

Between us, the team at [MindfulnessUK@Work](#) have been teaching mindfulness in the workplace for many years. Even with the increase in awareness of mindfulness we still get asked “What is mindfulness” or “Is it not a bit of a fad” and “does it really work”? Recently, I was asked whether mindfulness is just the buzzword of the moment, a bit like wellbeing, and I quote “is being overused and overrated.”

This way of thinking does evoke a sense of sadness for me, but also gives me hope as at least mindfulness is being discussed and it is my job to demystify, answer these kind of questions, and explain how I know and can prove that mindfulness can make a difference to people personally and in the workplace.

Those that are professional, experienced, and qualified just like us at [MindfulnessUK@Work](#), have the skills and capabilities to break this cycle of cynicism and help others really understand why mindfulness can be a true benefit for many and life changing for most. So, I thought I would do this via a blog (another buzzword!?).

Demystifying mindfulness.

Mindfulness has been around for more than 2,600 years and relates back to the meditation practices (Vipassana) that were established by Gautama Buddha for seekers following the noble eightfold path. Whilst we acknowledge its roots, it is also helpful to know that this is really where the connection to Buddhism ends. Mindfulness as a practice and term that we have learnt to understand was coined by Jon Kabat-Zinn in late 1970s and in the west is secular in nature.

Mindfulness is not religious or spiritual but often it is reported that those who take part in mindfulness practice and embed the tools, techniques and teachings into their day to day, develop a deeper sense of meaning and connection to life. It is not uncommon for practitioners to feel a deeper sense of joy, notice the good in life, and learn to develop a more optimistic outlook.

Let us not confuse mindfulness with yoga asana-based practice or traditional Buddhist meditation. Mindfulness is about reflection,

contemplation, is accessible to all and can be practiced anywhere at any time. You do not need special equipment or a place to practice mindfulness and it does not require long hours of dedication. We can practice mindfulness by simply paying attention to our sensory organs, for example: sights, sounds, touch, taste, or smell. We can bring the attention to the movement whilst walking, eating, drawing, and writing. Most of the activities we busy our-selves with each day, on auto pilot, can be explored mindfully and often take just a few moments.

Mindfulness meditation, on the other hand, is a more formal way of bringing mindfulness alive in our day to day lives, by taking part in longer meditative practices such as body awareness, focus on breath or grounding. There are several options, but I would always recommend starting with ten minutes of practice and gradually build up to twenty or thirty minutes when you feel ready. And it is that simple! Practicing mindfulness can take as little or as much time as you want or need to. It can work around your schedule and should never feel like a chore. Mindfulness in the workplace can easily be adopted to fit in and around your team's priorities and allow a more collective approach to helping each other through stressful times. But do not just take my word for it there is a large amount of evidence, research, and science behind mindfulness, proving its credibility.

Evidence, research, and science.

People often ask, how can sitting quietly meditating reduce my stress and anxiety? How can doing a body scan help me to cope better with pain? Why does mindfulness improve my relationships with others and help me to become better at communicating and listening? Well this is the compelling part!

Mindfulness practice, of all kinds, develops an ability to pay attention through the process of inquiry. As we develop this ability, we start to notice more about our experience, for instance our thoughts, our physical bodies, and sensations, and ultimately how we feel emotionally. It is this noticing that creates a heightened sense of awareness and once we are aware, we have choices. We have the

choice to respond, rather than react to stress triggers. We have the choice to decide who we are being in any given moment. We have the choice to change the pattern of events and how something unfolds. Victor Frankl, a Jewish neuroscientist in WW2, explained that “between stimulus and response there is space, it is in this space that we can find freedom and choice.”

On a more scientific level the brain has the most tremendous capacity to change and adapt. This is what we call neuroplasticity. When we pay attention in a mindfulness practice and we do this over and over again, we start to rewire the connections in our brain that results in a cycle of paying attention, noticing what is arising, becoming aware of how that makes us think, feel or react and then respond in a way that is more helpful and causes us less personal suffering. This is how a mindfulness body scan can reduce stress.

Of course, it takes practice, but studies have shown that mindfulness-based interventions are effective and new students often notice the start of something changing in just 5 days. Programmes such as the 8-week Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) course, is supported with very solid evidence. This is a programme where students develop their mindfulness practice and develop tools and techniques whilst also learning about the theory, neuroscience, context, and background of mindfulness.

In a study of 50 nurses in 2015, the group was equally split into two groups. The first group took part in the 8-week MBSR programme, which consisted of 2 hours of Mindfulness learning and home-based practice each day. The second group had no intervention. Clinical standardised self-administered questionnaires, focusing on depression, anxiety and stress scales were administered at the baseline prior to the MBSR program and again at completion, 8-weeks later. The MBSR participants reported significantly greater decreases in depression, anxiety and stress, and a greater increase in mindfulness including a heightened sense of well-being and an ability to cope. Proof that mindfulness works!

What are the benefits again?

Having taught mindfulness to several businesses, in a variety of sectors, and to individuals, I get to see first-hand the benefits of mindfulness in the workplace. I have watched how many of my clients and their teams have flourished after completing a 4 or 8-week programme of learning because they have embedded the practice and learning into their day to day lives, for the long term. For some its life changing, and for others the course is an opportunity to learn something new, develop new skills and tools that they can access. Either way everyone can benefit in some way from mindfulness.

Reducing stress:

Simply put, mindfulness practice is proven to reduce stress and anxiety and can be useful in supporting those with depression. Moreover, mindfulness nurtures calm, helps us to become better listeners and gives us an ability to focus and concentrate. It can support and promote better sleep, bring attention to habits related to poor diet or our relationship with alcohol and drugs in a mindful way that supports change.

If that's not enough for you, the physiological benefits of mindfulness have proven to reduce blood pressure, alleviate pain, improve gastrointestinal difficulties, reduce heart rate, improve blood flow, develop breathing and even support a change in posture for the good.

In the workplace, mindfulness has proven to increase engagement, boost morale, and improve a sense of value and worth for employees and teams. It is this heightened engagement and feel good factor from workplace mindful initiatives that evidentially lead to increased profit and lower attrition.

Communication:

With mindfulness, our ability to communicate and listen well is developed in a way where relationships can thrive. This is because mindfulness teaches us to respond rather than react; it helps us to create space to breathe and pause in conversations and most of all, mindfulness helps us to notice our habits and urges. As we learn to pay attention to who we are being in our conversations with others

and we learn to notice and recognise our behaviour we become much more aware of when we interrupt someone or when we try to shift a conversation in a different direction.

When teaching mindfulness in the workplace over a period of 8-weeks, students have stated that they have become far more aware of how they are behaving in conversations with colleagues and that it was in this awareness they were then able to create some space for others to share their views which allowed creation and innovation to flow far more freely.

Focus and productivity:

In this ever-busy modern society, and especially now as so many of us work from home, we should not lose sight of how much we are surrounded by things that distract us. Long periods on our lap-tops and computers working from home or in the office, whilst contending with outside near and far distractions can be really tiring and sometimes even a little soul destroying.

Those who practice mindfulness, report being able to spend a longer period in a more focused and concentrated way. I am sure that those reading this remember times when they read the same paragraph of a document repeatedly, on autopilot.

Through the practice, we can also become far more aware of our needs for self-care. We do this by, for example, spending 30 minutes with extreme focus on a piece of work and once complete, we learn to step away from our work, take a stretch, get a drink and move around a little. Breaking things down into bite size chunks throughout the working day helps us to manage tasks and priorities more effectively without developing fatigue. Mindfulness will support this way of being if we invest and take the time to practice.

Employee well-being is important, now more than ever, and it is essential for responsible businesses to find the best solutions for their workforce. Reducing stress, improving communication, and increasing focus and productivity are the formidable goals which can be supported by the team at [MindfulnessUK@Work](#).

To find out more go to [MindfulnessUK@Work](#)

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