etc.

However, there is something about the boss-employee relationship that can induce a sullen, adolescent resentment, an ongoing, unspoken slow-down strike consciously or unconsciously intended to make up for perceived injustices, such as being underpaid, overworked, underworked or forced to work on pointless projects. This is not an ideal situation for either the boss or the employee.

Instead of withdrawing from a boring or unpleasant situation, which is the usual response, we might try paying closer attention, looking for any parts of the job that might engage our curiosity and interest. We owe it to ourselves, and perhaps to our employers, to seek "right livelihood," either by looking for meaningful work or by searching for the meaning within our current work. Attention can add interest to even the most mundane job.

Those who manage to achieve a state of flow, working steadily during the day at projects for which they are well-suited, tend to be happier and less stressed than those who drag their heels and goof off at every opportunity. If we can learn to relax our bodies and focus our minds while working, we may be able to achieve the same or better results with less struggle, less cursing at the computer, less setting the office on fire and shooting our co-workers.

Muscle tension does not increase our productivity; it just causes burnout. Mindfulness practice can help us relax and stay focused on our most important goals, gently bringing us back on-task when we get sidetracked by unimportant activities.

Reminders to Be Mindful

"No matter what is chosen as a reminder, our real work is to remember. This remembering is called mindfulness." [27]

As another way of assisting the quest for mindfulness, we might borrow the technique of "experience sampling," which involves randomly sampling people's activities to see how they actually spend their time in daily life. Experience sampling was originally used by Csikszentmihalyi and Larson as a research tool [28]. For example, it could be used to provide a more accurate measure of wasted time than that obtained when employees reconstruct their experiences from memory.

A modified version of this method can be employed as a tool to promote mindfulness. For example, an occasional bell sound (perhaps once or twice per hour) could be used a cue to remind yourself to take a deep breath, relax, and adjust your posture. When you hear the bell, you could ask yourself, "Am I working, relaxing, or killing time? Am I focused on a worthwhile task?"

Aldous Huxley's novel *Island* featured hundreds of parrots that repeated the word "Attention," reminding the inhabitants to pay attention to the present moment [30]. Over time, we may habituate to such reminders, or they may even become new distractions, but reminders can be useful if we take the effort to seek out small moments of mindfulness.

An article called "Mindfulness and Mastery in the Workplace" offered an excellent list of 21 ways to reduce stress during the workday [27]. It provided suggestions such as:

- Use everyday cues in your environment (such as the telephone ringing) as reminders to "center" yourself.
- Stop for one to three minutes every hour during the workday to become aware of your breathing and bodily sensations, allowing the mind to settle in and regroup / recoup.
- Use your breaks to truly relax rather than simply "pausing."

Conclusion: Office noise, particularly extraneous conversation, is a common cause of stress and distraction in the workplace. Sometimes it is possible to address the problem at the source or mask the unwanted speech with other sounds. However, we may also want to consider ways of tuning out the noise or minimizing our reaction to it, since our emotional response can be even more distracting than the original sound.

The practice of mindfulness helps increase concentration and reduce stress. An organized course, such as the Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction classes taught in many hospitals and medical centres, are an excellent way to make mindfulness part of your daily life.

References

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7. A Bigger Brain with Meditation

(Source: www.bodyandsoul.com.au)

By Eloise King

How meditation can boost brain power in eight weeks.

Scientists have known for a few years that people who meditate have different brain structures from the rest of us. What hasn't been proven is that it's actually the meditation that affects our grey matter. Now a landmark study has not only shown that there's a direct connection, but that meditation can change our brains for the better in just eight weeks – even if we've never done it before.

In a study published in *Psychiatry Research: Neuroimaging* earlier this year, US researchers measured the brains of 16 people who had never meditated before, and then did so again after the group had completed an eight-week meditation program. During that time, the group spent an average of 27 minutes a day practising mindfulness meditation, a particular style of meditation which focuses on non-judgmental awareness of sensations, feelings and states of mind.

After the program, tests done on the group found there was increased grey-matter density in the hippocampus, the area of the brain associated with learning and memory, and in other brain structures associated with self-awareness, compassion and introspection. There was also a reduction in size of the amygdala, the part of the brain which controls anxiety and stress.

In other words, the silent practice of meditation changes the structure of our brains, boosting the areas that help us focus, remember things and be self-aware, while reducing the areas that can make us feel anxious and stressed.

US-based meditation master Thom Knoles, who is visiting Australia this month, says this research proves what long-term meditators have known for thousands of years.

"Practising meditation helps us see things clearly, have a stronger sense of self and puts the stresses in our lives into proper perspective," he says.

"Research indicates the effects of meditation are not just that the brain is growing more grey matter, but that the brain is learning how to repair itself organically. It would not be out of the question to assume that the brain is actually regenerating brain cells."

Many Styles, One Aim

While the US study proved the beneficial effects of mindfulness meditation, earlier research has shown that meditation in general improves people's grey matter.

For instance, a UCLA study, used high-resolution magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) to show that long-term meditators who used various meditation techniques all had larger volumes of the hippocampus and areas within the orbitofrontal cortex, the thalamus and the inferior temporal gyrus – regions known for regulating emotions – than those who did not meditate.

Knoles, who teaches Vedic meditation, which uses mantras to focus the mind, agrees that all types of meditation are beneficial for our brains.

"Closing one's eyes and settling into the simplest form of awareness is a powerful practice, irrespective of the name given to the meditation experience," he says.

Greater brain power

Meditation quietens the mind and generates feelings of relaxation. The brain then sends signals of blissfulness to the entire body, which then reorganises itself into a restful and stress-free state.

Knoles says each one of us has the same brain capacity. The question is: what are we training our brain to do?

"Instead of having brain matter generated through states of stress, meditation provides the brain with blissful experiences that increase the capability in every area," he says. "What we see is people become more creative, increasing their learning ability and intelligence, and taking on a larger life perspective. Meditation is not just a psychological or mood-enhancing tool but a way to grow and access more brain power."

8. Happiest Man in the World (University of Wisconsin)

(source: Anthony Barnes, The Independent,)

To scientists, he is the world's happiest man. His level of mind control is astonishing and the upbeat impulses in his brain are off the scale.

Now Mathieu Ricard, 60, a French academic-turned-Buddhist monk, is to share his secrets to make the world a happier place. The trick, he reckons, is to put some effort into it. In essence, happiness is a "skill" to be learned.

His advice could not be more timely as tomorrow Britain will reach what, according to a scientific formula, is the most miserable day of the year. Tattered New Year resolutions, the faded buzz of Christmas, debt, a lack of motivation and the winter weather conspire to create a peak of misery and gloom.

But studies have shown that the mind can rise above it all to increase almost everyone's happiness. Mr. Ricard, who is the French interpreter for Tibet's spiritual leader, the Dalai Lama, took part in trials to show that brain training in the form of meditation can cause an overwhelming change in levels of happiness.

MRI scans showed that he and other long-term meditators - who had completed more than 10,000 hours each - experienced a huge level of "positive emotions" in the left pre-frontal cortex of the brain, which is associated with happiness. The right-hand side, which handles negative thoughts, is suppressed.

Further studies have shown that even novices who have done only a little meditation have increased levels of happiness. But Mr. Ricard's abilities were head and shoulders above the others involved in the trials.

"The mind is malleable," Mr. Ricard told The Independent on Sunday yesterday. "Our life can be greatly transformed by even a minimal change in how we manage our thoughts and perceive and interpret the world. Happiness is a skill. It requires effort and time."

Mr. Ricard was brought up among Paris's intellectual elite in the 1960s, but after working for a PhD in biochemistry he abandoned his distinguished academic career to study Tibetan Buddhism in the Himalayas.