

The Art of Mindfulness at Work: You, Calm and Focused.

With the current economic climate, everyone is talking about stress these days, especially at work. With mindfulness, you can learn to respond to stress in new ways, shifting your focus and your life. Ultimately, stress is not what happens to you; rather, stress is produced by *how you respond* to what happens. That response contributes to either vitality and health, or distress and disease.

Increasingly, diverse companies from coast to coast have recognized the positive value of mindfulness, and are providing mindfulness seminars to their employees. Mindfulness research has consistently demonstrated decreases in stress, depression, anxiety, and insomnia, while finding increases in people's ability to relax and concentrate. These are real performance-enhancing benefits to employees everywhere. When people work together with greater clarity and focus, their synergy can create greater efficiency and creativity. Studies have shown that with mindfulness, absenteeism declines, while productivity, staff retention and job satisfaction increase. These impressive benefits are a substantial return on investment for both employee and employer.

By living more mindfully in the present moment and having greater awareness and control of your mind, you can:

- Manage challenges instead of letting them control you;
- Develop greater clarity about yourself and others;
- Choose more effective responses;
- Generate more creative solutions; and
- Feel increased stability and patience during times of change.

Modern humans are impatient. One of my students quipped, "I want to learn patience, and I want to learn it NOW!" We become angry and impatient whenever we have to wait... for the copier machine, the elevator, or the computer. This impatience leads to stress hormones running amuck. And that can lead to illness. When you notice your impatience rising, stop, take a breath, and notice how impatience subsides if we don't fuel it with more frustration.

In the workplace, life seems to be speeding up and time expanding. With smartphones and internet connections, many people feel like they're on call 24/7. The mantra seems to be "do more, faster". Have you noticed what time some of the emails in your inbox were composed? Are you or your colleagues still working at ten or eleven o'clock at night? (You know who you are!) The toll this takes on our bodies and minds is dangerous. Where's the balance?

According to an article in the Journal of Psychosomatic Medicine, "even a short program in mindfulness meditation produces demonstrable effects on brain and immune function". So, here are three mindful practices you can begin today to counter your racing mind, come back to the present moment, and create greater calm at work:

1. Stop for one minute every hour to become aware of your breathing and notice sensations in your body. Is there tension in your shoulders, face, hands or back? How are you sitting or standing? Consciously let go of any tension you find as you exhale and shift

posture to one that expresses alertness, balance, and ease. Use this moment to tune into the present and just be. All it takes is remembering.

2. Use everyday cues to remind yourself to center, breathe, and relax. Phone ringing? Instead of picking up on the first or second ring, use it as a cue to take a deep breath and become present. Allow yourself to become aware of the sound, of your body, of the shift you will make in shifting from one activity to another. Put a smile on your face before you pick up the phone after the third ring. The conversation may go very differently!

3. Use the "I am calm" technique. Breathing deeply from your abdomen, inhale and exhale slowly. With each inbreath, tell yourself: "I am", and with each outbreath say inwardly, "calm". Repeat ten or twelve times, and notice the impact this has on your body and mind.

Each of these suggestions takes just moments, and is always available to you. The key is your commitment and the intention to care for yourself regularly, every day. One of my students wrote to me last week about the challenges she faced at her new workplace. "I could not have weathered these past two weeks of distractions at my new job without having had the benefit of your teachings. By living in mindfulness and taking the time to meditate, I have been able to observe my new environment without over-reacting. For me it is about kindness to myself and observation without judgment ~ these two bring me clarity."

Whether you are employed, under-employed or unemployed, balancing your professional and personal life is challenging. Yet as we know, nothing endures but change. Using mindfulness, you can respond, moment to moment, to the changing landscape of your work world with greater balance and equanimity. As Jon Kabat-Zinn, Founder of the Mindfulness-based Stress Reduction program wrote, "You can't stop the waves, but you can learn to surf." Let mindfulness guide your journey.

Amy Bloom Connolly's SHINESM (Support Honor Inspire Nurture Evolve) programs bring mindfulness to life for low-income elders, homeless women, and the professionals who serve them. She also brings mindfulness seminars into the workplace. Amy's new CD contains two beautiful guided mindfulness meditations. A portion of the proceeds of the sale of each CD benefits SHINE's work in the inner city. For more information, and to receive the monthly Mindfulness newsletter, email Amy at amy@centerformindfulness.com

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