

Working mindfully

Can mindfulness improve work-related wellbeing and work effectiveness? **William Van Gordon, Edo Shonin, Katie Skelton and Mark Griffiths** consider some of the recent findings

There is currently growing interest among occupational stakeholders in the applications of mindfulness in the workplace. In addition to discussing the potential role that mindfulness may have in improving psychological wellbeing inside and outside of work, previous *Counselling at Work* articles on mindfulness have explored the change management implications associated with rolling out mindfulness interventions at the organisational level.^{1,2} Following a brief explanation of what we mean by the term 'mindfulness', this article complements these earlier perspectives by providing: (i) an up-to-date overview – with a focus on some of our own empirical work – of key developments and findings in occupation-focused mindfulness research, (ii) a discussion of the key mechanisms of action by which mindfulness may improve work-related wellbeing and job performance, and (iii) practical recommendations for the effective teaching of mindfulness in the workplace.

What is mindfulness?

Mindfulness is a form of meditation that derives from Buddhist practice.³ The Buddhist teachings assert that because the future never actually arrives and the past remains history, the only time available to individuals where they can fully embrace and experience their life is the present moment.³ Mindfulness is defined as the process of engaging a full, direct, and active awareness of experienced phenomena that is (i) spiritual in aspect, and (ii) maintained from one moment to the next.^{4,5}

Although in Western academia there is ongoing debate as to the precise facets of mindfulness, it is generally accepted that mindfulness: (i) is fundamentally concerned with becoming more aware of the present moment, (ii) can and should be practised during everyday activities and not just when seated in formal meditation, (iii) is cultivated more easily by using a 'meditative anchor' to centre the mind – such as observing the breath, (iv) should not entail any kind of forced breathing (ie the breath should be allowed to follow its natural course), (v) requires deliberate effort and sustained meditative awareness, and (vi) involves observing both sensory and cognitive-affective processes.⁴

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Overview of recent research

Compared to research investigating the utility of mindfulness in clinical settings, empirical enquiry into the applications of mindfulness in the workplace has progressed at a much slower pace. Despite this, several reasonably large-scale randomised controlled trials (RCTs) have been conducted, providing evidence suggesting that mindfulness can improve both mental health and wellbeing at work, and job performance.⁶ Indeed, both work-related wellbeing and job performance were the primary outcomes of an RCT that we conducted involving 152 office-based middle-hierarchy managers.⁷ We selected middle-hierarchy managers (ie line managers with direct responsibility for overseeing staff but who in turn reported to a more senior manager) as the target population for our study because this employee group is considered to be particularly at risk of work-related stress. Middle-hierarchy managers are typically exposed to both upwards and downwards management demands such that they frequently find themselves acting as a 'buffer' between top-level decision makers and non-management employees.^{7,8}



Participants of our study received an eight-week secular mindfulness intervention that we developed, known as Meditation Awareness Training (MAT). As with most mindfulness-based interventions (MBIs), MAT is formatted for group delivery and the intervention runs for a period of eight weeks. Employees attend weekly 90-minute workshops and receive a CD of guided meditations to facilitate daily self-practice. The weekly sessions comprise three distinct phases:

- a taught/presentation component (approximately 35 minutes)
- a facilitated group discussion component (approximately 25 minutes), and
- a guided meditation and/or mindfulness exercise (approximately 20 minutes).

On a four-weekly basis, employees are invited to attend a one-to-one support session (of 50-minute duration) with the programme facilitator. MAT instructors are required to have a minimum of three years' supervised meditation training and the support sessions provide an opportunity for employees to discuss their individual progress and/or problems with the programme.⁹

Following completion of the eight-week MAT intervention and compared to a non-meditating active control condition, middle managers who received MAT demonstrated statistically significant improvements in levels of: (i) work-related stress, (ii) job satisfaction, (iii) psychological distress, and (iv) employer-rated job performance.⁷ These findings were consistent with two further occupation-focused MAT studies that we conducted: (i) a qualitative study – also involving middle-hierarchy managers – in which it was demonstrated that MAT facilitated improvements in levels of psychological wellbeing inside and outside of work, attitudes towards work, job performance (including strategic foresight and decision-making aptitude), and organisational citizenship,⁵ and (ii) a case study involving a director of a blue chip company who experienced clinically significant improvements in levels of work addiction, sleep quality and psychological distress.¹⁰

Findings from our above-mentioned studies appear to be consistent with other recent studies of mindfulness that have been conducted in occupational contexts. For example, in a controlled study of an MBI delivered to 43 call centre employees, MBI group participants demonstrated significant improvements compared to non-meditating control group participants in levels of mindfulness, stress, anxiety/depression, fatigue, and negative affect.¹¹ The satisfaction level of participants' internal clients likewise significantly increased as a result of the intervention. A further recent study involving university employees (186 faculty and staff members) at risk of (or diagnosed with) cardiovascular disease utilised an RCT design and found that, compared to a non-meditating control group, MBI participants demonstrated significant increases in levels of mindfulness as well as a trend towards lower levels of C-reactive protein (a biomarker for cardiovascular disease).¹² Another recent study utilising a cross-sectional design and comprising 98 individuals working in the US restaurant industry, found a positive relationship between workplace mindfulness and job performance as well as support for an inverse relationship between workplace mindfulness and turnover intention (ie employees' intention to leave their job).¹³

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Mechanisms of action

Existing psychological models of work-related stress tend to be based on an 'exposure-environmental' model of work stress.⁷ In such models, work-related stress is considered to be a function of the extent to which employees are exposed to sub-optimal working conditions (eg inadequate support systems, inflexible working hours, conflicting demands, overly-taxing and/or unrealistic deadlines, or low-work autonomy).^{5,7,14} This manner of conceptualising work-related stress emphasises the importance of the employee's 'external' work environment rather than their 'internal' psychological environment.⁷ However, although in the various MAT studies outlined above, the intervention did not involve making any changes to participants' 'external' working conditions, those employees who received mindfulness training derived greater satisfaction from their work, showed improved levels of wellbeing, and also carried out their job more effectively.

By using mindfulness to facilitate a perceptual shift in how employees respond and relate to sensory and psychological stimuli, it seems that they are better able to objectify their cognitive processes and to apprehend them as passing phenomena.^{6,14} This manner of transferring the locus of control for stress from external work conditions to internal metacognitive and attentional resources helps employees gain back a sense of control in their working environment.^{5,7,14} Mindfulness appears to help depersonalise negative work-related experiences such that employees begin to regard all work encounters – both positive and negative – from the same perspective. Consequently, as employees become gradually more experienced at practising mindfulness, it appears that the working environment is increasingly regarded as a place or practice ground for them to further advance their mindfulness practice as well as an opportunity to grow and develop as human beings.^{5,7,10}

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Practical recommendations for teaching mindfulness in the workplace

Based on our own experience of delivering mindfulness training programmes in occupational settings, we offer the following five recommendations for the effective teaching and delivery of mindfulness in the workplace:

1 Focus on the breath: During mindfulness practice, the breath plays a vital role in helping to calm and centre the mind. During mindfulness practice, the idea is to use the breath as a meditative anchor such that the breath becomes the main object of concentration, but not to the extent that attentional focus becomes so narrow that it prevents other sensory and psychological experiences from entering into the attentional sphere. In other words, the breath is used to steady the mind in the present moment, not to shut out the present moment.¹⁴

2 Allow the body and mind to sit well: The most important aspect of the meditation posture is stability. This can be achieved by either sitting upright on a chair or on a meditation cushion.¹⁵ An analogy we have previously used to explain the most appropriate posture for seated mindfulness practice is that of a mountain: a mountain has a definite presence; it is upright and stable but it is also without tension and does not have to strain to maintain its posture – it is relaxed, content, and deeply rooted in the earth.¹⁶ The practice of following the breath while assuming a stable bodily posture naturally lends itself towards cultivating a stable mental posture.

3 Use guided meditations: Guided meditations are considered to be an effective way of introducing employees to the practice of mindfulness and of ensuring that they develop strong meditative foundations. Meditations are often guided by the mindfulness instructor during the weekly group sessions, and participants are normally provided with a CD of guided mindfulness meditations to facilitate daily self-practice. An important consideration to bear in mind when guiding a mindfulness meditation is to ensure that periods of formal seated meditation do not turn into an endurance exercise. For adults new to the practice of mindfulness, we recommend individual practice session durations of 15–20 minutes (for an example of a guided mindfulness exercise focusing on working mindfully, visit <http://edoshonin.com/2014/10/16/a-guided-meditation-on-mindful-working/>).

4 Emphasise on-the-job practice: One of the most frequent objections raised by organisations and employees to receiving training in mindfulness is that it will place additional time demands on already overloaded schedules.

However, rather than taking time away from work, mindfulness practice really begins when a person gets up from their meditation cushion (or chair) and continues with their various work duties and engagements. Mindfulness is less about finding the time to practise, and more about simply remembering to engage a mindful attention-set during whatever work (or non-work) activity a person happens to be engaged in.¹⁵ Indeed, emphasising the need to practise mindfulness 'on the job' is a central feature of most MBIs. This is because treating mindfulness meditation as a technique to be practised for just 15-20 minutes a day is unlikely to yield any benefits in the long term.

5 Teach from experience: Arguably, one of the biggest obstacles to the effective integration of mindfulness into occupational (and clinical) settings is aptitude deficiencies on the part of mindfulness instructors. It is not unusual to hear reports of mindfulness teachers providing formal instruction to others after receiving training in just a single eight-week programme of mindfulness meditation.³ In the traditional Buddhist setting, meditation teachers typically train for many years (or even decades) before they are deemed to have accrued sufficient experience to impart their knowledge to others.³ This accords well with findings from some of our own research where it has been demonstrated that participants of MBIs are sensitive to the extent to which the instructor is able to impart an embodied authentic experience of mindfulness.⁵ If the mindfulness instructor does not practise what they teach, then employees tend to consciously or subconsciously pick up on this and become much less receptive. Conversely, an instructor who has a firmly embedded and experiential understanding of mindfulness naturally exerts a reassuring presence that helps employees connect with their own capacity for cultivating meditative awareness.^{15,16}

Conclusions

Research and interest into the applications of mindfulness in workplace settings are growing. While further empirical investigation is clearly needed, provisional findings such as those presented above suggest that mindfulness can improve both psychological wellbeing inside and outside of work, and job performance. One of the biggest attractions of mindfulness to employers is likely to be the fact that MBIs represent cost-effective organisational-level work-related wellbeing interventions that require minimal changes to human resource management systems and procedures. However, in the short term, the perceived time demands of MBIs as well as an apparent scarcity of adequately trained mindfulness instructors are likely to be factors that impede the effective integration of mindfulness into occupational domains.

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