



# Paper

## Mindfulness

**What it is, the benefits, and how it can be applied  
in the workplace**

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Mindfulness has been around for more than 2,500 years, with roots in Buddhist teachings amongst others, although there is a tradition of contemplation in all the major religions. However, recent years have seen mindfulness practices spread to many secular contexts, including the workplace.

A rapidly growing number of employers, such as the US Marines, the NHS, Google, General Mills and Transport for London, are rolling out mindfulness training for employees, and reporting benefits including increases in emotional intelligence and reduced stress-related absenteeism. This number is set to grow further following the publication in January 2015 of the UK Mindfulness All-Party Parliamentary Group interim report '[Mindful Nation UK](#)'.

The report recommended that public sector employers such as the NHS and the Civil Service pioneer good practice and set up mindfulness pilot projects to be evaluated as part of their responsibility to combat stress. Other recommendations included wider access to Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy, currently recommended by the National Institute of Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE) as the preferred treatment for recurrent depression, and pilot projects in healthcare, education and the criminal justice system. So what's all the fuss about?

This briefing paper explores what mindfulness is, potential benefits for organisations and their employees, and offers pointers for creating a more mindful workplace.

## What is mindfulness?

### Mindfulness is:

- A way of training our minds to pay attention in the present moment in a particular way - with curiosity, openness, non-judgment and self-kindness/self-compassion.
- A philosophy or set of beliefs, including the afore-mentioned qualities and aspirations of being non-judgmental and curious.
- An alternative mind mode or mind state which we might call 'being mode' (Williams and Penman, 2011)
- A way of being, which leads to a different way of doing.

### When we are mindful, we are:

- More connected to the present moment, rather than living in the past or the future.
- More aware of what's going on in ourselves, with others and in the world around us.

- More resilient, open and flexible in our approach to life.
- Better able to manage our thoughts and emotions, drawing on scientifically-proven techniques to manage stress and anxiety, helping us choose how we respond.
- Better able to focus, to choose what we focus on, and also better able to see the bigger picture.
- Less judgmental and less self-critical.

## Experiential

To understand what mindfulness is, it helps to actually experience it. You may like to try the following:

### Mindfulness exercise

Following your breath for three minutes:

(Read these instructions through first, then try the practice)

Get comfortable in your chair, with your shoulders relaxed, your feet flat on the floor, legs uncrossed, and hands resting in your lap. Close your eyes or just relax your gaze, gazing downwards. Set a timer for three minutes once you're ready to begin or just 'guesstimate'.

Start by noticing where your body makes contact with the chair and the floor- all the different points of contact. Then shift your attention to your breath. Not trying to force or change the breath in any way, just breathing naturally. Not thinking about the breath, but being with the breath and noticing how your body feels as you breathe in, and breathe out. Perhaps there is a change in temperature in your nostrils depending on whether you're breathing in or breathing out. Perhaps you notice your abdomen rising and falling with each in- and out- breath. Just noticing. Almost as if you're surfing on the rise, and fall, of the breath. And if your mind wanders off- to thinking, to planning, to remembering, to worrying- whatever it is, accepting that has happened, it's what minds do, and gently coming back to the breath. And when your three minutes are up, having a sense of your whole body once more, again noticing where your body makes contact with the chair and the floor, and then widening your attention to the rest of the room, the office or wherever you are. Coming back gently, and opening your eyes, if they were closed.

Then taking a few moments to reflect on how this was for you. Did it feel like three minutes or longer or shorter? Did you find your breathing changed at all, perhaps getting less shallow? What about your stress levels? Did you find your mind wandered off frequently? Did you notice any strong reactions or responses, whatever they might be? Boredom? Frustration? Peace?

You may have experienced some benefit already just from engaging in the brief mindfulness practice outlined above. Now let's look at some of the reported benefits.

## Benefits

*“The main business case for meditation is that if you’re fully present on the job, you will be more effective as a leader, you will make better decisions and you will work better with other people”*

William George, a board member of Goldman Sachs and a former chief executive of the healthcare giant Medtronic (Gelles, 2012)

The reported benefits of practicing mindfulness with implications for organisations include:

- Improved wellbeing, resilience levels and ability to manage stress (e.g. Chiesa and Serretti, 2009), leading to less absenteeism, and greater ability to perform effectively under pressure and in VUCA (volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous) conditions.
- Greater productivity.
- Improved cognitive functioning including greater cognitive flexibility (Greenberg et al, 2012); faster, more rational decision-making (e.g. Kirk et al, 2011); and heightened creativity and improved insight problem-solving and creativity (Ostafin and Kassman, 2012; Friedman and Forster, 2001).
- Heightened emotional intelligence (e.g. Boyatzis and McKee, 2005); improved self-awareness and awareness of others (e.g. Creswell, et al, 2007); and greater self-management and management of relationships with others, leading to better relationships and less conflict in the workplace.
- More ethical and sustainable behaviour (e.g. Amel, Manning, and Scott, 2009); Improvements in moral reasoning and ethical decision making (Shapiro, Jazaieri and Goldin, 2012); and being more in touch with one’s values (e.g. Ericson, Kjøenstad, and Barstad, 2014).

## Application within organisations: creating a more mindful workplace

Given the burgeoning evidence base showing how mindfulness helps people manage stress, it’s unsurprising that organisations whose employees face highly stressful working conditions are turning to mindfulness, with positive results, as the examples below indicate.

## Tackling stress and improving wellbeing

### On track to resilience

In Transport for London (TfL), a local government body responsible for most aspects of the transport system in Greater London in England, mental health is a top health issue. TfL employees face a high number of stressors, including lone working, dealing with customers, shift work, and suicides and 'near misses' on the underground. TfL's stress reduction programme includes teaching mindfulness techniques. Among participants in the programme, days off sick due to stress, depression and anxiety fell by more than 70 per cent in the three years following the programme's introduction (Hall, 2013). Some 84 per cent of participants 'are relating to others better.'

### Mindful Marines

Military service is inherently stressful, and of course, getting it 'wrong' can be a matter of life or death. In this context, mindfulness training has emerged as a valuable intervention to promote psychological resilience. The pre-deployment period is known to be a highly stressful time, usually associated with increases reported in negative mood, depression, and anxiety. A group of US Marine reservists trained in mindfulness techniques who practiced mindfulness meditation eight weeks before deployment to Iraq, showed increases in working memory capacity, emotional intelligence, positive moods, and decreases in perceived stress (Stanley et al, 2011).

### Stressed social workers

Social workers experience high levels of work-related stress and are prone to early burnout. To address this, East Sussex County Council offers its social workers mindfulness training through the social enterprise [growmindfulness.org](http://growmindfulness.org), becoming one of the first county councils to do so, in 2013.

Since introducing its nine-week mindfulness training programme, absenteeism due to stress has fallen from 24 per cent in quarter two of 2013 to 18 per cent for the same period in 2014, they dropped to 18 per cent. The course is followed by monthly support to help embed daily practices in participants. The University of Bedfordshire is evaluating the impact of the mindfulness programme.

## Laying foundations for better relationships and ability to manage stress

Poplar Harca, a housing and regeneration community association in the south-east of Tower Hamlets in London, introduced mindfulness training for its staff in 2013.

Housing Services director, Andrea Baker, commissioned Rising Minds to create a bespoke programme. Rising Minds is a social enterprise delivering a mix of professional coaching, mindfulness training and conflict management for low-income people and front-line staff

in stressful roles. It began by conducting in-depth interviews with four staff members in different roles about the rhythm of their day, the sources of stress they experience and the opportunities for embedding mindfulness practices and techniques into daily work life. Staff were then invited to attend a mindfulness taster session, giving employees a 'taste' of mindfulness and helping Rising Minds identify what staff wanted to gain from it.

The information gathered in the preparatory stage was then used to tailor the mindfulness promotional and training materials (course hand-outs and CDs). The key objective was to take account of the nature of the working realities and to offer simple but powerful techniques that participants could take away and put into practice in their daily working lives to improve their ability to handle stress, think more clearly, and communicate more effectively.

Twenty four members of staff signed up to do the course, which consisted of six 90-minute sessions spread over a three-month period.

Participants filled out the standardised World Health Organisation (WHO) Wellbeing questionnaire at the beginning and end of the course. Of the 19 who stayed on the course the average increase on the Wellbeing Index was 32 per cent. Participants gave the course high ratings and a majority would recommend it for colleagues and residents. The majority of participants reported noticeable improvements in the key focus areas of ability to deal with stress (79 per cent); communication and relationships (79 per cent), workload and working practices (63 per cent), and work-life balance (53 per cent).

## How to do it

There are many ways you can introduce mindfulness into your organisation. Below are some ideas to help you do this.

### Mindfulness training and coaching

One common way to develop a more mindful workforce is to deliver mindfulness training to employees.

This can take various forms and can stand alone or be woven into other programmes. Many organisations start off with offering a one-off mindfulness 'taster' session (or a series of taster sessions in large organisations) open to all employees. These introductory sessions, typically delivered over 45 minutes to an hour and a half, over lunch or after work, will give employees an idea of what mindfulness is and a chance to try out some mindfulness practice.

Depending on employee interest and training and development budget, the next step is to deliver a longer mindfulness programme. Although the standard Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction programme, which has evolved from the first one offered by Jon Kabat-Zinn, is delivered over eight weeks, some organisations prefer to offer a shorter and

hence more 'work-friendly' variation- of four to six weeks, say. This typically involves weekly sessions of between 1.5 to 2.5 hours (in addition to regular home practice for participants). It is important to ensure that those delivering the mindfulness training are trained mindfulness teachers, such as through the Centre for Mindfulness Research and Practice at Bangor University, and that they practice what they preach- having a daily mindfulness practice, for example.

'Packaging' mindfulness training appropriately can make all the difference to success. Programmes might specifically seek to help develop more resonant leaders (Boyatzis & McKee, 2005); to help employees manage stress or generally to improve wellbeing, or to help them become more emotionally intelligent. When Google first offered mindfulness training as a means to reduce stress, it did not appeal to employees as stress is often seen as a badge of honour. Since re-packaging as a way to boost emotional intelligence, it has become a huge success (Tan, 2012).

A mindfulness component can be included within other programmes such as leadership development initiatives.

Mindfulness training can be supported by one-to-one coaching to help embed mindfulness habits, and help employees to identify any blocks to being mindful. Another growing area is mindful coaching. Organisations including News UK, Kent County Council and the BBC are training their internal coaches in mindfulness techniques to help them be more present, intuitive and creative with employee clients, and to be able to share basic mindfulness practices in coaching sessions or as 'homework'.

### **Ten steps to create a more mindful workplace**

Offer a mindfulness 'taster' session for all staff at lunchtime or after work.

Roll out a mindfulness training programme for employees eg over a four to eight week period.

'Package' mindfulness training appropriately.

Include a mindfulness component within leadership programmes as a way to develop more resonant employees, and other L&D interventions.

Evaluate the impact of mindfulness training on self-reported perceived stress levels; staff absenteeism due to stress and so on.

Train internal coaches in mindfulness techniques so they can support internal clients to be more mindful and/or ensure at least some of the external coaches on your preferred supplier list are able to work with mindfulness.

Weave in mini mindfulness practices (they don't have to be labeled as such) within daily working life- for yourself; at the start of meetings, in internal conferences.

Supply mindfulness apps to staff eg Headspace.

Foster a workplace where reflection and time out are recognised as valuable.

Offer spaces within the workplace where staff can go and meditate/take time out. In the US, General Mills, producers of Cheerios cereal and Häagen-Dazs ice cream, has a meditation room in every building in its campus just outside Minneapolis, Minnesota, and team leaders and executives are often seen meditating and practising yoga together (Gelles, 2012).

As an increasing number of employers set out to bring mindfulness into the workplace, we're likely to see more and more creative ways of doing so, and a growing evidence base highlighting what works, and potentially what doesn't work so well.



# Resources

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## Websites

Be Mindful (Mental Health Foundation) campaign to raise awareness of mindfulness meditation. Includes information on public mindfulness programmes

<http://bemindful.co.uk/>

## Suppliers and providers

Centre for Mindfulness Research and Practice: training programmes for mindfulness teachers: <http://www.bangor.ac.uk/mindfulness/>

Headspace (mindfulness app): <https://www.headspace.com/>

Liz Hall Coaching- Mindful one-to-one Coaching, Training for Coaches in Mindful Coaching, and Mindfulness Training Programmes for Staff:

<http://www.lizhallcoaching.com/>

Rising Minds – Mindful Coaching and Mindfulness Training Programmes for Staff:

<http://risingminds.org.uk/>

## Books

Chaskalson, M (2011) *The mindful workplace: developing resilient individuals and resonant organizations with MBSR*, John Wiley & Sons

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Liz Hall, IES Associate, is a trained mindfulness teacher, speaker, Senior Practitioner coach and writer.

If you are thinking about how the principles of mindfulness could be applied and bring improvements to your organisation, or you would benefit from the support of a Mindfulness Coach please get in touch and we will connect you with Liz.

Call Emma Knight on 01273 763 406 or email [emma.knight@employment-studies.co.uk](mailto:emma.knight@employment-studies.co.uk)

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