




# Mindfulness in the workplace

Have you noticed how often the word 'mindfulness' seems to be popping up in the media nowadays? It gets almost as many column inches as Gin does. On the subject of which do keep reading for my guided gin and tonic mindful meditation later.

While it feels that mindfulness is a relatively new craze, in reality it's a branch of the ancient practice of meditation and is highly relevant and important in relation to the way we live our modern and often stressful lives.

So let me ask you, do you often find your mind wandering and ruminating on subjects that you'd rather not think about? Do you tend to catastrophize and expect the worst possible outcome? Do you find yourself telling people that you're stressed and don't have enough time? If the answer to any of the above is yes then it could be that your brain has hijacked your mind and is now running the show.



Your brain is brilliant and capable of anything imaginable but a prehistoric and highly emotional part of it is primarily concerned with keeping you alive and will do its utmost to steer you away from any perceived danger. This part of our brain tells us that our survival depends entirely on sticking with the herd because there is safety in numbers. Living in a group made hunting for food and protecting ourselves from marauding mountain lions much easier and survival more likely for our caveman ancestors. So when the survival instinct kicks in we'll do anything to avoid danger.

Take for example speaking in public. According to Psychology Today we fear public speaking more than we fear death itself. The real fear is the one of making a fool of ourselves in front of the group. Our brains interpret this outcome as immediate exclusion from the herd followed by almost certain death by marauding mountain lions. You can see how the prehistoric brain springing into action here is irrelevant and often detrimental to modern life.

It may be distressing to realise that huge and important parts of our lives are being governed by this part of our brain but the good news is that the practice of mindfulness will help towards getting all the inaccurate speculation and unfounded threats under control. Mindfulness will ultimately lead you towards a happier, calmer and healthier life.

My name is Kate and my life, levels of happiness and health have been transformed over the past few years by the regular practice of various forms of meditation and mindfulness.

Three years ago self-induced stress literally brought me to my knees and I was unable to work or lead a normal life for several months.

I'd tried meditation a few times prior to this health incident and always struggled to maintain my attention span and ended up abandoning my efforts. Post illness I decided to try again and this time bought a guided meditation CD and also attended a couple of courses. The courses introduced me to the powerful experience of group meditation which is something I recommend highly.



Three years down the line and there is rarely a day that goes past when I don't meditate and on those exceptional days I feel the loss of those precious ten minutes. Yes that's pretty much all I do. Occasionally I'll meditate for 15-20 minutes but ten minutes a day has been enough to change my life entirely. So enough about how brilliant I think it is and let's talk about how you can easily bring mindfulness into your life.

The initial response I hear from most people is that they don't have the time or the patience to meditate or be mindful. Most of us are contracted to be in what for many is a hugely stressful environment for a minimum of 7.5 hours a day, 5 days a week, surrounded by people we wouldn't always necessarily choose to spend time with. You're a busy person, who isn't? So in order to address the initial protests of not having time I'd like to show you some ways to incorporate mindfulness into your working day.

## **So what is mindfulness?**

Put simply mindfulness is the practice of paying attention. It's the regular flexing of the attention muscle (i.e. your brilliant brain ever alert for marauding mountain lions) which leads to inner calm, the ability to deal with anything and much improved health.

One of my favourite side effects of mindfulness is that it literally seems to create time for me. I've found that because I'm so much calmer nowadays I have more time to think, to respond to questions in a measured way. I'm significantly less 'headless chicken' in the manner in which I go about living my life.

## **Why should I practice mindfulness?**

It's a portable technique which can be whipped out at will to help you deal with any given stressful situation. Yes you may have other coping mechanisms like relaxing in front of the TV with a glass of wine or going out on your bike but when you're waiting to go in to an interview or you're facing a situation at work you can't simply flick on Netflix to release the tension. You can however practice mindfulness wherever you are.



## How and when should I practice mindfulness?

That's really up to you. Depending on your disposition you can start being mindful from the moment you wake up to the moment you fall asleep. My recommendation is that you set aside ten minutes a day but even if you start out by trying it for 30 seconds you will still gain from the benefits.

One of the joys of mindfulness is that you literally cannot get it wrong. Let me explain. It's about paying attention which could be quite tricky what with a million and one things vying for our attention. Here's the genius part though....so you've sat down with great intentions of concentrating on your breathing and within seconds your mind wanders to thoughts of what's for dinner tonight. Please don't go beating yourself up and thinking that this mindfulness lark isn't for you. Simply noticing the fact that your mind has wandered is in fact being mindful. We're in a Win Win situation here people.

Let's go back to the start of the day and take advantage of the first stirrings of consciousness in the morning before you've even opened your eyes. Notice how cosy and warm you feel and how the bed is fully supporting your entire body. Do a quick scan starting at your toes and working your way up to the top of your head. Are all limbs feeling entirely comfortable? Have you woken up with a dead arm? If so, how does that feel? Remember that mindfulness is about paying attention to what's happening in the here and now, whether you pay attention for 20 seconds or twenty minutes.

### **Breathing. Yes even you have time to do that!**

Yes it's the obvious and classically talked about meditation, the art of literally staying alive. It could not be a simpler place to begin practicing mindfulness.

Find a comfortable chair to sit in, both feet planted squarely on the floor, hands resting in your lap or on the arms of the chair. Notice how the chair is fully supporting your body and where you may be feeling any pressure points. I'm going to talk you through my best friend Valerie's breathing meditation.



Sitting comfortably she imagines her breath moving in and out of her body in a figure of eight motion, as if the 8 was lying on its side in front of her. As she breathes in she imagines oxygen being drawn in from the furthest point of the 8, down the curve then moving upwards crossing over in the middle before rising up and over. She then breathes out sending the breath first down then through the crossing point then up and over then back again. For someone who struggled initially with the technique of mindful breathing she tells me that this kind of visual aid makes the process of mindful breathing much easier.

You might also like to try placing your hand on your stomach and simply being aware of the rise as you take a deep breath in and the fall as you breath out. Be aware of the moment between the out breath and next in breath. This briefest and most precious of moments is blissful and if you give it your full attention you'll feel your body literally sink into relaxation.

## **Mindful commuting**

One of my favourite mindful exercises is to notice things that please me. This is a great game to play if you commute to work by bus or train but for obvious safety reasons you shouldn't do this if you drive. If you're the passenger though then fill your boots. This is a great game to play with your kids out on a walk too.

The game is self-explanatory, simply notice things that please you, a car you like, the colour of a car, the fabulous shoes that lady at the bus stop is wearing, the house or road you pass everyday where you'd like to live, a beautiful garden, a field full of cows, a funny piece of graffiti. The more you do this the more accustomed to seeking out lovely things your mind will become. I've often found myself arriving at my destination feeling practically euphoric after playing this game.

So the car drivers don't feel left out why don't you fit five minutes of mindful breathing in when you get to work or listen to a quick guided mediation whilst sat in your parked car. I recommend an app called 'Buddify' which is fantastic for beginners and contains multiple different meditations for all kinds of situations.



## Mindful emails

A Buddify meditation that I love listening to and have found extremely helpful is in the Being Online section and is called 'Connect'.

During this 9 minute meditation you are encouraged to open up your emails and notice the emotions that arise when you do so. Labelling our emotions (joy, anxiety, dread, relief, self-judgement etc) can sometimes help create some space from them, freeing you for a moment. Don't open any emails but keep the inbox there in your view. Look at who the emails are from and allow them to be human beings, not just names on the screen. Are they friends, colleagues, salespeople? They're a group of people connected by the fact their messages are sat in your inbox right now. Right now they're experiencing their own stress, joy and problems so wish them and yourself well.


## Mindful tea making

It's good practice to get up and leave your desk every hour or so and making a round of drinks for your work mates always goes down well so why not make the entire process a mindful one?

As you fill the kettle with water take a moment to think about the distance the water has travelled to pour into the kettle. Approximately 70% of the earth's surface is covered in water and a huge percentage of you is made of water.

If you have a glass kettle watch the bubbles go from tiny to a large rolling boil and maybe take time to appreciate the mechanism (invented by Dr John C Taylor) that automatically turns the kettle off once the water has boiled. If you don't have a glass kettle listen to the building momentum of the sound of the water boiling.

Now that you have boiling water pour it slowly and carefully into the waiting cups noticing the steam wafting up and the aroma of freshly brewing tea. Take a few long, slow and deep breaths as you watch the colour of the water deepening. Appreciate the fact that this brew was made possible by someone thousands of miles away picking the tea leaves.



Take the milk from the fridge noticing the chill of the carton as you pick it up. How does the handle or carton feel in your hand? Is it heavy or light? As you pour a dash of milk into each cup notice the beautiful explosion of colours and shapes as the milk mingles with the tea.

Now take a sip and give your full attention to the taste and temperature. Is it bringing up any other thoughts and memories, is it making your mind wander? If it is that's ok, just remember to gently bring your attention back to the cup and know that by doing so you are totally mastering mindfulness.


## **How to mindfully deal with the overwhelming feeling of work piling up on your desk**

Stop what you're doing and put whatever is in your hand down. Find an object on your desk, it can be anything, a pen, your keyboard, a folder. Whatever it is you choose look at it, I mean really look at it. Give this object your complete and undivided attention. Notice the shape, the colour, is the light bouncing off this object anywhere? If you were to pick it up how would it feel? Is it textured, smooth, heavy or surprisingly light. Completely immerse yourself in taking in every single facet of that object for 20 seconds.

## **And now the one you've been waiting for, the kind of mindful activity we can all get on board with..... The mindful process of making the best gin and tonic you'll ever taste**

You're at the end of the day and it's possible that a drink may be in order so let's make the entire experience a mindful one from beginning to end. I promise it will make the gin taste even better.

Select the perfect glass feeling the weight and shape of it in the palm of your hand for a moment. No need to linger too long at any stage of the process just use and notice at least one of your senses at every step of the way. Take the ice tray from the freezer pausing momentarily to feel the cold blast. Is it hitting your hands first or maybe your face? Be aware of where you're feeling the sensation of cold. Listen to the chink of the ice cubes hitting the bottom of the glass and each other.



Now take a lemon and roll it between the palm of your hands. Feel the shape of the fruit you're holding and notice the smell as the oils are released into the air under the friction of rolling. Has the citrus fragrance made you automatically start to salivate with the anticipation of the bitter taste? As you slice into the lemon are you aware of the smell of thousands of lemony droplets exploding into the air in front of you?

Reach for the bottle of gin and as you did for the glass feel the weight and shape of it in your hand. Take a look at the label. Have you ever studied the label in detail? Does it contain a beautiful or intricate design that you've never noticed before. Ask yourself the question, does this please me? Noticing the things that please you will do wonders for your feelings of happiness. Now watch the gin cascading over those ice cubes. How are you feeling in anticipation of that first mouthful? Do you consider it your reward at the end of the day or are you frustrated that I've made you drag out the process thus delaying your gratification? Either way, know that simply by considering your feelings you are being mindful. So be kind to yourself because you cannot get this wrong.

Now for the crowning glory the tonic. How about concentrating on the bubble and fizz as the level of tonic rises to the top of the glass making the ice cubes knock together.

Now drink. With the amount of attention you've just paid to the preparation of this drink, the first sip will be like no other you've ever tasted before so relax and enjoy.

I do hope that I've been able to convince you of some of the benefits of the regular practice of mindfulness and also shown how it can be incorporated into your day. I'd love to hear of your experiences and any tips, techniques or ideas that you've used and would like to share. You can find me on Twitter @KateTheWaring.

**Wishing you a wonderful and mindful day.**