

Mindful Leader

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How Mindfulness Can Help Manage Work Stress



By Brenda Fingold

Even in the best of times, work is messy. By its very nature, work is unpredictable, complex, and continually moving in directions that are both expected and unexpected, pleasant and unpleasant, controllable and uncontrollable. And yet, most of us still show up every day assuming that we can contain our experience and are surprised when a conflict arises, technology goes down, a valued colleague gives notice, a done deal comes undone, or a significant trial fails. “We want to feel on top of our game and in command of the details, and we want work to stay in place so that we don’t need to worry,” writes Michael Carroll in *Awake at Work* (1). “Yet work will not stay in place, despite all our efforts.” If we happen to be leaders, we add responsibility and accountability. How we meet this inherent messiness has everything to do with our effectiveness and ability to thrive and sustain well-being.

Consider the similarities between our work as leaders and the work of professional athletes. We both engage in work that is demanding, fast-paced, and competitive, filled with uncertain outcomes (2). Yet, professional athletes receive significant training and practice in both the primary skills required for their sport as well as “secondary competencies” such

as focus, resilience, self-regulation, and endurance (3). The intensity of their work is reflected in an average career span of seven years, most of which is spent practicing rather than competing, and includes regular off-season time to rest (4).

Most leaders, by contrast, often plan for a career span of 45 years or more, perform on-demand for eight or more hours a day, may struggle to get a few weeks of vacation a year, and have little or no training in these essential secondary competencies. Without proactively cultivating capabilities that allow us to engage with the reality of work in a sustainable and healthy way, we cannot perform at our best or without cost over time to ourselves, our families, and our organizations.

I experienced this firsthand for 17 years as a litigator and partner in a large law firm, where I enjoyed my work and achieved success. However, I also avoided addressing the exhaustion, worrying, and physical symptoms that became part of my everyday reality. Then, at 40, with a 3-year-old child, I was diagnosed with colon cancer and underwent major surgery and seven months of weekly chemotherapy. I finally had to acknowledge that if I valued optimal performance and work that was sustainable and satisfying, I had to find a new way to be in relation to all of it.

You likely know the feeling of being out of balance and how relentless the linearity of our work days can sometimes feel. We all experience symptoms of stress from time to time, but when “every so often” becomes “most of the time,” something is amiss. It’s been almost twenty years since my recovery and choice to leave my legal career to support individuals and organizations in reimagining how work and life could feel with some small shifts in understanding and habits. That’s where the practice of mindfulness comes in.

What Is Mindfulness?

Mindfulness is a quality of awareness that is purposeful, clear, and available to meet whatever arises moment-to-moment. It is also an evidence-based practice for navigating work and life with more ease, effectiveness, and sustained well-being. Mindfulness is cultivated by paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, with curiosity and non-judgment (5).

In addition to the well-documented benefits of mindfulness to physical and mental health and well-being, researchers have found that mindfulness supports tissue growth in the hippocampus, an area of the brain responsible for learning, memory, and resilience (6). It also supports activity in the prefrontal cortex, including planning, attention, problem-solving, decision-making and memory (7). Mindfulness practice also is correlated with a decrease in the activity of the parts of the brain associated with stress reactivity and the fight/flight/freeze response (8).

It’s Simple but Not Easy

Have you ever driven somewhere, parked your car, and realized that you had little or no memory of what appeared along the way? Or have you been reading and become so distracted that you had to reread pages? You are not alone. A Harvard University study concluded that 47 percent of our waking hours are spent thinking about something other than what is actually happening (9). This has tremendous implications for the quality of our work, as well as the quality of our lives (10).

Mindfulness can be an antidote to this state of “continuous partial attention.” (11). Improving the quality of our attention is simple but not easy. As soon as you try to pay attention in this way, you will notice that your mind has a mind of its own. We spend an inordinate amount of time in the past and future, caught up in worrying, planning, remembering, regretting, and just daydreaming. We spend much less time experiencing the present moment directly—in other words, being mindful.

You also will likely notice that we are constantly judging—ourselves, others, and our experiences. We perceive the world through filters of conditioning and habit that may lead us to act in unhealthy ways. By practicing mindfulness, we become more comfortable with what is, and we create space for conscious, life-affirming choices. If you want to receive the benefits of mindfulness, you need to practice. You are not trying to make anything happen while practicing; you are just showing up. If your mind feels busy, remember that mindfulness is not about having a quiet mind, but rather about being able to notice that you have become distracted and having the capacity to bring your mind back to your focus.

Create a clearing in the dense forest of your life. (I love this line from “Clearing” by Martha Postlewaite) There are many ways to practice mindfulness, most of which involve paying attention to something and as soon as you notice you have gotten distracted or your mind has wandered, returning your focus to the intended object of your attention. Because your breath and body are always in the present moment, no matter where your mind has drifted, they are a useful focus for mindfulness practice. Try the “body scan” exercise below. Note that this practice is about so much more than simply managing attention or connecting to your body. You are guaranteed to have thoughts, feelings, sensations, and/or urges arise, just like we do moment-to-moment during the day, and here is a chance to practice noticing and meeting all of it with more ease and equanimity.

Practicing regularly may not feel comfortable or easy, and it is best to start by picking a length of time that is feasible for you. I am often asked for the best length or time of day for practice. My answer: whatever length and at whatever time you will actually do it! In our culture of relentless “doing,” we are not used to making space for just “being.” Creating new habits takes some courage and patience, but the brain can change and create new neural connections in response to new behavior. Remember, if you went to the gym to get physically stronger and never got out of your comfort zone, would anything change?

Short moments many times a day. Another way to practice mindfulness is to begin paying attention in new ways to what you are already doing. Choose something you do every day, and use it to strengthen your ability to sustain focused attention. Examples include becoming fully present when you walk up or down stairs, take the first few bites of a meal

or sips of a beverage, turn on your computer in the morning and shut it down at the end of the day, or even brush your teeth. Each time you bring full awareness to a task, you are strengthening the muscle of mindfulness.

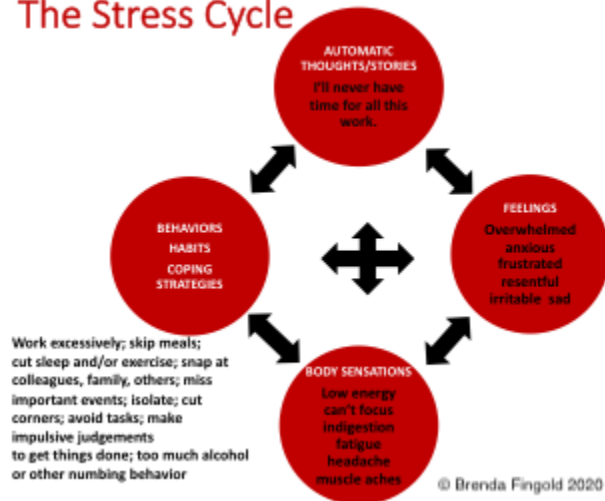
Move from reacting to responding. When faced with an unpleasant or unwanted situation, we may experience stress reactivity. Our reactions include physical sensations, thoughts, emotions, and behaviors that are, more often than not, automatic and habitual. Once triggered, we may act in ways that we regret later, as the part of the brain responsible for complex thinking and emotional self-regulation gets taken over by the part that is focused on surviving a perceived threat. The more quickly we can recognize signals of stress and imbalance, the more skillfully we can intervene in the stress cycle, make more appropriate choices, and maintain our own health and well-being.

Unfortunately, many of us live in a moderate stress reaction on a daily basis. It is important to understand that a stress reaction can be set off to some degree by anything that threatens our sense of well-being—challenges to social status, ego, or strongly held beliefs—or our desire to control things (12). Common workplace stress triggers include not feeling respected, appreciated, or listened to; being treated unfairly; and being held to unrealistic deadlines (13). Although generally not intended, these things happen all the time in every workplace!

Noticing what is arising externally or internally is a first step in choosing how to best meet it. Without awareness, we don't have a choice in how we think or behave. When someone cuts you off in traffic, do you generally pause to consider what, if anything, is the best way to respond, or do you tighten up, gesture or yell immediately and automatically? When someone says something hurtful or critical, have you ever reacted immediately in a way that you later regretted? (One great thing about mindfulness is that it allows us to bring curious and non-judgmental acceptance to our own less than desirable habits, which is the only way we can ever grow and change.)

With awareness, we have a choice. We can notice our direct experience and then pause and intervene in the unhealthy autopilot thoughts and behaviors. Over time, we become familiar with our mental habits and how the stress cycle is activated. When I first began to practice mindfulness, I noticed that I have the following recurring thought: "I'll never have enough time for all this work." This is such a deeply wired thought pattern that it appears in my mind without any relation to reality. Take a look at the diagram to see how that simple thought leads to an escalating cycle of stress. As we refine our ability to be aware of what is happening inside ourselves, we greatly increase our ability to intervene in any part of the stress cycle and make conscious and wise decisions about what is called for in the moment.

The Stress Cycle



You might find it useful to consider some of your familiar negative thoughts and look at the chaos that ensues when you are not present to notice what is happening. Try the STOP practice at the end to learn how to reduce the harmful impacts of stress.

Here are some suggestions for mindfulness practices during a regular workday. Pick just one, and try it for a week.

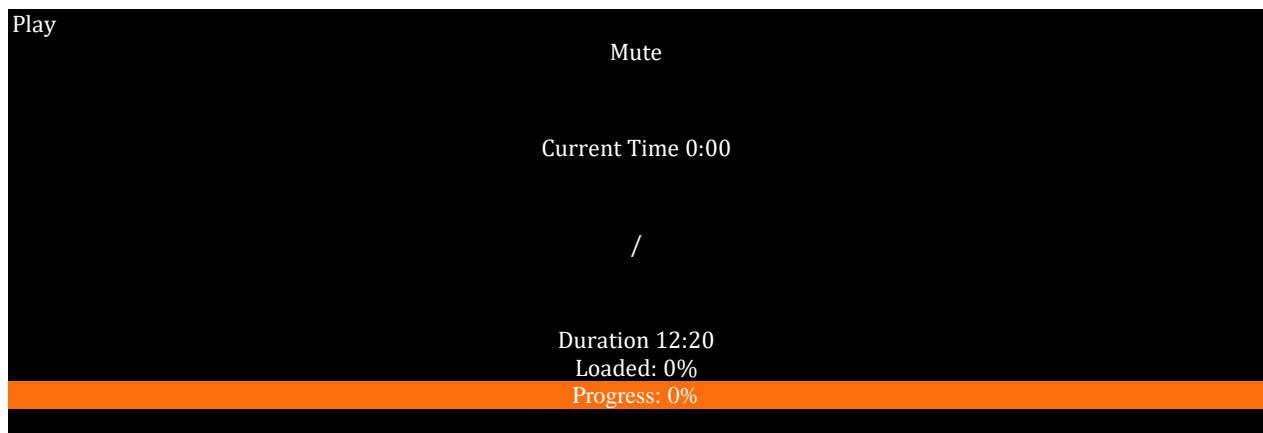
- Once you get to your desk, take a moment to “just be.” Become aware of your breath, the feel of the chair and your feet on the floor, and perhaps even name your intention for how you want to experience the day (not what you want to get done).
- Find two places in your day to integrate a mindful pause to “come to your senses” and bring curious awareness to the present moment, including the sounds, sights, sensations of breath and feeling of contact your body is making with the floor or chair. By dropping into the direct experience of the senses, distractions tend to lessen and you might see more clearly what is here and move into the next moment more strategically and calmly. This pause may be one minute to five minutes (try the 5 minute guided recording).
- As you walk around, take the opportunity to practice mindful walking. For a few steps, bring full attention to the soles of your feet as they meet the floor. This simple practice will slow down the frenetic mental and physical pace that so often takes over.
- “Center before you enter.” Before joining a meeting or answering the phone, take a few breaths; feel your feet on the floor, your body in the chair, and your breath; and let go of what you have been thinking about and what you are going to do next. In this way, you bring your whole self to the conversation.
- Practice mindful listening. When you are in a meeting or conversation, notice your wandering mind and practice gently but firmly bringing it back to your breath and what is being communicated to you. Choose to listen purposely with curiosity and non-judgment.
- Try single tasking. There is an inverse relationship between multitasking and productivity, accuracy, and efficiency. Research indicates that multitasking

increases stress and can alter brain tissue and structure (14). Also notice how often you distract and interrupt yourself, and train yourself to stay focused on your intention.

- Check in with yourself from time to time throughout the day, allowing yourself to notice and intervene early if an inner storm is brewing. A good time to do this is during transitions from one task to another.

The practice of mindfulness allows us to more skillfully respond to the inherent stressors and complexities of work and life—and to relate to whatever arises in our lives moment to moment in new and more satisfying ways.

Practices



Body Scan

In a body scan practice, you methodically bring attention to the body, moving from the feet to the head or the head to the feet. You may notice a wide range of physical feelings: pressure, lightness, tingles, pulsation, itches, aches, discomfort, warmth, coolness, and more. You may not notice anything. The intention is not to elicit relaxation but to cultivate awareness—to simply notice what is there to be noticed. You might become aware of thoughts or emotions as well as you move through the scan. There is no need to analyze or change anything—just feel and acknowledge whatever is present with friendly interest.

The more regularly you practice the body scan, the easier and more natural it will be to check in with yourself with precise and open attention during the day. When you notice tension in specific regions, bring non-judgmental awareness to the sensation, and experience how the sensation may change.



Duration 4:17

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The STOP Practice

As soon as you notice that you are having a reaction to something or someone:

Stop. Intentionally take a pause from current thoughts and activities.

Take a breath. Or two or three, which is generally all it takes to connect with the present moment.

Observe. What is happening with you right now? What sensations can you feel? What emotions are present? What thoughts are going through your mind? What urges and behaviors are here?

Proceed. The pause allows you to notice conditioned and automatic reactivity and to become more fully aware of the direct experience of the moment. If you can step out of autopilot, you have a choice about how you want to relate to the situation. Notice whether by adding space for awareness, your experience is different from in the past, and if you feel more able to respond skillfully rather than react in habitual knee-jerk ways.

***Brenda Fingold** has been leading workplace mindfulness programs for almost two decades. She is a Certified Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction Teacher and has directed workplace and leadership education programs at the mindfulness centers at both Brown University School of Public Health and the University of Massachusetts Medical School. Previously, she spent 17 years at a large Boston law firm as a litigator and partner responsible for training and professional development.*

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Footnotes:

1. Michael Carroll, *Awake at Work* (Shambala 2004).
2. Jim Loehr & Tony Schwartz, *The Making of a Corporate Athlete*, Harvard Bus. R. (Jan. 2001), <https://hbr.org/2001/01/the-making-of-a-corporate-athlete>.
3. *Id.*
4. *Id.*
5. Mindful, *Jon Kabat-Zinn: Defining Mindfulness* (Jan. 11, 2017), <https://www.mindful.org/jon-kabat-zinn-defining-mindfulness/>.
6. See, e.g., Britta K. Hölzel et al., *Mindfulness Practices Leads to Increases in Regional Brain Gray Matter Density*, 191 *Psychiatry Res.* 36 (2011).

7. *Id.*; Tom Ireland, *What Does Mindfulness Meditation Do to Your Brain?*, *Sci. Am.* (June 12, 2014), <https://blogs.scientific-american.com/guest-blog/what-does-mindfulness-meditation-do-to-your-brain/>.

8. *See, e.g.*, Britta K. Hölzel et al., *Stress Reduction Correlates With Structural Changes in the Amygdala*, 5 *Soc. Cognitive & Affective Neuroscience* 11 (2010).
9. Matthew A. Killingsworth & Daniel T. Gilbert, *A Wandering Mind Is an Unhappy Mind*, 330 *Sci.* 932 (2010).
10. Brenda Fingold, *Beyond Knowledge and Good Intentions: The Role of Mindfulness in Effective and Ethical Lawyering*, *Law Journal Newsletters* (June 2017), <https://tinyurl.com/yd8wyyqrs>.
11. *See* Tony Schwartz, *Take Back Your Attention*, *Harvard Bus. R.* (Feb. 9, 2011), <https://hbr.org/2011/02/take-back-your-attention.html>.
12. Jon Kabat-Zinn, *Full Catastrophe Living: Using the Wisdom of Your Body and Mind to Face Stress, Pain, and Illness* (Bantam 2013).
13. Daniel Goleman, *The Brain and Emotional Intelligence: New Insights* (2011).
14. *See, e.g.*, Kep Kee Loh & Ryota Kanai, *Higher Media Multi-Tasking Activity Is Associated With Smaller Gray-Matter Density in the Anterior Cingulate Cortex*, *PLoS One* (Sept. 24, 2014).