



Meditation at Work

Meditation at work: How to manage information and manage your mind

*This happens to me on more days than most: I am in a meeting, or working against a deadline, and it occurs to me that I am barely breathing. I'm not holding my breath, but my breathing is shallow, my chest and diaphragm tight and withholding, like I'm conserving air; ... a little like I've just discovered I'm under water.*¹

Like this freelancer turned full-time writer, it's easy to feel consumed by work and everything else outside of it. Sorting through it all feels like a tall order sometimes—so many tasks, so many to do's, so much information. It's no wonder our minds wander *47 percent of the time*. The mental and emotional to-and-fro is exhausting and can lead to unhappiness.

Up your happiness *and* your workplace productivity with the thing that's making wellness headline news—meditation. Meditation is far more than monks and mountains. It offers a slew of benefits directly related to the workplace. Things like:²

- Reduced stress, depression and anxiety
- Reduced risk of heart disease and high blood pressure
- Improved concentration, focus and productivity
- Greater control of your thoughts and a sense of calm, peace and balance
- Increased blood flow and energy

Taking just a few minutes to quiet the mind makes mental information management easier. At work, meditation is an effective way to enhance work productivity and performance because of its emphasis on focus, calm and clarity. Use this Blue Paper® to learn how to practice meditation and then use it as a guide to harness meditation's positive effects on productivity at your office.

From the top: Terms

There are a handful of critical terms to understand about meditation before going on to discuss the concept itself. First, a look at *stress* and *well-being*:

¹ Kirsch, Melissa. "Meditation at Work: Breathing Lessons." Melissa Kirsch: Meditation at Work: Breathing Lesson. TheHuffingtonPost.com, 09 Mar. 2011. Web. 21 Feb. 2013. <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/melissa-kirsch/meditation-at-work_b_831838.html>.

² "10 Benefits of Meditation." Infographic A Day, 2 Dec. 2012. Web. 21 Feb. 2013. <<http://infographicaday.com/infographic-10-benefits-of-meditation/>>.



- **Stress.**³ A bodily response, stress begins in a very small part of the brain known as the amygdala. There, the body's "fight or flight" response is generated. Negative stress is the most common connotation of the term, but there's a healthy kind of stress, too. It's called *eustress*. Eustress compels us to keep going when we derive energy from the task at-hand—even if it's exhausting.
- **Well-being.**⁴ A broad term, well-being applies to the economic, emotional, mental physical, psychological, social and spiritual state of a person or group.

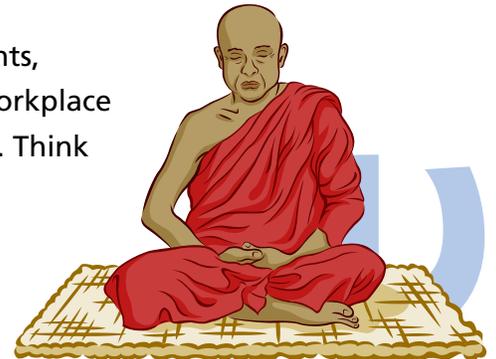
Andy Puddicombe knows all about stress and what stress can do to a person, especially a young person. After a traumatic event in his early 20's, Andy decided to confront his stress head-on by leaving his home in the United Kingdom for the Himalayas. There, he joined a monastery, became a monk and committed himself to the study of meditation, what he calls *focused relaxation*. It's about "familiarization with the present moment," he says. "It's recognizing thoughts coming and going with no judgment."

Andy also knows about positive well-being. After a long stay in Asia, he returned home to the UK and established [HeadSpace](#), a Web community committed to helping people understand meditation and the benefits to be gained from it. In his [TED talk](#), Andy speaks of one of the fundamental tenants of the practice, namely the ability to mentally "step back," which affords us all a very different perspective. "We can't change what happens to us, but we can change the way we experience it and *that's* the potential that comes with meditation."

Together, let's take a look at meditation and explore the value it presents, specifically at work in terms of productivity. Even on a good day, the workplace tends to be a high-stress environment where productivity is a tall order. Think of meditation as a means to a more productive, more profitable end.

Too much information, too much stress, too much pressure

How often do you use your cell phone or tablet? You probably have a mobile device within arm's reach right now just in case you need to respond to the *buzz* or *beep* it elicits with each new email, text message or phone call. The advent of mobile devices means we are absorbing and processing information at unprecedented levels; it's a wonder our minds are even able to keep up with the incessant influx of information!



³ Benson, Herbert, and Bronwyn Fryer. "Are You Working Too Hard?" *Harvard Business Review*, Nov. 2005. Web. 21 Feb. 2013. <<http://hbr.org/2005/11/are-you-working-too-hard/ar/1>>.

⁴ "Well-being." *Wikipedia*. Wikimedia Foundation, 28 Feb. 2013. Web. 08 Mar. 2013. <<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Well-being>>.

Michael Carroll is a meditation teacher for business leaders. "There is so much information coming at us, we struggle to remain agile which is the most critical leadership skill."⁵ This information overload and excessive distraction are directly tied to low productivity levels. In fact, it costs the U.S. economy upwards of \$900 billion each year.⁶ That's a problem worth preventing and it's actually a problem that *can be prevented*.

On the other hand, environments with an overemphasis on productivity actually *decrease* productivity so that what begins as mindfulness fast becomes *mindlessness*.⁷ Where constant distraction takes away from one's ability to focus and be productive, too much pressure to perform well doesn't serve employees, either. Sounds like an odd relationship, but it's true.⁸ There is a correlation between the amount of stress we experience and the level of our performance. It's called the Yerkes-Dodson Curve, illustrated below:

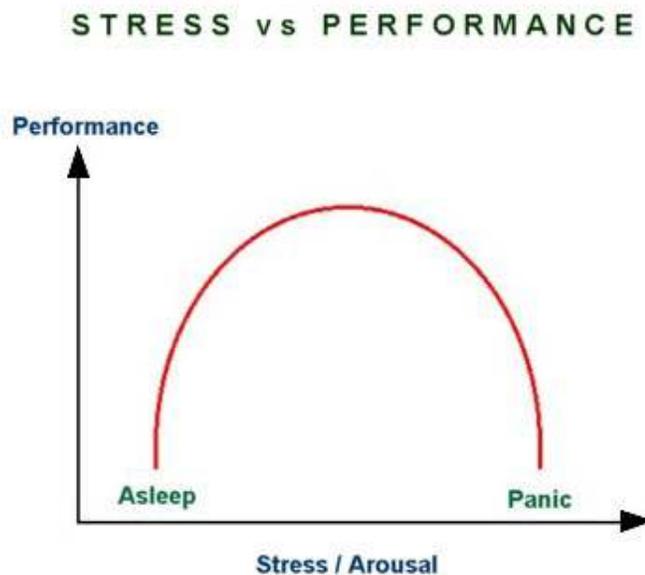


Figure 1. The Yerkes-Dodson Curve

Source: <http://www.theairlinepilots.com/medical/effectsofstress.htm>

In 1908, two Harvard scientists, Robert Yerkes and John Dodson, demonstrated the delicate relationship between stress and performance. They found that stress is sometimes necessary to keep us going—think pre-race or before a big test—but it doesn't take much to throw this relationship off balance. Too much stress and performance drops precipitously.

⁵ Serafin, Tatiana. "Sit. Breathe. Be a Better Leader." *Inc.com*, 18 Oct. 2011. Web. 21 Feb. 2013. <<http://www.inc.com/articles/201110/more-and-more-entrepreneurs-meditate-how-and-why-you-should-too.html>>.

⁶ Woods, Wendy. "Meditating at Work: A New Approach to Managing Overload." *Institute of Noetic Science*, Feb. 2012. Web. 21 Feb. 2013. <<http://noetic.org/noetic/issue-nineteen-february/meditating-at-work/>>.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*

Entrepreneur

When our information-saturated and pressurized worlds are compounded by day-to-day wins and losses, it's easy to see the origin of our stress—"an energy zapper"⁹ that's responsible for more than 60 percent of doctor's visits.¹⁰ That's why it's important to be able to manage workplace setbacks before they go on to hinder our ability to think clearly and work well.

Left unaddressed, those minor setbacks turn into major challenges that contribute to unhealthy levels of stress. Higher stress levels tend to result in a decline in workplace productivity. Any decline in productivity, whether it's felt by an individual or a group, has a direct impact on your bottom line. Businesses are defined in large part by their employees and their collective well-being. A business won't thrive if its employees can't. In fact, "80 percent of workplace success is directly related to emotional intelligence, or the ability to manage oneself, relate to others, and deal with life's pressures."¹¹

Learning to control stress via meditation heightens energy levels, improves focus and ultimately adds time to the day. It is a proven way to keep your employees productive, to ensure they remain focused and forward-thinking *and* to keep your bottom line intact.

The difference meditation makes

Before previewing the numbers that make the case for meditation, a quick look at who trusts it first. Rocker and hip-hopper Russell Simmons meditates; so does Bill Ford and Ray Dalio, founder of the Bridgewater Alliance. When it comes to their well-being, each of those men—all powerhouses in their respective industries—believes in the value of meditation. A number of large businesses also trust meditation to further their employees, giants like Google®, eBay®, Prentice Hall® and GlaxoSmithKline® to name a few.¹² Google's "Search Inside Yourself" classes, which meld science, meditation and business expertise, have helped Google's brightest to become even brighter with participants noting lower stress levels and improved focus.¹³

When a person meditates, they experience a kind of relaxation that acts as a catalyst to *sustained* creativity. This is called a "new normal state."¹⁴ There



9 Tabaka, Marla. "How to Increase Productivity." *Inc.com*, 15 Nov. 2010. Web. 21 Feb. 2013. <<http://www.inc.com/marla-tabaka/decrease-stress-increase-productivity-.html>>.

10 Benson, Herbert, and Bronwyn Fryer. "Are You Working Too Hard?" *Harvard Business Review*, Nov. 2005. Web. 21 Feb. 2013. <<http://hbr.org/2005/11/are-you-working-too-hard/ar1>>.

11 Woods, Wendy. "Meditating at Work: A New Approach to Managing Overload." *Institute of Noetic Science*, Feb. 2012. Web. 21 Feb. 2013. <<http://noetic.org/noeticissue-nineteen-february/meditating-at-work/>>.

12 Bruzzese, Anita. "Meditation Can Keep You More Focused at Work, Study Says." *Meditation Can Give You Gains at Work - USATODAY.com*. USE TODAY, 10 July 2012. Web. J Feb. 2013. <<http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/money/jo.bcenter/workplace/bruzzese/story/2012-07-08/meditation-helps-your-work/56071024/1>>.

13 *Ibid*.

14 Woods, Wendy. "Meditating at Work: A New Approach to Managing Overload." *Institute of Noetic Science*, Feb. 2012. Web. 21 Feb. 2013. <<http://noetic.org/noeticissue-nineteen-february/meditating-at-work/>>.

are many other benefits of meditation, but the reason these people and organizations have already thrown their weight behind its practice is because the numbers prove it. Here are a number of studies to consider:¹⁵

- In one study by the University of Washington, researchers discovered that those people with meditation training remained on-task longer and with less distraction than those who did not.
- A study on a specific kind of meditation called mindfulness meditation found that the part of the brain responsible for the stress response actually decreased in size.
- In 2011, an amalgam of researchers from Harvard®, MIT® and Massachusetts General Hospital noted that participants just out of an 8-week exercise in mindful meditation were better able to regulate a special kind of brain wave that eliminates distractions.¹⁶
- Stanford University®, in the same year, determined that participants who practiced a mere four minutes of loving-kindness meditation saw an increase of feelings of “social connectedness and positivity towards strangers.”
- Meditation has also proven helpful in separating matters of both personal and professional importance, a tremendous help in terms of decision-making.

The coolest part is this: Multiple studies reported a change in the structure of the brain, an indication that the effects of meditation are lasting. All things considered, what's *not* to love?

How to meditate

Meditation is very simple, but like many other activities, it requires practice in order to do it well. Here's a quick 1-2-3 guide to meditation:¹⁷

1. Find a quiet place where you will not be disturbed and sit with a straight back.
2. Close your eyes or zero in on a point in the distance. Focus your mind on that object and “watch” your mind naturally move from one thought to the next.
3. Stay in-tune with your body and your mind by breathing slow, deep breaths. Fill your whole chest with air, hold it for a moment, then let it out slowly.



¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Trafton, Anne. “The Benefits of Meditation.” MIT’s News Office, 4 May 2011. Web. 21 Feb. 2013. <<http://web.mit.edu/newsoffice/2011/meditation-0505.html>>.

¹⁷ “3 Ideas for Meditating at Work.” How To Meditate at Work | Mind Yourself Chicago. Mind Yourself Chicago, 15 Sept. 2012. Web. 21 Feb. 2013. <<http://www.mindyourselfchicago.com/3-ideas-for-meditating-at-work/>>.

That's the simplest way to meditate, by "observing the breath," but there are many other ways to meditate, too. What follows are all variations of the mindfulness method, which "focuses on paying attention to one's current state and truly focusing on the present moment, eliminating the anxiety and fretting that can plague the unfocused mind."¹⁸ Here's a look:¹⁹

- **One-word mantra.** Pick one word and repeat it to yourself. Go for a positive word like "peace" or "calm" and say the word in your mind deliberately. Take breaks in between and allow your mind to wander naturally, but use your word to circle back and stay focused.
- **Walking meditation.** A great kind of meditation for the afternoon, this is ideal for bright and sunny afternoons when you just want to get out of the office. Calm your breathing and begin to walk. Pay attention to your feet and how they connect with the ground beneath it.
- **Hold your breath.** It's as simple as it sounds. Breathe deeply, hold it in and exhale slowly. Repeat the steps as often as you need to until you begin to feel a sense of calm.
- **Musical meditation.** You may think of meditation music as birds chirping or streams rushing. That's not the case. Taking a moment to listen to a good song, really zeroing in on the music and the lyrics, is still taking a break and a taking step back from the task at-hand. Sync yourself with the music, any kind of music, and remember all the while to keep breathing.

You probably won't derive immediate joy from meditation, but it will help you.²⁰ At first, you may even be a little restless, but think of meditation as an exercise, like weightlifting. You won't see bigger muscles in a day, a week, or even a month after you hit the gym. But, over time, your most prized muscle—your mind—will become stronger.

Make meditation happen

Herbert Benson, M.D., is the founder of the Mind/Body Medical Institute in Chestnut Hill, Massachusetts. He co-authored a book entitled *The Breakout Principle* with William Proctor in 2003. In it, they posit that unmanaged stress can be *destructive*. They proffer a way to prevent "burnout" over time by alternating passive and active work activities to help regulate the amount of stress at work. Whether or not company managers implement their methodology doesn't matter so long as they "do something to address the rampant negative effects of workplace stress if they want to compete effectively."²¹

¹⁸ Meditation. Visual.ly, n.d. Web. 21 Feb. 2013. <<http://visual.ly/meditation>>.

¹⁹ Overey, Jason Lee. "12 Most Powerful Ways to Meditate Quickly at Work." *12 Most*, 18 Jan. 2012. Web. 21 Feb. 2013. <<http://12most.com/2012/01/18/12-powerful-ways-meditate-quickly-work/>>.

²⁰ Puff, Robert. "No More Excuses! How to Meditate Every Day." *Psychology Today*, 15 Feb. 2012. Web. 21 Feb. 2013. <<http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/meditation-modern-life/201202/no-more-excuses-how-meditate-every-day>>.

²¹ Benson, Herbert, and Bronwyn Fryer. "Are You Working Too Hard?" *Harvard Business Review*, Nov. 2005. Web. 21 Feb. 2013. <<http://hbr.org/2005/11/are-you-working-too-hard/ar1>>.



What with 90 percent of today's thoughts and acts coming through as tomorrow's thoughts and acts, action is essential.²² Meditation cuts the routine. Consider what follows as a crash course about how to implement meditation to help your employees cope with information overload and the pressure of productivity.

Just as Benson and Proctor recommend, it's important to do something. You don't have to do much. Take these simple ideas as starting points.

- **Learn first.** Seek people in your area who specialize in meditation. Drop a line and ask if they're able to serve as a kind of resource to help you get your meditation mojo going.
- **Expert advice.** Ask them, also, if they'd be willing to spare part of a day to speak to your employees about their experience and what meditation can do for them. Offer various days and times if you have a bigger company and, if you really want to get serious, mandate that every employee attends.
- **Beginning meditation for beginners.** After the initial expert seminar, create opportunities for employees to engage in beginning meditation courses. Bring someone in-house to help them understand the step-by-step of the practice and get them moving in the right direction. It should be a non-threatening class that helps them feel more comfortable with the idea of meditating.
- **Professionals or podcasts.** You can continue to schedule an external meditation guide to lead employees through scheduled meditation. As a more cost-effective alternative, look around for CDs or podcasts of meditation tutorials and classes. That way, employees who become especially engaged with meditation, can begin to take over organizing and facilitating daily employee meditation sessions with a little audio guidance.
- **It's a tool, not a test.** Company-wide meditation should be noncompetitive, so if you plan to implement meditation, do so in an effort to help everyone become a better person and a better professional.
- **Groups work.** A trend tends to stick around and last a lot longer when people do things together. Meditation can be a tricky thing to grasp. Encourage employees to work together and help one another.



²² "How Meditation Increases Your Motivation." EOC Institute, n.d. Web. 21 Feb. 2013. <http://www.eocinstitute.org/How_meditation_increases_your_motivation_s/510.htm>

- **Shoot for mornings.** The AM tends to be the best and most effective time to facilitate meditation sessions. That way, employees can clear their minds and mentally prepare for their day before it actually begins. It will help instill a sense of calm for work, which is invaluable in terms of stress management.

If you aim to make meditation a company-wide venture, start now and start with a purpose. You won't be hearing excuses like "I don't know how" and "I don't have time" if you make meditation a company priority. Working to provide those opportunities to *help* employees get involved and stay involved will mean a lot to your employees, but it will mean even more to you when you began to see signs of rising productivity and it won't take long to see and celebrate the numbers.

But, before any of this can happen, you'll likely have to talk with other movers and shakers within your business. As with any new initiative, it cannot be done alone. Build the case for meditation with the stars in the C-Suite by explaining that meditation *works* and, furthermore, that it's good *for* work.

A lack of awareness of how we're feeling or what we're thinking ultimately impacts decisions and actions, both of which are very much business issues. If you help people discover new ways to take action and meet those tough decisions with gusto, they'll thank you for it later with a greater productivity and rave-worthy performance. As for you, as their leader, you'll have more control over your emotions and your mind, too. "Because leaders are under so much stress and because there is that performance requirement you have to look at how to be much more productive and better at what you do," says executive coach Ray Williams.²³



Before we sign off, below are two case studies on the victories of two corporations that believed in the power of meditation. Both companies, Genentech and General Mills, started dabbling in meditation more than seven years ago. And, since that time, both have reaped incredible rewards as a result of simply taking the time to help their senior leadership teams, management teams and employees better manage information ... and their minds.

Case study 1: Genentech²⁴

In 2006, Genentech began offering employees the option of enrolling in meditation and mindfulness classes to a more far-reaching initiative called a Personal Excellence Program, or PEP, which is rooted in meditation to drive

²³ Serafin, Tatiana. "Sit. Breathe. Be a Better Leader." *Inc.com*, 18 Oct. 2011. Web. 21 Feb. 2013. <<http://www.inc.com/articles/201110/more-and-more-entrepreneurs-meditate-how-and-why-you-should-too.html>>.

²⁴ Woods, Wendy. "Meditating at Work: A New Approach to Managing Overload." *Institute of Noetic Science*, Feb. 2012. Web. 21 Feb. 2013. <<http://noetic.org/noetic/issue-nineteen-february/meditating-at-work/>>.

development and innovation. Altogether, the course is 10 months long. In that time, participants go through three separate phases. Here's what the program yielded:

- Increased employee satisfaction by 10-20 percent
- Increased customer satisfaction by 12 percent
- A huge jump—50 percent—in employee communication, collaboration, conflict management and coaching.
- A clear majority of participants indicated a “significant measurable business impact.”

Since its beginnings, thousands of Genentech employees have gone through the PEP program. And, as a result of its success, the company instituted a “graduate” program to boot.

Case Study 2: General Mills²⁵

In the same year, 2006, General Mills ushered in a program called The Mindful Leadership Series, a hearty combination of meditation, yoga and dialogue. The program was created to help teach corporate leadership how to “be more mindful of both themselves and others to tap into their internal capacities.” Here are the results from a follow-up study in 2009:

- There was a marked increase (23 to 83 percent) in the number of participants that “take time each day to optimize personal productivity.”
- There was another marked increase (from 32 to 82 percent) of the number of participants that “make time on most days to eliminate some tasks/meetings with limited productivity value.”
- Eighty percent of participants reported a “positive change in their ability to make better decisions with more clarity.”
- And, finally, 89 percent noted “enhanced listening capabilities, to both others and themselves.”

Because of such positive outcomes, General Mills has since introduced a seven-week course for *all* levels in the organization ... because it's *that* good.



²⁵ Woods, Wendy. “Meditating at Work: A New Approach to Managing Overload.” Institute of Noetic Science, Feb. 2012. Web. 21 Feb. 2013. <<http://noetic.org/noetic/issue-nineteen-february/meditating-at-work/>>.

Conclusion

We're on information overload and we're being asked to do more and make more, *more* often. Our day-to-day is stressful. And, well, it's unhealthy and unsustainable.

Meditation is one small way to change all that. Meditation has the power to help you and your employees better manage information and your mind. It doesn't require a lot of time, at least not all at once, but it does require commitment. By committing to meditation you're committing yourself to a calmer, more collected mind, one that will help you turn in an unprecedented performance at work.



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