

Summary of «Mindful Work» by David Gelles

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Mindful Work investigates the principles of mindfulness and how we can apply them to our personal and professional lives to be happier, healthier, and more productive.

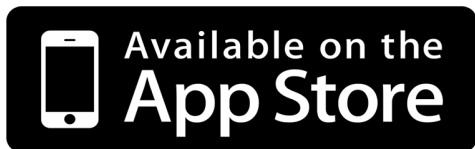


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Introduction

Raise your hand if your work has ever made you feel stressed. Or if you've ever come home at the end of a long day and thought, "I need a drink or a vacation or both." Okay, that's pretty much all of us, right? All of us have felt overwhelmed by the chaos of our busy work weeks and it doesn't help that technology enables us to bring our work home, which often leaves us feeling as if we've never left the office. So, if you've ever felt that self-care means booking that tropical getaway right now, I don't blame you! But the good news is that there are cheaper— and more fulfilling— ways to find relaxation. And it starts with mindfulness.

And while that word might bring to mind connotations of hipsters in yoga pants, the truth is that there's more to mindfulness than you might assume, and most importantly, best practices for your mental health are more than just a fad. So, what exactly is mindfulness and why do you need it? Well, in *Mindful Work*, you'll find out how to rejuvenate your energy, strengthen your focus, and boost your problem-solving abilities at work. You'll understand why a few simple concentration strategies are supported by scientific research and guaranteed to enrich your life (as long as you put them into practice). You'll also learn why many companies around the world— US food giant General Mills— have made mindfulness a part of their company culture and, most importantly, why mindfulness will benefit you.

This Mindful Moment

So, what exactly is mindfulness? Perhaps the most helpful way to think of it is as the most relaxed form of meditation ever. At its core is the value of capturing and being present in exactly the moment you're in. Because, let's be honest, how much easier would that make your life? Instead of being overwhelmed by the fact that you have fifty emails to answer yesterday, three meetings you should be in right now, and a call that you're already on, what if you were able to inwardly take a deep, compressing breath and focus on how to make the most of this moment? Focusing on the moment would allow you to assess and prioritize what needs to be done and to orient yourself around your goals without being caught up in the stress of it all.

So, if we can just do that, why don't we? The short answer is that, without mindfulness, it's too hard! No matter how much we hate it, getting swept away by stress is easier— in fact, almost unavoidable— if we don't fight against it. Mindfulness helps us reclaim the moment— and, in turn, our sanity— by providing us with coping mechanisms which enable us to step back from the situation and examine it objectively. This helps us identify actionable solutions which we can then put into practice for solving our problems and reducing our stress. And in so doing, it can even make us more thoughtful in how we deal with others.

For example, it's easy to get frustrated by a colleague's behavior, particularly if they appear to be slacking off or losing focus. But practicing mindfulness helps us remember that initiating an open and honest dialogue about their behavior is a great step toward healthy conflict resolution. Talking with them might lead to the discovery that they're under a lot of personal stress that's affecting their performance at work and we in turn can be more understanding as we work together to find a mutually beneficial solution.

If this is starting to sound like a pretty great strategy for managing stress and increasing productivity at work, you're not alone! Because after Janice

Marturano, a General Mills employee, began practicing mindfulness to help herself cope with stress at home and at work, GM soon realized that this could be an awesome practice to introduce as part of basic employee training. Now, hundreds of General Mills employees practice mindfulness and meditation rooms can be found in every General Mills building!

Mindfulness Can Rewire Your Brain

If you don't consider yourself one for new fads, you may not be surprised to learn that when it was first introduced, mindfulness was dismissed as new-age nonsense. This was largely because there was little quantifiable data to back it up and those who considered themselves people of science and reason were reluctant to believe in anything which they couldn't prove with irrefutable data. However, the evolution of fMRI technology— that's functional magnetic resonance imaging, in case your wondering— has broken new boundaries for mindfulness because it's provided a way for science to measure its positive effects.

fMRI technology works by measuring brain activity through blood flow. So, when we use this method to conduct brain scans of people who meditate, we can prove that those who practice mindfulness become calmer. What this means in practice is that if we measure the brain activity of someone who's currently meditating, we can see that the areas of the brain which are responsible for thinking about ourselves become relaxed. In fact, experiments have proven that when someone is given a task that centers on self-reflection, such as identifying a word that describes themselves, many people appear judgmental or stressed. However, if that activity is repeatedly followed up with a mindfulness exercise, it's been proven that people become less judgmental and more thoughtful, both when it comes to themselves and to others.

So, what does this mean for mindfulness in practice? Quite simply, it means that mindfulness rewires our brains for the better! When we make a habit of putting ourselves in the moment and thinking objectively about a given task, we become calmer, more considerate, and more self-aware. As such, because the brain can literally be trained like a muscle, it's possible to re-shape the very structure of your brain through the thought exercises you practice. In fact, neurological research has proven that mindfulness can actually strengthen the kindness and compassion impulses located in our

brain's pre-frontal cortex. So, if you want to literally re-train your brain, practicing mindfulness is the best way to start!

Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction

Mindfulness increased in popularity after it received media attention from people like Steve Jobs, but it didn't fully gain traction or become mainstream until it was given a social face-lift by a man named Jon Zabatkinn in the 1970s. Zabatkinn introduced a new method for coping with stress which, as you might have guessed from this chapter title, is called Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction. (But because that's pretty long to keep repeating, we'll refer to it as MBSR).

One of MBSR's most appealing facets is that it exists totally separate from any religious beliefs. Where mindfulness may bring to mind religious practices which hinge on meditation, MBSR removes the pressure to subscribe to any one set of beliefs and invites users to simply relieve stress. Once again focusing on being present in the moment and focusing on the sensations your body is experiencing right now, Zabatkinn's principles center on the belief that all sensations— whether painful or pleasurable— are but temporary fluctuations in intensity. And because it's often easy to think of our stress as a permanent and engulfing thing, shifting our focus to the impermanence of any feeling can be very freeing. It can also help us seek to achieve balance and awareness in every moment we experience.

Mindfulness Improves Your Focus

Although we've already touched briefly on the ways in which mindfulness can improve your focus, the benefits are so significant that they deserve their own chapter. Because one of the biggest things Mindfulness targets is the elimination of multitasking. If that thought throws you for a loop, you're not alone. Because we're all doing a thousand things at any one time, aren't we? And as you've probably noticed, it feels like you're dividing your attention in one thousand different ways. We might think this makes us more efficient, but ultimately, it reduces our focus and diminishes our productivity.

Because instead of being more efficient, we're just frantically diving from task to task in a mad scramble to get them all done. And although we often think we're enabling ourselves to do everything really well and really fast, in the end, we usually just wind up giving less than our best to a lot of little things. Wouldn't we all rather just do our best? If your answer is yes, then removing multitasking through the practice of mindfulness is your first step to a more productive future. Learning to develop your focus through mindfulness will help you to seize the moment and turn one vital thought into action. Instead of allowing your brain to ping-pong back and forth between your entire to-do list, bouncing from, "I need to pick up dinner tonight" to "Let's get a start on that presentation for Monday," mindfulness will help you to identify the most practical, actionable step for right now and follow it through to completion.'

And if you're wondering how to do that, the answer is simpler than you think! You can start by training your thoughts to focus on whatever you're doing, no matter what that is. If you're playing a board game with your family, be fully present. Think only about the moment you're creating with them, and don't let intrusive thoughts about tomorrow's business meeting creep in. Likewise, if you're in the middle of a presentation at work, seize disruptive thoughts about your to-do list and your personal life and remind yourself that these thoughts are stealing from your present. When you

harness these distracting thoughts and cast them aside, you give yourself control of your mind. And when you think of it that way, it's really like unlocking your maximum potential for productivity!

Mindfulness Actually Makes You Kinder

Remember what we talked about earlier, about how mindfulness strengthens your brain's kindness and compassion impulses? Well, for the purposes of this chapter, we're going to return to that focus and examine how mindfulness stimulates compassion and what it looks like in practice. Having established that practicing mindfulness makes us more aware of our thoughts, our emotions, and the importance of seizing every moment, it follows naturally that in developing our self-awareness, we also become more aware of others.

The more we're able to separate ourselves from our own emotions and look at situations in an objective light, the more we're able to remove ourselves from feelings of narcissism or entitlement, such as the belief that only our feelings are correct. This in turn makes us more sensitive to the emotions of others and more inclined to put ourselves in their shoes. And as in the earlier example of problem-solving by understanding a stressed co-worker's plight, we become more compassionate and less judgmental. As such, we experience more feelings of connection with others or a sense that we are all part of a common humanity and thus, deserving of kindness.

Gelles suggests that this sense of connection can be developed using a unique meditation strategy called "metta," which literally means "loving kindness." The central tenet of metta is the practice of being kind to yourself, freeing yourself from negative or judgmental thoughts, and wishing happiness and protection on yourself. And going back to our earlier point about literally re-shaping the structure of our brains, it follows that if we're consistently sending ourselves positive messages, we can re-train our brains to be more optimistic, loving, and kind. By simply applying this practice to ourselves and our own thought patterns, we can even begin training ourselves to look upon others with a more compassionate worldview.

Mindfulness Creates a Culture of Social Responsibility

Think for a moment about social responsibility— what it looks like in practice and what it means. At its core, social responsibility is about a sense of connectedness with others, a belief that our actions directly impact those around us, and that we have a responsibility to ensure our actions have a positive effect. In practice, doesn't that sound a lot like the principles behind mindfulness? The similarities just go to show that when we reflect on how our actions impact the world and set about making a positive change, we can make the world a better place simply by reforming our thought-lives first.

And if one person can make a difference in the lives of those around them simply by applying the principles of mindfulness, how much more influence does a company have? Gelles argues that when businesses implement the principles of mindfulness, they can create a culture of social responsibility, reforming the society around them. To illustrate this point, Gelles highlights the example of leading clothes company Patagonia. Their mission is to educate their customers about mindful shopping practices by encouraging them to reflect on their impact on the environment. In fact, they're so focused on promoting this mission that they even launched an ad campaign instructing customers not to buy their clothes!

And when a company is willing to lose revenue to make a statement, people notice. It's powerful because it stands out from a culture of selfishness and mindless consumerism, and because it's different, it has the power to make people listen. That's the power of applying mindfulness in your everyday life and your business practices. However, with that said, it's also important to remember that mindfulness and a culture of social change only become possible when people do the right things for the right reasons. Taking control of your life through mindfulness doesn't happen overnight and it certainly doesn't happen when people jump on the bandwagon because it's the trendy thing to do.

Mindful Leadership Demands a Great Leader

This brings us to our final and perhaps most vital point. Because the principles of mindfulness will neither change your life nor the lives of those around you if you fail to internalize them and fully put them into practice and a good leader recognizes that. However, it's important to remember that being a strong leader doesn't mean you have to be an extrovert or seek attention for yourself. You can be a leader just by quietly, calmly taking control of a situation and guiding it onto the right path— even if you're only taking charge of your own life. So, no matter where you are in life, think first about developing mindfulness for yourself and then take a close look at the qualities you're cultivating.

And as you grow in your practice of mindfulness, observe the changes that are taking place in your everyday life. Are you becoming more patient? More empathetic? Stronger and more determined? Each of these are qualities of successful leaders and each can be developed through practicing mindfulness. So, as you cultivate these traits in yourself, think of what you can do to help grow them in others. Can you inspire someone simply by listening to their problems? By being understanding when they expect you to lash out? By validating someone else's feelings instead of prioritizing your own? These are all leadership qualities which are often lacking in the current business models of today, and this is what you have the power to change.

Because when your starting point is a desire for self-improvement rather than the aim of getting your own way, you'll find that leading with mindfulness will generate a very different experience both for yourself and for others. When you lead with mindfulness, you invite yourself to listen to others and lead with compassion. You choose to break your goals down into manageable chunks rather than falling into the trap of multi-tasking. You choose to lead with a connection to others that allows you to identify your employees' strengths and weaknesses and delegate tasks to the best people for the job. By practicing these principles, a mindful leader acts as a role

model for those around them and challenges the status quo simply by touching others with the power of their own changed lives.

McMindfulness

To return to our earlier point about those who hop on the bandwagon of any trend just because it seems like the cool thing to do at the moment, we're going to take a brief look at a concept Gelles refers to as "McMindfulness." As you might guess from the name, this concept asserts that when you follow this pattern, you're attempting a drive-through, fast-food style of practicing mindfulness. When you do this, you're not really interested in putting in effort and changing your life, you simply want an instant fix or to engage in performative behaviors that make you look like you're keeping up with the newest lifestyle trend. Such practices lead to diluted or half-hearted attempts at practicing mindfulness, like one-time use as a therapy tool or a workplace motivation boost while glossing over other necessary elements like the holistic re-wiring of your brain that occurs when you condition yourself to be compassionate.

And although some readers may arrive at this chapter and find that they're still skeptical of mindfulness, that's okay. Although you're under no obligation to believe and internalize these principles for yourself, it is important to understand that true mindfulness is not an easy fix. It's a mindset that you choose to embrace and live into every day. And as such, it's not something you can accomplish overnight.

Final Summary

So, as we arrive at the end of this summary, what can we conclude about mindfulness? Well, for starters, we know that mindfulness is accessible to everyone. Anyone can practice it and reap its benefits in their life. These benefits include a sharper focus, accelerated productivity, and an increased attention span as we train ourselves to ignore distractions, eliminate multi-tasking, and harness our thoughts to focus only on the task at hand. By consistently practicing mindfulness, we can also strengthen the kindness and compassion impulses in our brain and become more understanding of others. And in so doing, we remove stress from our lives, replacing it with compassion, connection, and clarity of focus.



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