

# Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction for the Changing Work Environment

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## ABSTRACT

Businesses and organizations are being transformed by globalization, new technology, knowledge and information growth, and diversity. Uncertainty and instability are the norm in today's workforce leading to an increase in stress which has been shown to be detrimental to work productivity, interpersonal relationships, and both physical and mental health. Although stress is a part of life, it must be appropriately managed. This paper describes how management can help to alleviate the problem by instituting a program of mindfulness training to their wellness programs. Mindfulness is paying attention, in the present moment, with full awareness, and without judgment. Based upon recent assessment studies (Baer, et al., 2006) five specific factors of mindfulness are also reviewed. In addition, three critical beliefs are introduced which, if practiced, will minimize one's suffering. These include the acceptance that life is not fair, dealing with the truth in any situation, and one's ability to choose one's attitude. Mindfulness techniques, including awareness of the present moment and breathing are also described.

Keywords: Mindfulness, Stress, Attitude, Work, Acceptance, Wellness

## INTRODUCTION

Uncertainty and instability are the norm in today's work environment. This unpredictability leads to an increased level of discomfort and stress for employees and managers as they try to accomplish their day-to-day objectives and achieve their professional goals.

Businesses and organizations are being transformed by globalization, new technology, knowledge and information growth, and diversity. There is no longer guaranteed employment with a stable salary and pension correlated with seniority. The nine to five workdays are being replaced with telecommuting and flex schedules. These issues in conjunction with downsizing, reengineering, dejobbing and outsourcing contribute to occupational and personal stress, as change is very difficult for most people. However, it is the compounding effect of these factors that create undue levels of stress that negatively impact people, affecting all aspects of their lives.

Many organizations have wellness programs providing workshops and information for drug/alcohol problems, smoking cessation, weight loss, etc. However, more emphasis must be placed on how the mind and our thoughts contribute to our discomfort and stress. "Mindfulness is the awareness that emerges through paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally to things as they are" (Williams, et al., 2007, p. 47). It can be used to help alleviate stress, improve work satisfaction, productivity, and the quality of one's life.

By using well established principles and techniques of mindfulness, based upon Eastern philosophy and Western psychology, employees and managers can interrupt their self-defeating and irrational thoughts and become more focused on their job responsibilities. They will become better able to cope and manage the bombardment of information, accept change in a more realistic and healthy manner, and realize greater fulfillment in both their professional and personal lives.

## STRESS

Hans Selye, a pioneer in stress research, first described the physiological syndrome of stress in 1936. He defined stress as "the nonspecific response of the body to any demand made upon it" (Selye, 1974, p. 151). The body's reaction to a stressor became known as the "general adaptation syndrome" (G.A.S.) or the "biological stress syndrome." Dr. Selye described the syndrome as progressing through three stages. 1. The alarm reaction (the first response to a new situation, the stressor), 2. the stage of resistance (the continued exposure to the stressor and learning to cope), and 3. the stage of exhaustion (the depletion of energy reserves which leads to fatigue and eventually death). Even though the stressors may be different, they all elicit the same biological stress response. It does not matter whether the situation is pleasant or unpleasant. The body must adapt to change in order to maintain its homeostasis. Pleasurable events may be thought of as "stress" while unpleasurable events may be thought of as "distress" (Selye, 1974).

Stress is not something to be avoided as it is a part of life and human existence. "Complete freedom from stress is death" (Selye, 1974, p. 20). Stress allows us to be at our best and the body needs to react appropriately when experiencing a physical threat in order to survive. An acute experience of a stressful situation is not harmful. It is the chronic or long term stress response that can be dangerous to one's health (Beatty, 2001). Unfortunately, many people have learned to accept chronic stress and have attempted to cope with it to the best of their abilities. They have resigned themselves to the fact that overwhelming stress is just an undesirable part of life. It is the price one pays for living in this world.

The body automatically reacts to stress. This process can be activated by one's perception of a "real" or "imaginary" stressor. The body's reaction to a stressor is part of our survival mechanism. Under stress, the adrenocorticotropic hormone (ACTH) is released into circulation by the anterior pituitary gland in the brain. ACTH reaches the adrenal cortex on the kidneys where it stimulates endocrine cells to secrete the steroid hormone cortisol. Cortisol is beneficial to

the body when real danger is present, however, under prolonged stress, the results can be devastating to one's physical and mental health. One of the best-known correlations between prolonged stress and health is that found with certain cardiovascular diseases including both high blood pressure and an increase in heart rate. Subsequently, these factors increase the probability of a heart attack or stroke. In addition, with an increase in the body's cortisol level, the immune system is suppressed which adds to chronic illness and in many cases depression (Beatty, 2001).

The stress level in the United States is out of control. In September 2007, the American Psychological Association (APA Practice, 2007) conducted an online survey assessing the stress levels among 1,848 adults. The respondents' age, sex, race/ethnicity, education, region, and household income were weighted where necessary to correlate with the actual proportions in the population. The results had a sampling error of +/- 2 percentage points and are as follows:

- Seventy-nine percent of people agreed that "Stress is a fact of life". One-third of the people reported experiencing extreme levels of stress, and nearly 17% reported that they experienced their highest level of stress 15 or more days per month. In addition, 48% of Americans believed that their stress had increased over the past five years and nearly half reported that stress had a negative impact on their emotional well-being (49 percent) and physical health (46 percent).
- Seventy-seven percent experienced physical symptoms during the last month as a result of stress. These included:
  - Fatigue (51%)
  - Headache (44%)
  - Upset stomach (34%)
  - Muscle tension (30%)
  - Change in appetite (23%)
  - Teeth grinding (17%)
  - Change in sex drive (15%)
  - Feeling dizzy (13%)
- Seventy-three percent experienced psychological symptoms during the last month as a result of stress. These included:
  - Irritability or anger (50%)
  - Feeling nervous (45%)
  - Lack of energy (4%)
  - Feeling tearful (36%)
- Forty-eight percent of adults did lie awake at night during the past month because of stress and on average they reported losing 21 hours of sleep per month.
- Forty-three percent overate or ate unhealthy foods and 36% had skipped a meal because of stress during the last month

## WORK STRESS

Man must work. I think we have to begin by clearly realizing that work is a biological necessity. Just as our muscles become flabby and degenerate if not used, so our brain slips into chaos and confusion unless we constantly use it for some work that seems worthwhile to us (Selye, 1974, p. 81).

The United States has evolved from an agrarian society through the industrial revolution and in the 1970's, into the age of information where "knowledge workers" are now in demand (Robbins, 2000). Executives, managers, and employees in today's workforce are becoming overwhelmed with the rapid changes in technology. Individuals believe that they need to be, or are expected to be, in contact with others 24 hours each day. Therefore, there is a proliferation of

cell phones (many individuals have two), BlackBerrys, iPods, MP3 players, iPhones, and of course, e-mail and texting. The work force is always “plugged in.” The results of the APA survey (2007) indicated that 74% of the respondents reported that work contributed to their level of stress followed by concerns about money (73%). The perception of work stress was an increase of 15% over the results of a similar survey completed in 2006. In addition, half of the participants reported that stress had a negative impact on both their personal and professional lives. Approximately one-third experienced stress as a result of managing work and family responsibilities and 35% indicated that their work interfered with their family or personal time. Work demands also interfered with family responsibilities several times each month according to 15% of the respondents. Workplace stress in the United States also affects career decisions and results in lost productivity. In addition:

- Fifty-two percent of the participants reported that they have considered or made a decision about their career such as looking for a new job, declining a promotion or leaving a job based on workplace stress.
- Fifty-five percent indicated that they were less productive at work as a result of stress.
- Forty percent reported that they did not use all their allotted vacation time.
- The leading causes of work stress were:
  - Low salaries (44%)
  - Heavy work load (41%)
  - Lack of opportunities (40%)
  - Uncertain job expectations (40%)
  - Long hours (39%) (American Psychological Association, 2007)

Ideally, to minimize stress in life, the principle aim is not to avoid work, but to find the kind of occupation which, for each individual, is play. “One should select an environment which is in line with one’s innate preferences; find an activity which you like and respect” (Selye, 1974, p. 82-83). When this is not possible, an extreme example of work stress and its effect on families has been described in the November, 2007 issue of Fortune Magazine where Dominic Orr, CEO of Alteon WevSystems (a Silicon Valley data-networking company) shared his story.

On a spring morning in 1998 Dominic Orr woke up as he did every day, in the dark. While his children slept, he showered, checked his phone and e-mail messages, and drove from his Saratoga, CA home to a breakfast meeting nearby. When he emerged an hour or so later, he stopped cold. In the early-morning light, he saw his dark-green Infinite J30 covered with deep dents. The taillights were smashed, and the body was riddled with chips and scratches. Orr could hardly believe his eyes. When had this happened? Who could possibly have done it? His stress level was already higher than it had ever been. As the CEO of Alteon WevSystems, he spent months on the road meeting with business partners and wooing clients. The few hours he had at home were spent answering e-mails, phoning potential hires, or reviewing marketing plans. Eighteen and 20-hour days had often been the norm when he worked at Hewlett-Packard, but now his responsibilities were far greater. He couldn’t afford to screw anything up.

His home life had become equally stressful; lately the only thing his family did together was argue. The night before, Orr had made a rare appearance for family dinner but was irritated to find his 15-year-old son, Alvin, chatting on the phone, no doubt racking up another \$200 long-distance bill. Orr shouted at his son for keeping him, his wife, Teresa, and their 1-year-old daughter, Adria, waiting to eat, and threatened to take away Alvin’s computer.

Now, standing in front of his wrecked car, on the phone with Teresa, it dawned on him that the damage hadn't occurred while he was at breakfast, it had happened the night before, and he had been so wrapped up in work that he simply hadn't noticed till the sun came out. Later that day Alvin confessed to having attacked the car in a fit of rage. "I tried to destroy something that mattered to him," Alvin recalled recently (Mehta, 2007, p. 66).

The reduction of stress can be approached by either altering the "stressor" (external focus) or by altering one's perception of the stressful situation (internal focus). Traditionally, management has only tended to concentrate on external methods to lessen stress such as time-management training, redesigning of jobs, increased employee involvement, social support networks, and improved organizational communication in order to produce more satisfied and productive employees (Robbins, 2000). Today's new organizations are more cognizant of their employee's needs and are making strides to be more aware of the personality characteristics and dynamics of work interactions. Rather than having a number of "bosses" and "supervisors" that give only directions and orders and monitor production goals, organizations are seeing the value of "working teams" (Lencioni, 2005), and mentoring and coaching (Blanchard, 1998). In addition, executives understand that for employees to be more productive and satisfied, they need to feel that their work is worthwhile, that they are in control of achieving the goal, and they receive ongoing recognition for good work (Collins, 2001). Organizations are also providing more support and assistance for employees that are having life difficulties that may be affecting their physical and/or mental health, and interpersonal relationships. Many companies have a variety of wellness programs and employee assistance programs. However, these programs also emphasize the external causes of stress as they generally focus on the employee's behavior. Counseling or information usually centers on behavior problems such as smoking cessation, weight loss, substance abuse, and physical fitness. Some companies have workout facilities at work and others give some reimbursement for membership in local gyms. These changes are all beneficial; however, they do not always produce the intended result. Organizations must also give attention to the internal factors that cause stress; the mind itself and individual perceptions of the world. The employee's perception of the work environment is usually not considered. Therefore, mindfulness training may allow for reductions in stress even when changes in the organizational environment are impossible or not practical (Hayes, et al, 2006).

## **MINDFULNESS**

Mindfulness is a special way of being in this world as "Life is found only in the present moment" (Hanh, 1992). Mindfulness teaches us to be alive and present no matter the circumstances. "Without it we cannot see the world clearly and simply stay lost in the wanderings of our minds" (Goldstein, 2007, p. 76). Mindfulness is usually associated with meditation due to its long history in Eastern contemplative traditions, especially Buddhism. However, one does not need to meditate to successfully practice mindfulness in order to enhance one's quality of life. All beings can benefit. Each person has the skill to transform themselves from a "human doing" into a true "human being."

Mindfulness can be thought of as moment-to-moment, non-judgmental awareness, cultivated by paying attention in a specific way, that is, in the present moment, and as non-reactively, as non-judgmentally, and as openheartedly as possible (Kabat-Zinn, 2005, p. 108).

Over the years, mindfulness has been well accepted and successfully incorporated into many therapeutic interventions in both the medical and psychological fields. These include

mindfulness based stress reduction (MBSR; Kabat-Zinn, 1990, 2005), mindfulness based cognitive therapy (MBCT; Segal, et al, 2002), dialectical behavior therapy (DBT; Linehan, 1993), acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT; Hayes, et al., 1999), substance abuse treatment (Marlatt, 2005), and relapse prevention (Marlatt and Donovan, 2005). However, although there has been an increase in popularity, one weakness has been a lack of a working operational definition of mindfulness derived from a rigorous scientific evaluation (Bishop, 2002). “We must move toward a definition that is more precise and that specifies testable theoretical predictions for the purpose of validation and refinement” (Bishop, et. al., 2004, p. 231). A more specific working definition of mindfulness will also assist others in their attempt to learn the necessary techniques to develop their mindfulness skills.

On a conceptual level, Bishop and his colleagues, after several meetings, developed a two-component model of mindfulness. The first component involved the self-regulation of attention. That is, maintaining attention on immediate experience in the present moment and the recognition of one’s mental events. The second component involved being curious, open, and accepting of one’s experience in the present moment (Bishop, et. al, 2004).

Using a scientific approach, Baer, Smith, Hopkins, Krietemeyer, and Toney (2006) factor analyzed five self report mindfulness questionnaires to explore the various facets of mindfulness. They identified five clear interpretable characteristics. They are listed below with examples of test items.

1. Non-reactivity to Inner Experience
  - a. I watch my feelings without getting lost in them.
  - b. Usually when I have distressing thoughts or images, I am able just to notice them without reacting.
2. Observing/Noticing/Attending to Sensations/Perceptions/Thoughts/Feelings
  - a. I notice changes in my body, such as whether my breathing slows down or speeds up.
  - b. I pay attention to sensations, such as the wind in my hair or sun on my face.
3. Acting with Awareness (these items are reverse scored)
  - a. I find it difficult to stay focused on what’s happening in the present.
  - b. I find myself preoccupied with the future or the past.
4. Describing/Labeling with Words
  - a. It’s easy for me to keep track of my thoughts and feelings.
  - b. I’m good at thinking of words to express my perceptions, such as how things taste, smell, or sound.
5. Nonjudging of Experience (these items are reverse scored)
  - a. I make judgments about whether my thoughts are good or bad.
  - b. I tell myself I shouldn’t be thinking the way I’m thinking.

Of the five factors, all were present and accessible by the subjects. However, only the “observing” factor was more prevalent in subjects that meditated regularly (Baer, et al., 2006).

## **MINDFULNESS SKILLS**

“All of us have the capacity to be mindful. All it involves is cultivating our ability to pay attention in the present moment” (Kabat-Zinn, 1990, p. 11). However, in order to increase the probability of a successful mindfulness experience, one must assess his own thinking and philosophical view of the world because, “Nothing comes from outside your mind” (Suzuki, 1973, p. 34). Also, as stated in the Dhammapada, the Buddha’s teachings, “We are what we think. All that we are arises with our thoughts. With our thoughts we make the world” (Kornfield, 1996, p. 4). In addition, the Stoic philosopher, Epictetus, emphasized that happiness is completely

dependent upon ourselves by how we react to events. “It is not that which has happened that afflicts this man, for it does not afflict another, but it is the opinion about this thing which afflicts the man” (Epictetus, 2004, p. 6). Consequently, prior to learning specific mindfulness techniques, there are three critical principles or beliefs that act as a foundation for the development of mindfulness and psychological well-being.

First, one must come to the realization that “life is not fair.” Individuals who have not accepted this fact, experience ongoing distress and disruption in their lives. We regularly see injustice and bad things do happen to good people (Kushner, 1981). “Many people have a great deal of difficulty with the fact that virtue is not always rewarded nor is evil always punished” (Stockdale, 1984, p. 73). In addition, Albert Ellis (Ellis, 2000), the founder of rational emotive behavior therapy (REBT), emphasizes that one’s belief that everything should be “fair” causes people to severely “distress themselves” and increases their suffering.

Second, one must face reality and deal with the truth, as it presents itself, in any situation. This is exemplified by Admiral James Stockdale sharing his experiences as a POW in Hanoi during the Vietnam War. He was held captive for almost eight years under extreme conditions, including isolation and torture. He was able to survive by facing the brutal facts of his reality, and “hanging in there” for as long as necessary, even when there was no light at the end of the tunnel (Stockdale, 1984). Admiral Stockdale observed that those prisoners that continued to be “optimistic” and lived with the hope of rescue on a day to day basis soon became discouraged and despondent when their hopes did not materialize. They denied the reality of the situation rather than face the truth. This philosophy, of facing the truth, has also entered into the mainstream corporate environment and has become known as the Stockdale Paradox. When doing business, one must always retain absolute faith that one can and will prevail, regardless of the difficulties, and at the same time, confront the brutal facts of the current reality, whatever they may be (Collins, 2001).

Third, one is always free to choose one’s attitude no matter the situation. As with Admiral Stockdale, insights into “humanity” often arise in extreme conditions. “What’s true of all the evils in the world is true of plague as well. It helps men to rise above themselves” (Camus, 2004, p. 113). Viktor Frankl was a survivor of the Nazi concentration camp at Auschwitz. He experienced and was surrounded by extremes of deprivation, torture, suffering, dying, and death. Personally, Dr. Frankl not only lost all his worldly possessions, but also his friends and family in the gas chambers. His experiences helped him to conceptualize his theories regarding what it means to be a human being. He found that no matter what one must endure, everything can be taken away but one thing, that is, one is always free to still choose his attitude regardless of the circumstances (Frankl, 1984, 1990).

Mindfulness is a skill that can be learned and refined with practice. We all have the ability to be aware, it is whether we choose to be aware or continue to function on automatic pilot based upon old habits. Are we truly free if we only react based upon our past conditioning, set programming, or life scripts?

In mindfulness training, it is important to be aware of the body and its reactions as “Mindfulness of the body keeps us present – and therefore, we know what’s going on” (Goldstein, 2007, p. 98). Participating in formal meditation is not necessary to develop the skill of mindfulness and reduce stress. As a first step, simply be still and observe “what you are experiencing.” What are you aware of inside and outside your body? Try to observe without evaluating, judging, or interpreting any of your thoughts or sensations. You will find that this is very difficult to do as thoughts are continuous. “The mind is so hard to control that it is like an ape (Yun, 2006, p. 63). That is, thoughts are constantly jumping around like a monkey swinging from tree to tree. Ideally, you just acknowledge the thoughts then return to noticing what is occurring in the present moment. To assist with this process, many people begin to focus on the breath as a distraction to the thoughts and to remain focused on the present. “Mindfulness of breathing is one of the best starting points for the cultivation of the mind. The breath is a clear

indicator of our inner life” (Brazier, 1995, p. 66). As you concentrate on breathing, simply say to yourself, “I am breathing in” and “I am breathing out”. When you notice that your thoughts have taken you away from the present, just become aware of the fact, and return to the breath. Repeat this process over and over, thousands of times. As there is no right or wrong, when you are ready, you can move your attention to a broader focus and become aware of whatever presents itself either internally or externally. The challenge is to notice without judgment or evaluation. This is mindfulness.

In order to experience mindfulness in everyday life, Jon Kabat-Zinn (1990) uses a raisin to assist people to be in the present moment. He gives the following instructions:

First we bring our attention to seeing the raisin, observing it carefully as if we had never seen one before. We feel its texture between our fingers and notice its colors and surfaces. We are also aware of any thoughts we might be having about raisins or food in general. We note any thoughts and feelings of liking or disliking raisins if they come up while we are looking at it. We then smell it for a while and finally, with awareness, we bring it to our lips, being aware of the arm moving the hand to position it correctly and of salivating as the mind and body anticipate eating. The process continues as we take it into our mouth and chew it slowly, experiencing the actual taste of one raisin. And when we feel ready to swallow, we watch the impulse to swallow as it comes up, so that even that is experienced consciously. We even imagine, or “sense,” that now our bodies are one raisin heavier. (p. 27-28)

“Knowing what you are doing while you are doing it is the essence of mindfulness practice” (Kabat-Zinn, 1990, p. 28). It is important to practice in everyday life as mindfulness is like any other skill that improves with practice and repetition. The brain actually changes as new neural pathways are developed (Siegel, 2007). You can practice this skill by being fully aware of what you are doing with any activity. For example, feel all sensations when taking a shower, brushing your teeth, eating a meal, making love, etc. Ideally, one can be mindful most of the day as you fully engage in life. The present is now and is all we have; the future has not yet arrived. To be most productive and clear headed, we must function in the present.

Being present and focused is critical to reduce stress, improve relationships, and to increase our ability to make competent and wise decisions. A preoccupation with the past often leads to regrets and depression while concerns about the future only lead to worries and anxiety. With mindfulness, one can become aware of how and why one reacts to events or situations instead of responding impulsively due to past conditioning. With mindfulness, one can better evaluate the situation and/or problem solve with full awareness. Mindfulness can guide one’s actions and responses. One can control the situation rather than have it control you. This is true freedom.

As a personal example of not being mindful resulting in a disappointing result occurred while the author was an undergraduate student at Oregon State University. At a national wrestling tournament, I was winning a match against a past national champion. In fact, my opponent was being “pinned” with both shoulders on the mat. Rather than continue to focus my attention in the present moment and task at hand, my mind began to wander. My thoughts ranged from “I can’t be winning, he is a national champion,” to “If I do win, I will be so excited. What an accomplishment!” Needless to say, as I removed myself from the present moment, my opponent escaped from my grasp, and I lost by one point. Not being mindful cost me the match. Athletes in general can only be successful if they are mindful. They cannot dwell on past missed baskets, strike outs, interceptions, etc. Champions must stay in the present moment and “let go” of the past immediately.



## CONCLUSION

Stress is a fact of human existence. Overwhelming stress and distress is not. For maximum stress relief, there must be a change in one's internal mental processing and perception of the world. The critical factor is one's ability to be in the present moment, with full awareness, as life only occurs in the "here-and-now." In today's work environment there is increasing instability and uncertainty leading to greater stress. The negative effects caused by job insecurity and layoffs are more prominent and seem to dominate the news each day, sometimes with tragic outcomes as murder and suicide.

Current literature suggests that mindfulness based interventions do help to alleviate a variety of mental health problems and improve the quality of life. Mindfulness has been implemented in dialectical behavior therapy (DBT; Linehan, 1993), acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT; Hayes, et al., 1999), substance abuse treatment and relapse prevention. (Marlatt, 2005 and Marlatt and Donovan, 2005), mindfulness based cognitive therapy (MBCT; Segal, et al., 2002), and mindfulness based stress reduction (MBSR; Kabat-Zinn, 1990, 2005).

By incorporating the five basic factors of mindfulness of non-reactivity, observing, awareness, labeling, and non-judging (Baer, et al., 2006) one's inner world can begin to change regardless of the external circumstances. In addition, by combining these more passive factors of mindfulness with the more active cognitive processing of one's belief system including the unfairness of life, confronting the truth, and choosing one's attitude, stress will be alleviated. Since mindfulness has been effective with mental health problems, additional research is needed to specifically investigate the effects of mindfulness training in various business organizations and corporations. Studies should investigate the use of mindfulness training in conjunction with established wellness programs as well as being used as a treatment modality that stands on its own. Reduction of stress will increase employee satisfaction and improve work enthusiasm and productivity.

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