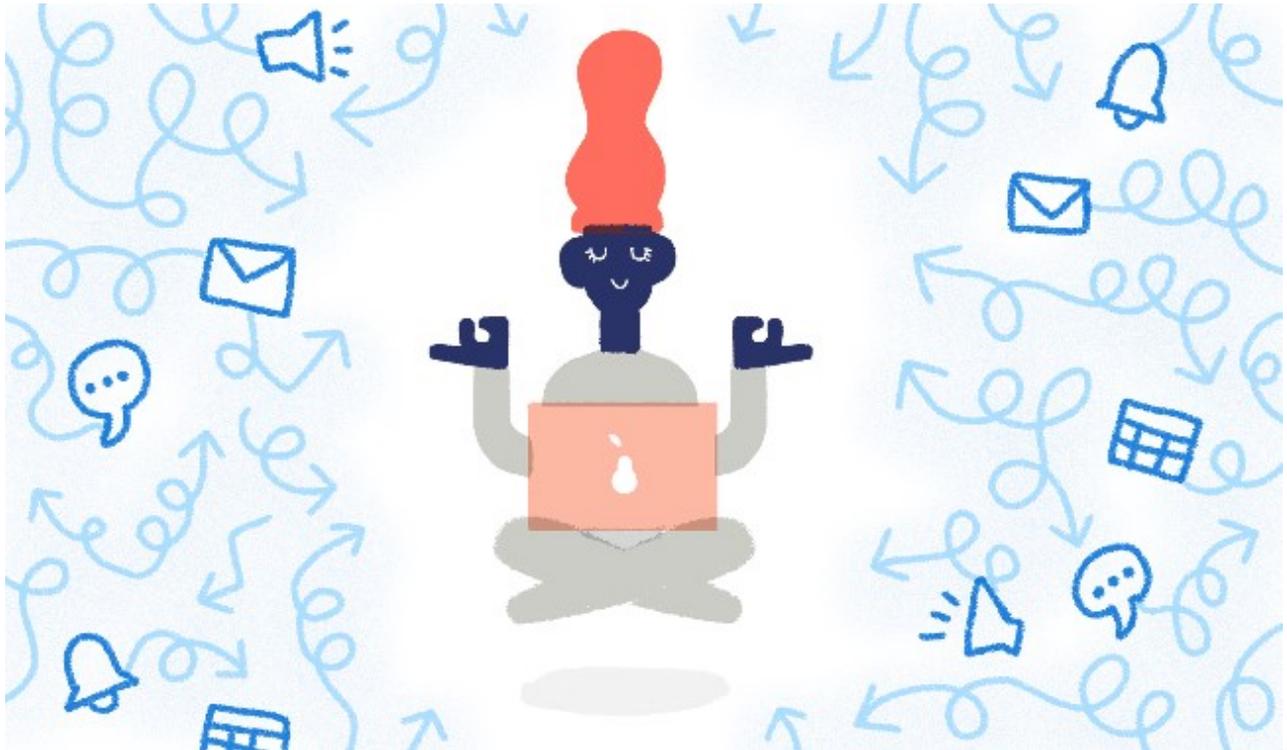


7 tips for practicing mindfulness at work

Ben Taylor | February 14, 2017



Let's face it: we've turned busyness into a lifestyle. The workday is filled with meetings, calls, emails, and surprise deadlines. We spend our evenings trying to catch up. We raise kids, race through TV episodes, or respond to a barrage of after-hours work messages. It's crazy and constant, but the ends—a successful career, a satisfying home life—justify the means. Right?

[Psychological research](#) suggests we're doing it all wrong.

Our tendency to cruise along on auto-pilot limits creativity, makes us less productive, and strains our relationships. Instead of living in the moment, our brains are stuck reviewing mental checklists and worrying about what's coming next.

Experts suggest a solution: practicing mindfulness. Mindfulness is a mental state that involves living in the present, staying in tune with our surroundings, and being more aware of our feelings, thoughts, and sensations. While mindfulness traces its roots to ancient Buddhist traditions, the modern-day equivalent is simple and practical. All it takes is a few thoughtful changes to your day-to-day mindset and routine.

1. Pause before beginning your day

Before you start your work for the day, take a moment to pause and observe. This might be a few minutes at home with a cup of coffee, a moment set aside before starting your car, or a short time at your desk before waking up your laptop.

Pay attention to your breathing and your surroundings. Notice the small things you normally ignore—the temperature of your drink, the material in your desk, the smell of your office. Moments like these can seem silly and unproductive for professionals used to busyness. But [mindfulness advocates](#) say even just a minute or two of mindful reflection can help you break out of your old, unproductive routines, paving the way for more creative, focused work.

2. Learn how your body reacts to daily events

The next time you have a negative experience—an awkward conversation with a co-worker, a disappointing review with your boss—take a moment to notice how your body reacts, physically. Does your neck tense up? Do you grind your teeth? Does your temperature rise?

Now notice the same reactions after positive events: a lunch with co-workers, a successful presentation, an encouraging call with a client. Does your heart rate change? Do your muscles relax?

Simply [being aware](#) of your physical responses can help you make small daily adjustments. If a morning update meeting tends to tense you up, try doing something relaxing right after: a cup of tea, a quick walk around the office, a one-on-one chat with a mentor.

Even if you can't change your schedule, simply knowing how your body responds can help you form more positive physical responses over time. If you can anticipate a negative response before it happens, you'll feel more in control and less irritable when it actually comes along. Over time, you may find your negative responses disappearing altogether.

3. Practice nonjudgmental observation of others

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Perhaps you're good at observing the world around you, at noticing the little things other people do. The problem? It's tempting to slip into a critical mindset. When a few co-workers begin a loud conversation, maybe you've rolled your eyes, rather than simply noting their excitement. When a colleague suggests a new idea for a launch campaign, perhaps you've thought of all the ways the idea could go wrong.

Professor and writer Jon Kabat-Zinn suggests beginning with nonjudgmental observation: watching and listening closely, but holding back your inner critic, at least at first. Avoiding a critical attitude takes work, but with practice, it's one of the most effective ways to switch off your internal auto-pilot.

Non-judgmental observation allows you to discover new things about your co-workers and your environments. Maybe you knew a few colleagues were excited about their new spending proposal, but you'd never noticed how their personal budgeting influenced their zeal for cost-cutting at the office. Or perhaps you knew your nearby colleagues had a tendency to chat a lot on Mondays, but only now you discovered they were simply nervous about a weekly Monday meeting.

Non-judgmental observation shouldn't ultimately replace critical thinking and healthy debate. But if you can start with dispassionate awareness, you can gather much better information first, and ultimately, understand your colleagues better.

4. Practice nonjudgmental observation of yourself

Self-evaluation can be good in small doses, but left unchecked, it can develop into a toxic cycle. The more you train your mind to immediately find fault in your daily actions, the more you'll develop self-doubt and increase your level of stress.

Psychologist Rick Hanson notes that people have a tendency to learn more from negative experiences, while not learning enough from positive ones. Cut yourself some slack. Rather than analyzing every thought, decision, and daily interaction, you should start simply by observing.

Perhaps you did forget your place in the morning presentation, and maybe you were five minutes late to an afternoon meeting. But you also nailed that campaign summary and helped encourage a shy co-worker to share an awesome idea. Moments like these are just as worthy of observation.

By noting each detail—but temporarily withholding self-judgment—you'll gain a more balanced perspective on your day. In the end, you're less likely to think poorly of yourself, or alternatively, to have an inflated sense of your recent accomplishments.

5. Encourage your colleagues to practice mindfulness

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If you're a manager—or even if you just run the occasional meeting—you have an opportunity to allow your colleagues to practice mindfulness. Instead of jumping straight to a meeting agenda, give the room a moment to focus, take a deep breath, and put aside other distractions from the day. Sometimes, the moment might call for a full 10 minutes of silence and mindful meditation, such as before an hour-long creative brainstorm. In other cases, even just a [six-second pause](#) can make all the difference.

As a boss, encouraging breaks, walks, exercise, or other escapes can be critical. If employees feel comfortable putting their work aside when they can't focus, they'll return with a refreshed sense of purpose and concentration.

6. Accept the past and practice “radical acceptance”

Maybe you tend to spend a lot of time thinking about what already happened. Why didn't you get a promotion? Did you say the wrong thing in that last meeting? How did you get so distracted for the last two hours?

Learning a lesson from the past is smart, but over-obsessing only perpetuates problems. If you keep agonizing over your performance in the last presentation, you'll have little time to focus on the one you're giving tomorrow.

Mindfulness enthusiasts recommend [focusing on the present](#) as much as possible. Even if your morning went poorly, think about your current project, and do the best you can for the rest of the afternoon. Started a conversation with your boss on the wrong foot? Rather than trying to “make up” for the beginning, just focus on the moment at hand.

When something important does go wrong—say, losing your biggest client to a competitor—experts suggest practicing “[radical acceptance](#).” Radical acceptance doesn't mean you agree with what happened, and it doesn't require you to be happy or satisfied that the event took place. Instead, radical acceptance simply means you acknowledge the reality of what happened. This attitude can help you focus your energy on your next steps, rather than clinging to a grudge or constantly trying to understand someone's actions.

7. Visualize success

Mindfulness writers suggest leaving the present in one specific case: visualizing success. If you have the time, these authors [recommend](#) meditating before an important call, review, or conversation, picturing the best possible outcome.

Even if you don't achieve success the first few times, it's the practice here that's critical. Over time, you train your brain to take in the good, practice gratitude, and be more open to accomplishment.

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You may not have time to try all of these tips at once, but the good news is that even just one or two can be a big help. Try practicing the tips you can, and see what sort of difference it makes. Sometimes just giving yourself permission to pause is the best first step.

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