



# Mindfulness

## for Compassionate Leadership and Stress Reduction

MANAGEMENT CONNECTION

Strategies to  
combat stress  
and lead more  
compassionately

The past year may be on the records as one of the most stressful times in your life. You and your employees faced stressors in your work that you did not know existed two years ago. When we make it through stressful moments in our lives, we can look back with clarity to reflect on our challenges, mistakes, and successes. Or can we?

Research on the human brain points out that when we experience stress, our brain may not allow us to respond to situations with clarity and focus. Stress has a chemical effect on our brain and body, and can even lead to diseases such as Alzheimer's, Type 2 diabetes, or cancer. What if we can implement something into our work life that combats this stress effect on our brain and body, allowing us to lead compassionately? Enter mindfulness!

### WHAT IS MINDFULNESS?

According to Jon Kabat-Zinn, professor emeritus of medicine and the creator of the Stress Reduction Clinic and the Center for Mindfulness in Medicine, Health Care, and Society at the University of Massachusetts Medical School, mindfulness is the *awareness that arises from paying attention, on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally*. Other phrases to describe mindfulness include non-judgmental awareness, body awareness, and awareness of bias.

You may have heard the word mindfulness in the past and had some assumptions about what it is. Common misconceptions about mindfulness include: "going into a trance" or a "blank mind" or simply a "relaxation technique." The opposite of



**Kristin Klinefelter, MS, RDN, LDN** has been working in various capacities in the Nutrition and Health field since 1998. For years, her email tagline was “Be good to yourself, if you don’t take care of your body, where will you live,” by Kobi Yamada. After doing this research on mindfulness, she believes it should read: “Practice Mindfulness: If you don’t take care of your brain and body with mindfulness, where will you live?”

mindfulness is mindlessness. When we drop or break things, perform a task while talking on the phone, run on autopilot, or forget that we have done a task, we are operating mindlessly. These effects are physical and tangible (a broken glass for example), but does operating this way cause harm in other ways? The answer is a firm yes!

## WHAT MINDFULNESS DOES FOR YOUR BRAIN

Researchers find that chronic stress affects the whole body and changes the brain’s size and function. Stress can kill brain cells and shrink the size of the brain. Areas of the brain that are negatively affected include regions associated with the regulation of emotions, metabolism, and memory (neurosciencenews.com). Stress deregulates the nervous system by engaging the limbic area, causing us to use the fight-or-flight response.

On the contrary, when a person practices mindfulness, scientists have found that the brain reacts by thickening the size of the prefrontal cortex region, the area responsible for logic and decision-making. The prefrontal cortex calms down the limbic area of the brain that tells us to fight or flight. Mindfulness regulates your nervous system, which regulates you.

“Mindful activity harnesses the power of the prefrontal cortex and allows your emotions to be in control. It gives us insight, empathy, and a sense of morality,” says Dan Siegle, MD. Siegle has an excellent explanation of this brain anatomy and physiology on many YouTube videos and his website (<https://www.mindsightinstitute.com/>).

## HOW MINDFULNESS CAN IMPROVE WORK ENVIRONMENTS AND RELATIONSHIPS

As professionals, we need to arrive at work with the tools to work well with others,

- Increased creativity
- Improved self-regulation and ability to cope with difficult situations

## HOW TO BE MINDFUL AT WORK

There are formal and informal ways to practice mindfulness. While it might not be practical to pull out a cozy cushion in your office to do a mindful sit, you can incorporate these informal mindfulness techniques at work:

- **Practice Gratitude.** Simple practices like maintaining a gratitude journal, genuinely complimenting your employees, or writing



make ethical decisions and be empathetic towards our employees, colleagues, and clients. Science demonstrates that mindfulness can equip us with those tools. Other benefits of practicing mindfulness include:

- The ability to see situations more clearly

thank you notes can boost your mood and focus immediately.

- **Single-Task and Slow Down.** Focus on one task at a time. Being a multi-tasker is not necessarily a productive characteristic.

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**WHEN A PERSON PRACTICES MINDFULNESS**, the prefrontal cortex calms down the limbic area of the brain that tells us to fight or flight. Mindfulness regulates your nervous system, which regulates you.

- **Be Consciously Present.** Being consciously present means paying attention to our thoughts, feelings, and tensions, as well as those of others. If you notice tension in your body, or an unclear mind, take pause and ask yourself what is going on. Perhaps you had a poor night's sleep, or you are distracted by a conversation you had earlier. Acknowledge the cause of your tension and give yourself some grace.
- **Listen and Speak with Compassion.** Learn about using inclusive language and be aware of any bias you may have. "Most leaders have good intentions and want to be inclusive in their words and actions, but we all fall victim to implicit bias and the corresponding microaggressions that can negatively impact how safe (or unsafe) others feel around us. We need to start with open acceptance, proactively solicit feedback from our team, and then reflect on any negative interactions that occur to improve," says Jonathan H. Westover, PhD of Utah Valley University and Human Capital Innovations, LLC. Listen first and listen to understand. Restate what is said and ask for clarification if needed. Your goal is to understand first, before you share your own opinion.
- **Practice Self-Regulation Strategies.** Take three deep breaths, take a five-minute mental health walk, or develop a mantra to repeat as positive self-talk. Finding a strategy that will take minimal time yet provide calming techniques will be invaluable for your work life. Prior to communicating with employees, colleagues, or clients, take time to relax consciously and actively. Take a deep breath through your nose; hold it for five seconds in your lungs and belly and let it out slowly through

**PRACTICE SELF-REGULATION STRATEGIES.** Take three deep breaths, take a five-minute mental health walk, or develop a mantra to repeat as positive self-talk.

your mouth. If possible, close your eyes while you do this and repeat it three times. "The best intervention you can bring to the workplace is your own regulated nervous system. A dysregulated adult cannot help another dysregulated adult. We need to practice strategies that help us regulate our own bodies and minds," says Stacy Bender-Fayette, MS, Social & Emotional Learning Specialist at Peacemaker Resources in Bemidji, Minn. You are a leader within your department, facility, and field, which means people observe and mimic your behavior. Relax and regulate for your benefit as well as those around you.

## LEARN MORE ABOUT MINDFULNESS

Many resources are out there to assist you in becoming more mindful. Here are just a few available options.

### Read

- Full Catastrophe Living by Jon Kabat-Zinn describes his stress reduction program called mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR).
- Mindsight by Dan Siegle, MD describes the brain science and benefits of practicing mindfulness.
- Mindful.org has a newsletter, daily tips, and insightful articles.

### Listen/View

Use guided meditation apps (Aura, Breethe, Calm, Headspace) or YouTube videos.

Becoming more mindful benefits you in a plethora of ways. It can improve your brain, enhance your work environment, and provide additional advantages. Practice becoming more mindful to improve the quality of your life. ■

## RESOURCES

- Kabat-Zinn, Jon. *Full Catastrophe Living: Using the Wisdom of Your Body and Mind to Face Stress, Pain, and Illness*. New York: Bantam Books, 2013.
- Mindful.org <https://www.mindful.org/>
- Neuroscience News.com July 25, 2019. What stress does to the brain <https://neurosciencenews.com/brain-stress-14580/>
- Positive Psychology The Neuroscience of Gratitude <https://positivepsychology.com/neuroscience-of-gratitude/>
- Siegel, Daniel J., 1957-. *Mindsight: The New Science of Personal Transformation*. New York: Bantam Books, 2010.

# 5 WAYS TO PRACTICE MINDFULNESS



## Be Consciously Present



Being consciously present means paying attention to our thoughts, feelings, and tensions, as well as those of others.

## Practice Self-Regulation Strategies



Take three deep breaths, take a five-minute mental health walk, or develop a mantra to repeat as "positive self-talk." Finding a strategy that will take minimal time, yet provide calming techniques, will be invaluable.

## Practice Gratitude



Simple practices like maintaining a gratitude journal, complimenting your staff, or writing thank you notes can boost our mood immediately.

## Listen and Speak with Compassion



Learn about using "inclusive language." Listen-first, acknowledge what others say, and then respond.

## Single-Task



Focus on one task at a time. Being a multi-tasker isn't necessarily a productive characteristic.

## CE Questions | MANAGEMENT CONNECTION



*This Level 1 article assumes that the reader has entry level knowledge of the topic. The desired outcome is to ensure a foundation of basic concepts of the subject matter.*

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Reading *Mindfulness for Compassionate Leadership and Stress Reduction* and successfully completing these questions online has been approved for 1 hour of continuing education for CDM, CFPPs. CE credit is available ONLINE ONLY. To earn 1 GEN CE hour, access the online CE quiz in the ANFP Marketplace. Visit [www.ANFPonline.org/market](http://www.ANFPonline.org/market) and select "Edge CE Articles" within the Publications Section. If you don't see your article title on the first page, then search the title "*Mindfulness for Compassionate Leadership and Stress Reduction*." Once on the article title page, purchase the article and complete the CE quiz.

- Which is not a benefit of mindfulness?
  - Improved self-regulation
  - The ability to respond calmly to stressful situations
  - Increased use of the fight-or-flight response
- An example of mindlessness is:
  - Completing reviews while talking on the phone
  - Nodding and taking notes about the responses of a person you are interviewing for the head cook position
  - Completing the food order before starting the schedule
- Stress affects our brain by:
  - Engaging the fight-or-flight response
  - Reducing the number of brain cells we have
  - Both A and B
- Mindful Communication involves:
  - Listening first
  - Being aware of bias
  - Both A and B
- Taking deep breaths, positive self-talk, and taking a walk break are examples of:
  - Self-regulation
  - Time wasters
  - Being selfish
- The area of the brain that is responsible for emotional control, logic, and empathy is:
  - The limbic system
  - The prefrontal cortex
  - The brain stem
- What is an informal way you can practice mindfulness at work?
  - Participate in a one-hour guided meditation on YouTube
  - Put a cozy couch in your office, laying down to breathe and practice stillness
  - Practice gratitude and single-task