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Mindfulness and Mastery in the Workplace:

21 Ways to Reduce Stress during the Workday

THIS ARTICLE EMERGED out of a conversation initiated by Thich Nhat Hanh following the conclusion of a five-day mindfulness retreat in 1987. He had asked the participants to speak together about practical methods they used to integrate mindfulness into everyday life. Most people reported that this was a struggle and that the "how" of doing so was at best, elusive. Since this has been an explicit focus of our approach at the Stress Reduction Clinic, after talking about the clinic work and my own attempts to weave practice into the fabric of my everyday life, Amie Kotler, who also participated in the discussion and is the editor of Parallax Press, asked me to write this article.

Over the past seventeen years, the Stress Reduction Clinic at the University of Massachusetts Medical Center has introduced more than 8,000 people to mindfulness practice. The clinic is the heart of an over-arching community known as the Center for Mindfulness in Medicine, Health Care, and Society and offers medical patients a substantive, educationally oriented approach we call *mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR)*.

As an instructor, I have had the good fortune of working with several hundred patients/participants each year. In the context of preventive and behavioral medicine, mindfulness practice is a vehicle that assists people in learning to tap deep internal resources for renewal, increase psychosocial hardiness, and make contact with previously unconceived of possibilities and ways of being. Besides well-documented reductions in both medical and psychological symptoms, participants report an increased sense of self-esteem, shifts in their sense of self that afford them the ability to care for themselves while better understanding their fellow human beings, a palpable deepening of self-trust, and for some, a finer appreciation for the preciousness of everyday life.

In addition to this ongoing clinical work, I have the opportunity to teach in a wide variety of settings in both the public and private sectors. These programs are tailored to individual, corporate, or institutional needs with an underlying emphasis on the cultivation and application of mindfulness and mastery in the workplace. Out of one such program evolved: *21 Ways to Reduce Stress During the Workday*.

During a follow-up program for secretarial staff, I was moved by their struggle to practically integrate the stability and sense of connectedness that they sometimes felt during the sitting meditation practice into their daily lives while at work. In response to their struggle, "21 Ways" came into print. In developing these ways, I proceeded by simply asking myself: How do I attempt to handle ongoing stress while at work? -- actually from the time I awaken in the morning until I return home at the end of the formal workday. How do I attempt to stitch mindfulness into the cloth my daily life? What helps me to wake up when I have become intoxicated by the sheer momentum and urgency of living?

Mindfulness harnesses our capacity to be aware of what is going on in our bodies, minds, and hearts in the world -- and in the work place. As we learn to pay closer attention to what is occurring within and around us, one thing we begin to discover is that we are swimming in an unavoidable sea of constantly changing events. In the domain of stress reactivity, the technical term for this fluctuating reality is called a *stressor*. Stressors are ever-present events that we are continually adapting to. Some tend to be met with ease and others draw us away from our sense

of stability. The crucial difference in our responses to stressors usually has to do with fear and our perception of feeling threatened or overly taxed by an event, be it either internal or external in origin. Seen from a psychological viewpoint, stress is a relational *transaction* between a person and her environment. From this transactional point of view, our perception and appraisal of the events as either being over-taxing to our inner and outer resources (threatening) or capable of being handled makes a tremendous difference.

Because many of our perceptions and appraisals are operating below the current threshold of our awareness, often we don't even know that our resources are being overly taxed. Conversely, because we have all been conditioned by habit and history, events that are not, or may no longer be threatening are often reacted to as if they are threatening. Therefore, developing our ability to see and understand what is going on inside and around us is an essential skill if we are to be less subject to these unconsciously driven reactions.

Changing the way we see ourselves in relationship to events actually alters our experience of those events, their impact in our lives, as well as our capacity to maintain our well being in the midst of such events. Given this viewpoint, the cultivation of mindfulness -- our capacity to be aware and to understand ourselves and the world around us -- is crucial to our ability to handle stress effectively.

Primarily, what the secretaries were struggling with was the gap between the awareness and stability they were beginning to touch in the domain of formal practice, and the dissipation of awareness and consequent dissonance experienced in the workday environment and their usual "workday mind." What they wanted was a vehicle for integrating "formal practice" into everyday life.

Although this need for integration is the same for all of us, notions about how to work in such a manner remain largely conceptual unless we develop concrete ways of practicing that transform theory into a living reality. This is exactly what the "21 Ways" provided. The participants got enthusiastic about these suggestions because it provided them something solid to work with when attempting to "bridge the gap" and integrate mindfulness into their workplace.

Since then, I have shared these "ways" with many workshop participants and continue to receive letters and telephone calls from people who have either added to the list or posted them as convenient reminders in strategic locations such as office doorways, restroom mirrors, dashboards, and lunch rooms. I've been gladdened to hear from them and happy that by its very nature, the list is incomplete and therefore full of possibility.

Each of these "21 Ways" can be seen as preventive -- a strengthening of your stress immunity, or as recuperative -- a means of recovering your balance following a difficult experience. Most importantly, they are methods for knowing, and if possible, modifying our habitual reactions in the midst of adversity. As you begin working with this list you'll notice that it includes pre-, during, and post-work suggestions. Although arbitrary, these distinctions might be initially useful to you. Incorporating awareness practice into your life will necessitate a skillful effort that includes commitment, patience, and repetition. It may be helpful to think of yourself as entering a living laboratory where the elements of your life constitute the ingredients of a lively, educational process. Allowing yourself to be a beginner is refreshing. Give yourself the room to experiment without self-criticism. Allow your curiosity to carry you further into the *process*.

At the heart of workday practice is the intention to be aware of and connected to whatever is happening inside and around us (mindfulness) as well as the determination to initiate change when called for (mastery). A useful example of this process is revealed in the following story told to me some years ago by a physician friend. I call this story, *Little Green Dots*.

My friend told me that as his practice grew busier and more demanding, he began to develop

minor, transient symptoms that included increased neck and shoulder tension, fatigue, and irritability. Initially, these symptoms were benign, disappearing after a good night's rest or a relaxing weekend. But as his medical practice continued to grow, the symptoms became persistent and, much to his chagrin, he noticed that he was becoming a "chronic clock-watcher."

One day, while attending to his normal clinical duties, he had a revelation. He walked over to his secretary's supply cabinet and pulled out a package of "little green dots" used for color-coding the files. He placed one on his watch and decided that since he couldn't stop looking at his watch, he'd use the dot as a visual reminder to center himself by taking one conscious breath and dropping his shoulders.

The next day he placed a dot on the wall clock because he realized, "If I'm not looking at the one on my wrist, I'm looking at the one on the wall." He continued this practice and by the end of the week he had placed a green dot on every exam room doorknob. A few weeks after initiating this workday practice, he said that much to his own surprise, he had stopped, taken a conscious breath, and relaxed his shoulders one hundred times in a single day. This simple, persistent decision to be mindful had been for him, transformative. He felt much better. Most importantly, his patients began telling him that he was "much more like himself." For him, that was the icing on the cake.

The story is simple and direct. Using what is constantly before us as a way of awakening to our innate capacity for stability and calmness is essential if we wish to thrive in the midst of our demanding lives.

Years ago, while working with a group of harried receptionists who described their reaction to the telephone ring as feeling much like Pavlov's dogs, I suggested that they use the first ring of the telephone as a reminder to take one breath, return to themselves, and then pick up the phone. For many, this simple practice became a powerful agent of change. Some said that people they had spoken with for years on the telephone didn't recognize their voices. Clients told them that they were speaking in a more measured pace and their voices had settled into the lower ranges. For the receptionists, the telephone no longer elicited the usual patterned reaction. They had learned to respond to this relentless, invasive, ubiquitous sound rather than to react. Through the action of awareness, the ring of the telephone had shifted from an object of unconscious threat and demand to a vehicle for cultivating greater awareness and skillful action.

Having experimented with the "green dots" on my own watch, I have found that like any other method, they can quickly sink into the realm of the unconscious. Pretty soon, like the second hand, numbers, or date indicator, the dots become just another part of the watch face, completely unseen, of no help -- actually perpetuating more unawareness.

No matter what is chosen as a reminder, our real work is to remember. This remembering is called mindfulness.

The following "21 Ways" are simply a road map. Allow your curiosity and the sense of possibility to unfold as you explore the territory, discovering your own "ways."

21 Ways to Reduce Stress During the Workday

1. Take five to thirty minutes in the morning to be quiet and meditate, and/or lie down and be with yourself...gaze out the window, listen to the sounds of nature, or take a slow quiet walk.
2. While your car is warming up, try taking a minute to quietly pay attention to your breathing.
3. While driving, become aware of body tension, e.g. hands wrapped tightly around the steering wheel, shoulders raised, stomach tight, etc., consciously working at releasing, dissolving that tension...Does being tense help you to drive better? What does it feel like to relax and drive?
4. Decide not to play the radio and be with your own sound.

5. On the interstate, experiment with riding in the right lane, going five miles below the speed limit.
6. Pay attention to your breathing and to the sky, trees, or quality of your mind, when stopped at a red light or toll plaza.
7. Take a moment to orient yourself to your workday once you park your car at the workplace. Use the walk across the parking lot to step into your life. To know where you are and where you are going.
8. While sitting at your desk, keyboard, etc., pay attention to bodily sensations, again consciously attempting to relax and rid yourself of excess tension.
9. Use your breaks to truly relax rather than simply "pausing." For instance, instead of having coffee, a cigarette, or reading, try taking a short walk -- or sitting at your desk and renewing yourself.
10. For lunch, try changing your environment. This can be helpful.
11. Try closing your door (if you have one) and take some time to consciously relax.
12. Decide to stop for one to three minutes every hour during the workday. Become aware of your breathing and bodily sensations, allowing the mind to settle in as a time to regroup and recoup.
13. Use the everyday cues in your environment as reminders to "center" yourself, e.g. the telephone ringing, sitting at the computer terminal, etc.
14. Take some time at lunch or other moments in the day to speak with close associates. Try choosing topics that are not necessarily work related.
15. Choose to eat one or two lunches per week in silence. Use this as a time to eat slowly and be with yourself.
16. At the end of the workday, try retracing today's activities, acknowledging and congratulating yourself for what you've accomplished and then make a list *for tomorrow*. You've done enough for today!
17. Pay attention to the short walk to your car -- breathing the crisp or warm air. Feel the cold or warmth of your body. What might happen if you open up to and accept these environmental conditions and bodily sensations rather than resist them? Listen to the sounds outside your workplace. Can you walk without feeling rushed? What happens when you slow down?
18. At the end of the workday, while your car is warming up, sit quietly and consciously make the transition from work to home -- take a moment to simply *be* -- enjoy it for a moment. Like most of us, you're heading into your next full-time job -- home!
19. While driving, notice if you are rushing. What does this feel like? What could you do about it? Remember, you've got more control than you might imagine.
20. When you pull into the driveway or park on the street, take a minute to orient yourself to being with your family members or to entering your home.
21. Try changing out of work clothes when you get home. This simple act might help you to make a smoother transition into your next "role" -- much of the time you can probably "spare" five minutes to do this. Say hello to each of your family members or to the people you live with. Take a moment to look in their eyes. If possible, make the time to take five to ten minutes to be quiet and still. If you live alone, feel what it is like to enter the quietness of your home, the feeling of entering your own environment.

Engaged Buddhist Reader

Edited by Arnold Kotler

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