

ARTICLE TITLE:

Here's What Mindfulness Is (and Isn't) Good For

INSTRUCTION:

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ARTICLE:

While mindfulness doesn't necessarily work the way the hype proclaims, there are some things that a good mindfulness practice *can* really help with. By better understanding when mindfulness is the right approach, HR and training programs can better enhance both leader performance and employee wellbeing.

The tricky thing about trying to interpret research about mindfulness is that many studies that claim great things for mindfulness are less rigorous than others, even though they may be peer reviewed. Many have poor controls — or, as in one case, the test group may be properly compared to a group doing something else (like exercise), but both groups actually show similar rates of improvement.

University of Wisconsin neuroscientist Richard Davidson and I used the most rigorous scientific standards to sift through the sea of publications on mindfulness and other kinds of meditation. We found that only about one percent of those several thousand articles fit gold standards for medical research (more on this in Davidson's and my recent book, *Altered Traits: Science Reveals How Meditation Changes Your Mind, Body, and Brain*). Those solid studies, though, reveal that there are four real benefits from mindfulness: stronger focus, staying calmer under stress, better memory, and good corporate citizenship.

Let's look at how each of these works.

Stronger Focus

The gold-standard studies that we identified show that there is less mind wandering and distractibility among those who practice regular mindfulness routines. These people showed better concentration, even when multi-tasking. The business implications are manifest: higher productivity and fewer conceptual gaps. As one executive described the risk of having poor focus, "When my mind wanders in a meeting I wonder what business opportunity I've just missed."

To get this benefit, try three ten-minute sessions of mindfulness throughout the day. Put everything aside for the time being, and just bring your full attention to your breath. Don't

try to control it — just sense the full in-breath and the full out-breath. If you notice that your mind has wandered, simply bring it back to your breathing and start over with the next breath.

Don't judge yourself for your runaway thoughts — we all have them. When you start a mindfulness practice you become hyper-aware of how much your mind wanders away from what you are trying to concentrate on. But it's the act of bringing the focus back to the breath that seems to strengthen the brain's circuitry for concentration.

What prompts this change? Our brain's prefrontal cortex is the executive area that controls our attention. When the amygdala, the trigger point for disturbing emotions like anger or anxiety, acts up, it signals the prefrontal areas to shut down. That's why when we are anxious or angry we can't think so well. If we can calm our amygdala, that allows the prefrontal areas to operate more effectively — and thus to better focus our attention. And as we'll see in the next section, mindfulness does exactly that.

Staying Calmer Under Stress

Studies have shown that those who practice meditation have a less trigger-happy amygdala. That means the brain is less likely to interpret certain inputs as threats and jump on a defense reaction — be it flight, fight, or freeze.

For an example of how this plays out in a professional setting, consider the leader of a high-level executive team. Since instituting a morning group mindfulness session that is similar to the exercise described above, the team gets along better, reacting less strongly to minor conflicts. This means they can also share information and ideas more fluently —and, at the end of the day, make more effective strategic decisions because they are able to calmly debate their differing points of view. Research on other groups has also found that people who meditate generally recover more quickly from a stressful event.

Better Memory

Those who practice mindfulness also show a stronger working memory — the short-term memory that registers in-the-moment thought processing. For example, with a mindfulness practice, college students' graduate school entrance exam scores increased by 16%.

In a professional setting, this can bolster a leader's ability to perform the complex thinking needed for strategic work, problem solving, and even intense interactions with others. And having a less reactive amygdala means a leader stays more calm — which means more clarity.

Good Corporate Citizenship

Meditation that intentionally cultivates an attitude of kindness is often a part of a mindfulness practice. This approach has been shown to lead to more activity in brain circuits

for caring, increased generosity, and a greater likelihood of helping someone in need, qualities of the best corporate citizens — and of the leaders people prefer to work for.

In fact, many sports teams now incorporate mindfulness into their training as a way to better harmonize their playing. Meditation teacher Jon Kabat-Zinn used to work with the Harvard and also Olympic crew teams, where team coordination and support was paramount. He would have them stand together in a circle holding hands and focusing on their breath, then get into their shell in silence and begin.

Here's the bottom line: While you shouldn't believe everything you hear about mindfulness, there are, indeed, payoffs from a meditation habit. In fact, the research also shows that more hours of meditation you put in over your lifetime, the better the results on the four fronts we've described. Think of mindfulness as a way to enhance certain kinds of mental fitness, just as regular workouts at the gym build physical fitness.

(903 WORDS)

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