

# Reduce Your **stress**

with

# Mindfulness



What is Mindfulness?

Your Brain on Stress

Mindfulness Practices

*When you change the way you look at things the things you look at change.*

## **What is Mindfulness?**

Mindfulness, simply put, is training the mind. It is not a technique, it is the skill of being fully present and fully aware. It's just being right here, right now, without trying to change the present moment, just being aware of it.

When we get stressed the mind is controlling us, while attempting to gain control of things around us. As we become mindful we shift our attention to not trying to change but simply being aware of what is.

The practice comes from a very old tradition, a 2500-year-old meditation used by the original, historical Buddha, not the religion of Buddhism. In essence it is tapping into the science of how the mind works and training the mind. This is completely secular and we can apply it to our work.

## Mindfulness Attention Skills

1. Concentration: the ability to concentrate on whatever you wish for as long as you want. When you're multi-tasking this is compromised.
2. Clarity: having clarity of thought, good judgement, putting together the pieces of what is really going on, not clouded by your judgement.
3. Equanimity: the ability to go with the flow. Accept that you cannot change and choose actions without angst or emotion that alters judgement.

Mindfulness helps us to minimize stress, not just manage it. It works because it decreases blood pressure and regulates your heart rate. When you are concentrating you automatically feel calmer. Overtime mindfulness has a positive impact on the brain. It enhances our lives because it rewires the brain.

## Your Brain on Stress

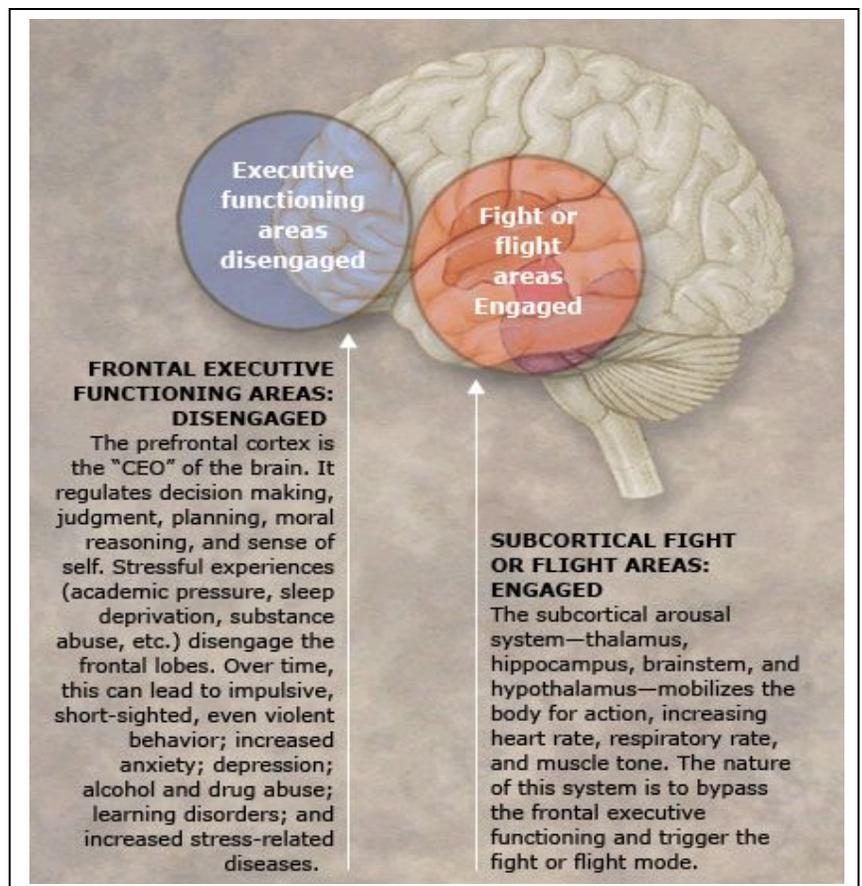
Stress has become an epidemic. It's so widespread, we often don't even notice it. It's just a part of everyday life. Yet it can sap our energy, vitality and zest for life if we're not careful.

For career success it is important that you manage your responsibilities effectively, respond to co-workers respectfully, and maintain your integrity and sanity.

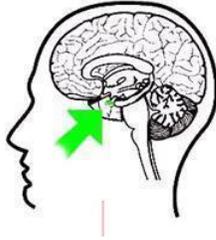
If you are feeling anxious and overwhelmed by time pressures, endless to-do lists and negative internal chatter, understanding the effects of stress can help you to counteract it.

Have you noticed when you are feeling stressed that your behavior changes? You could become impatient, judgmental, moody or inconsiderate. You might even become short-tempered, irritable and blame others.

If we look at how the brain functions when its stressed we find there is a direct connection between outward behaviors, such as being impatient, impulsive and judgmental, and internal feelings of overwhelm from having too much on your plate, that you are falling behind or missing deadlines



Brain science tells us we are having an "amygdala hijack," a phrase coined by Daniel Goleman an expert on Emotional Intelligence. The rational brain gets hijacked by the amygdala, a more primitive part of the brain that triggers a rapid response to a threatening environment.



When the amygdala kicks in, stress hormones cause the brain to bypass the normal neural pathways of higher functioning. Instead, we're thrown into a sequence of physiological reactions based on the basic freeze, fight or flight instincts. We feel tense, overwhelmed and perhaps even a bit fuzzy, as if we've lost 20-30 IQ points. Not surprising, considering during amygdala hijack, we literally lose our rational mind for a bit.

So what can you do? Here are some strategies:

1. Remind yourself of how you would prefer to respond be regardless of the situation and focus on your goal of being calm and confident.
2. Take care of yourself: make sure you eat properly and get enough sleep. Do the things that energize you like exercise and positive self-talk.
3. Remember to HALT. Check-in: are you feeling hungry, angry, lonely or tired?
4. Identify common triggers which set off ineffective behaviors: being overwhelmed with too much to do, too much change, internal or interpersonal conflict, unmet expectations, etc.
5. Determine strategies to interrupt the amygdala hijack process.
6. Use Mindfulness practices like taking a deep breath, counting to 10, shifting your perspective or 'flipping' to a positive thought to help break away from the stressed feeling.

## Mindfulness Practices

Mindfulness is an incredibly powerful tool for dealing with and handling workplace stress. Mindfulness can help reduce your body's cortisol levels, which quickly lowers stress on a neurochemical level. It can also help you eliminate internal resistance, so you can meet life's problems as exciting challenges rather than as taxing crises. Here's a Mindfulness Routine to reduce your work day stress.

1. Start your work day with Centering Yourself
  - Take 5 to 10 minutes to center yourself: bring your awareness into the present moment. Ground yourself in non-attachment. Experience the present moment as it is.
  - Begin by sitting down and setting the intention to be mindful. Remind yourself why you're doing this – in this case, to prepare yourself for the day, or to reduce stress.

- Then, just watch your breath. Don't avoid any sensation that comes up and don't try to create any particular experience. Just watch your experience, exactly as it is. Be relaxed, yet alert at the same time. As your awareness deepens, your stress will naturally dissipate. Your capacity to handle stress for the rest of the day increases.
  - Doing this for just 5 to 10 minutes before your work day can work miracles for your stress levels.
2. Two Minutes, Twice a Day
- Pause twice in your day for mindfulness. Even just two minutes can transform your whole day.
  - Anytime you find yourself feeling stressed, take a minute to be mindful.
  - One great habit is to spend 2 minutes meditating right after taking your lunch break.
3. Let Go at the End of the Day
- It's too easy to take stress from the workday home with you. Just a 5 to 10-minute break for mindful breathing at the end of the day can be a great way to cleanly separate your work related stress from the rest of your life.
  - Sit down with the intention of ending your work day. Watch your breathing and notice all the sensations that arise. Breathe in and out while watching your breath, again doing nothing but being aware.
  - Taking the time to slow down, pause and be mindful sends a clear signal to your brain that you're shifting gears. You move from a hectic "work time" pace to a much more leisurely "personal time" pace.

If you want less stress in your work, try adding these three habits to your daily routine. In total, they take less than 30 minutes. They can easily be the most emotionally impactful 30 minutes of your life.

### **Mindfulness Triggers**

Most likely you are familiar with triggers that cause negative reactions when a situation reminds you of a bad experience. This same mechanism can be utilized to create a beneficial trigger. Think of something that will remind you to be in this moment for 10 – 20 seconds. Examples could be sitting a red light, the phone ringing, or when you arrive at a meeting.

Stand up, and take a breath for a micro meditation. Breathe, be aware of your body, be right here, right now. This calms the system.

Become aware of being here, be aware of breathing in and out, if your mind wanders simply come back, allow that breath to go deeper, put your hand on your belly. Notice: get the breath down into belly. It only takes a few breaths.

This simple meditation activates the parasympathetic nervous system, and has a physiological calming effect on the body, decreasing stress and supporting relaxation. You can do this whenever you find yourself stressed: have a deadline, you've worked for 12 hours and need to do more, or having a personal crisis.

## **Mindfulness Meditation**

An article about the physical and emotional benefits of meditation from The Mayo Clinic includes Mindfulness as a form of meditation.

This type of meditation is based on being mindful, or having an increased awareness and acceptance of living in the present moment.

In mindfulness meditation, you broaden your conscious awareness. You focus on what you experience during meditation, such as the flow of your breath. You can observe your thoughts and emotions, but let them pass without judgment.

Other meditation practices suggested include: Guided imagery or visualization, Mantra meditations, Qi Gong, Tai Chi, Transcendental Meditation and Yoga.

Common elements in meditation practices are: focused attention, breathing, relaxed breathing, being in a quiet setting and sitting in a comfortable position.

Anyone can practice meditation. It's simple and inexpensive, and it doesn't require any special equipment.

## **References**

Harvard Business Review: Interview with Maria Gonzalez, Author of "Mindful Leadership" and developer of the Mindful Leadership app.

Search Inside Yourself Leadership Institute, Article: "Reduce Your Stress With Mindfulness."

The Mayo Clinic Patient Care and Health Info, Article: "Meditation – A simple, fast way to reduce stress."