

Can We Be Mindful at Work Without Meditating?

With the possible exception of our families of origin, no other setting than work provides us with more opportunities to be irritated, outraged, anxious, discouraged, disappointed, overwhelmed, jealous, embarrassed, bored, or afraid of saying what we really mean. Whether we like it or not, we take our hearts to work everyday—and sometimes they get hurt.

But you don't need me to tell you that work hurts. What you may not know is that this is good news. What we hate about work can also provide a catalyst to important changes in our lives. Dissatisfaction, for example, can remind us about our long-lost sense of possibility and purpose, which might have gotten buried in endless meetings, bottomless inboxes, and overwhelming to-do lists.

For more than a decade, I've been teaching the skill of mindfulness as a way to combat stress and dissatisfaction—and cultivate a greater sense of purpose and meaning—on the job. Over that time, the scientific study of mindfulness has grown exponentially, with the latest studies showing that it improves such work-related capacities as focus, emotion regulation, memory, learning, decision making, bad-habit breaking, leadership, and creativity. My students have included burned-out health care providers, veterans with post-traumatic stress disorder, and MBA and mid-career students at Stanford's Graduate School of Business.

One of the first and biggest questions many people have about mindfulness at work is when, precisely, they're supposed to practice it. Most workplace-oriented mindfulness programs start by telling employees to find a quiet place to meditate on their lunch hour (or, everyone's favorite, to wake up earlier and meditate before work). Or they might suggest turning off the phone during dinner, perhaps unplugging completely once a year on a special retreat.

These ideas are great, if we can manage to find the time for them. But for the vast majority of us, for the vast majority of the time, our eyes are open, our phones are on, our bosses are watching, and we have to keep doing our work. We find ourselves in the thick of things, most of us without nannies and personal assistants to pick up the slack while we seek some ideal balance of self-care, family responsibilities, and "leaning in."

What if we didn't have to stop what we're doing to meditate? Contrary to the perception of mindfulness as something that you only practice on a meditation cushion, in seclusion from the world around you, I teach my students the importance of "mindfulness-in-action"—becoming mindfully aware of your thoughts, feelings, and surroundings even while you're engaged in some other activity.

FOCUS, LEADERSHIP, LEARNING, EMOTION REGULATION, MEMORY, DECISION MAKING, CREATIVITY, BAD-HABIT BREAKING



The possibility—and benefits—of mindfulness-in-action gained support recently from a study led by Florida State University's Adam W. Hanley. Hanley and his colleagues instructed some college students to wash the dishes mindfully, by paying attention to what they were doing as they were doing it: the water, the soap, the dishes, the sounds and smells, their own breathing, even their own thoughts and feelings, all of it—as long as it was happening in the present, as opposed to, say, ruminating on the past or worrying about the future.

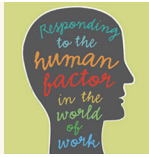
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Compared with students who washed dishes as they normally would, the mindful dishwashers not only seemed more mindful after about eight

minutes of dishwashing, but they also reported greater feelings of inspiration and decreased feelings of nervousness. While most studies examine the benefits of sitting meditation, this is one of the first to investigate a more informal mindfulness practice.

These encouraging results support an understanding of mindfulness as an eyes-open, on-the-spot engagement, not just an eyes-closed, time-out break. Without stopping what we're doing, we learn to hold onto the threads of awareness, compassion, and purpose throughout our day. Perhaps most important for busy working people, meditation doesn't become yet another item on our to-do list. Mindfulness-in-action has big implications for the people who (for whatever reason) don't take to sitting meditation—and for the other 23 hours of the day for people who do.

About The Author

Leah Weiss is a scholar and writer specializing in the application of meditation in secular contexts. She teaches courses on compassionate leadership at the Stanford Graduate School of Business and is a Senior Teacher and Trainer for Stanford's Compassion Cultivation Program, founded by HH the Dalai Lama. She also directs Compassion Education and Scholarship at Hopelab, an Omidyar Group research and development nonprofit focused on resilience.

website: www.gsb.stanford.edu/faculty-research/faculty/leah-weiss

email: lweiss@stanford.edu

What would mindfulness-in-action look like at work? Based on my experiences teaching a variety of professionals, here are three ways to practice while on the job.

1. Bring a sense of purpose to the everyday.

You can turn the smallest routines into opportunities for greater accomplishments.

For example, one of my students changed the password on her computer to “breathe.” When she took a breath upon logging in, she explained, it allowed her to check in on her intention for the next task. So rather than compulsively check her email, she could choose to work on projects that mattered to her. This made her more productive and more satisfied with how she was spending her time and energy, and it took zero extra time—or no more than a few seconds, what researchers at the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence have called a “micro-moment.” Their studies have shown that a moment is all we need to reset our perspective and see things differently.

It may sound simple—a cue, a breath, a moment to think about what matters—but that's the point: We can do a lot with a little if the effort is well-targeted. Getting a cup of coffee, waiting for an application to open, or putting our hand on the door handle to the meeting room are all opportunities to reconnect with our purpose and get perspective.

2. Speak your truth. Easier said than done, of course, but downright impossible without mindfulness.

Say you're in a meeting. At the moment of deciding whether to speak up, take a second to notice the thoughts or stories that pass through your mind. Are you trying to please someone else? Are you trying to protect yourself, or an image of yourself? Often when people communicate, fear is part of the picture—fear of being exposed, judged, misunderstood, or ignored; fear of misunderstanding the other person. Awareness that our fearful thoughts and feelings are nothing more than fleeting thoughts and feelings can free us from being controlled by them.

Mindfulness makes room for a choice to feel the fear and do it anyway or, better yet, feel

the fear but base our decisions and actions on something else. In this mindful moment, can you see that these thoughts are just thoughts, and thus allow yourself the choice not to let your fearful or angry thoughts run the show?

3. Take a moment to reflect. At the end of a day, a meeting, an email exchange—indeed, after any task you approached with purpose and intention (see #1)—pause to consider how it went, and to reset your intention. For example, maybe you are frustrated with a colleague and are setting the intention to improve the relationship. Even if there's nothing you would do differently next time, reminding yourself of your intentions keeps them alive and effective.

Often, however, there is a gap between what we meant to happen and what actually happened. This is not a bad thing; it's an opportunity to learn and make new choices accordingly. Sometimes, we all succumb to what I like to call the “screw it, I blew it” effect: After we make one mistake, we give up on preventing others, assuming we've already lost our way. But one study at Louisiana State University suggests that a moment of self-compassion can keep us on track: Participants who were prompted to have some compassion for themselves after eating a donut ate significantly less candy (offered by the experimenters) than participants who were not prompted to have any particular perspective on eating the donut.

In the workplace, beyond any literal donuts we may encounter, the implications are clear enough: Since we're not perfect there any more than we are anywhere else, we must be able to tolerate mistakes in order to carry on and do better. A moment of self-compassionate reflection can be the antidote to the culture of perfectionism that pervades so many of our workplaces.

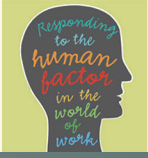
So mindfulness-at-work is not about meditating at work so much as work as meditation. It does not require finding more lovable work (or co-workers) but instead rediscovering joy in the work (and co-workers) we have. It helps people use the heart they already have at the job they already do to close the gap between the way things are and the way they want them to be.

By Leah Weiss

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Don't Let Anxiety Control Your Life

Anxiety is familiar to everyone due to the many stresses and complexities of modern life, but about 25 percent of U.S. adults have a serious problem with anxiety that must be addressed at some time in their lives.



“Unlike fear, which is usually directed toward a concrete thing or event, such as a snarling dog or not meeting a deadline, anxiety is often nonspecific and can be brought on by worrying about the future, your finances or your health, in general,” says Edmund Bourne, Ph.D., author of *Coping With Anxiety*. “Anxiety can appear in different forms and at different levels of intensity, and can range in severity from a mere twinge of uneasiness to a full-blown panic attack.”

The causes of anxiety are varied and include upsets in brain chemistry, heredity, childhood trauma, abuse, chronic stress, loss of a loved one, and drug and alcohol abuse, to name a few.

“While it can be helpful to identify possible causes of anxiety and address them, you don’t need to know why you feel anxious to be helped by practicing coping strategies,” says Dr. Bourne.

Coping strategies

The following practices are helpful for anyone with anxiety and may be all that’s needed if your anxiety level is mild and not disrupting your life.

People with more severe anxiety, including anyone dealing with panic or post-traumatic stress disorder, will still find the exercises helpful but also may need therapy and medication.

These exercises can be done individually or in any combination:

Take calming breaths

This exercise quickly interrupts the momentum of anxiety symptoms. Breathing from your abdomen, inhale through your nose slowly to a count of five. Pause and hold your breath to a count of five. Exhale slowly to a count of five. Take two normal breaths, then repeat the cycle for three to five minutes.

Stop magnifying problems

Exaggerating problems by making them seem bigger and more serious than they are can lead to anxiety. To combat this way of thinking, stop using words such as terrible, awful, or horrendous in relation to events or situations in your life. Instead of saying to yourself, “It’s unbearable,” or “I can’t stand it,” try saying, “I can cope” and “I can deal with and survive this.”

Stop worrisome thoughts

Use this strategy if you find yourself stuck in a spiral of worrisome thoughts that won’t go away. “If you’re alone and want to halt a chain of anxious thoughts, shout in a loud and forceful manner, ‘Stop!’ or ‘Stop it!’” says Dr. Bourne. “If you’re with other people, shout internally as you visualize a large stop sign.” Every time the worrisome thoughts return, repeat the spoken or internal command to yourself.

Shift your point of view

When anxiety or worry about an actual or possible problem is getting the best of you, try thinking about the situation in the following ways:

- Tell yourself you can lighten up about it.
- Say the affirmation, “This too shall pass.”
- Realize it’s not likely to be as bad as your worst thoughts about it.

Combat negative self-talk

Positive affirmations can help you cope with anxiety in the moment and over the long-term by helping you change long-standing beliefs, which tend to enable anxiety. To make your thoughts more constructive and supportive, replace or refute each negative statement.

For example, replace “This is unbearable” with “I can learn to cope with this.” Or, replace “What if this goes on without stopping?” with “I’ll deal with this one day at a time.”

“Resisting or fighting anxiety is likely to make it worse,” says Dr. Bourne. “A more constructive approach is to cultivate an attitude that says, ‘OK, here it is again. I can handle this. I’ve done it before.’ In most cases, anxiety peaks and begins to subside in a few minutes. It will pass more quickly if you practice coping strategies regularly when you start to feel anxious.”

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Claremont EAP can help with all of these choices!

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Estate Planning for Everyone



Simple steps
for creating an
estate plan that
will put your
mind at
ease.

Make a will.

In a will, you state who you want to inherit your property and name a guardian to care for your young children should something happen to you and the other parent.

Consider a trust.

If you hold your property in a living trust, your survivors won't have to go through probate court, a time-consuming and expensive process.

Make health care directives.

Writing out your wishes for health care can protect you if you become unable to make medical decisions for yourself. Health care directives include a health care declaration ("living will") and a power of attorney for health care, which gives someone you choose the power to make decisions if you can't. (In some states, these documents are combined into one, called an advance health care directive.)

Make a financial power of attorney.

With a durable power of attorney for finances, you can give a trusted person authority to handle your finances and property if you become incapacitated and unable to handle your own affairs. The person you name to handle your finances is called your agent or attorney-in-fact (but doesn't have to be an attorney).

Protect your children's property.

You should name an adult to manage any money and property your minor children may inherit from you. This can be the same person as the personal guardian you name in your will.

File beneficiary forms.

Naming a beneficiary for bank accounts and retirement plans makes the account automatically "payable on death" to your beneficiary and allows the funds to skip the probate process. Likewise, in almost all states, you can register your stocks, bonds, or brokerage accounts to transfer to your beneficiary upon your death.

Consider life insurance.

If you have young children or own a house, or you may owe significant debts or estate taxes when you die, life insurance may be a good idea.

Understand estate taxes.

If you and your spouse together own assets worth at least \$1.5 million, you may want to consider taking steps to reduce federal estate tax that will be due at the second spouse's death. You may want to make tax-free gifts now or consider an AB trust.

Cover funeral expenses.

Rather than a funeral prepayment plan, which may be unreliable, you can set up a payable-on-death account at your bank and deposit funds into it to pay for your funeral and related expenses.

Make final arrangements.

Make your wishes known regarding organ and body donation and disposition of your body -- burial or cremation.

Protect your business.

If you're the sole owner of a business, you should have a succession plan. If you own a business with others, you should have a buyout agreement.

Store your documents.

Your attorney-in-fact and/or your executor (the person you choose in your will to administer your property after you die) may need access to the following documents:

- will
- trusts
- insurance policies
- real estate deeds
- certificates for stocks, bonds, annuities
- information on bank accounts, mutual funds, and safe deposit boxes
- information on retirement plans, 401(k) accounts, or IRAs
- information on debts: credit cards, mortgages and loans, utilities, and unpaid taxes
- information on Totten trusts or funeral prepayment plans, and any final arrangements instructions you have made.

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