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## Mindfulness: The Link Between Wellness and Mental Health

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The following is based on Lisa R. Schmidt's presentation at the 2015 Symposium.

Similar to the health care system, most employee wellness programs aim to treat *symptoms* of stress, like weight, high cholesterol, diabetes, lack of exercise and insomnia.

"If you want to measurably improve the quality of life of your employees and yourself, you need to address the root cause (of health problems), which is stress," Lisa R. Schmidt, CEBS, told her audience at the 34th Annual ISCEBS Employee Benefits Symposium in August. "It's the No. 1 driver of health care costs in the United States and in Canada."

Schmidt, a mindfulness consultant and owner of Mindful Benefits® in Scottsdale, Arizona and faculty associate/researcher at Arizona State University, said Canadian employers have a better understanding of the links between stress, poor health outcomes and lower productivity. But because of a strong body of academic research showing that relationship, awareness among U.S. employers is growing.

"Mindfulness is the practice of paying attention to the present moment on purpose, without judgment," Schmidt said. "When we are mindful and practicing a mindfulness intervention, we notice things in the body but don't judge them. That's a tough thing to do. . . . It's hard for us to stay right here. That's normal. . . . It's part of who we are. And it's also our undoing."

She led her audience through two mindfulness interventions—a short breathing exercise and an abbreviated version of a "body scan" often used as a clinical intervention for a number of health conditions related to stress. Both are

among the multicultural, evidence-based interventions that are accessible to everyone, from line worker to executive, and can be done for a few minutes in the workplace.

Schmidt described the biology behind the stress response, a reaction to danger that helped humans (and all animals) survive as a species. The instant it perceives danger, the *amygdala*—the part of the brain that stores and processes memories—activates the autonomic nervous system to begin the "fight or flight" response. It signals the *hypothalamus*, the brain's control center. A cascade of chemical messengers (hormones) causes instantaneous changes in the body including rapid breathing (providing oxygen to run from danger—the bear or sabertooth tiger), the heart begins to pound and nonessential functions shut down, including the immune and digestive systems. Pupils dilate and "the brain goes run, run, run." Adrenaline floods the system. Glucose—blood sugar—is dumped into the body, providing energy for our biological need to escape.

Part of the stress response causes the hypothalamus to activate the adrenal glands to flood the body with 30 hormones. This cascade wreaks havoc when prolonged over time. Schmidt noted that a prolonged stress response may eventually trigger type 2 diabetes or impaired carbohydrate metabolism that leads to obesity—just two of the many possible effects.

Stress is implicated in "many health conditions, including getting sick all the time, cancer, depression, eczema, psoriasis, posttraumatic stress syndrome, stomach ulcers, the list goes on and on." In fact, the Benson-Henry Institute reports that 60-90% of all health care spending in the U.S. is due to stress-related conditions.

Because of the brain's ability to rewire its pathways to learn something new, called *neuroplasticity*, people can teach themselves through mindfulness practice how to put the brakes on the stress response. "But we have to notice it when it's happening," Schmidt said.

"The goal of all mindfulness interventions is that we practice. We practice because when the stressful events happen,

as they always will, and we begin to go into stress response, that's a really bad time to start practicing. We practice so that when life goes off the rails . . . we go back to our practice and say, 'Oh, yeah, this is where I breathe.' ”

At Arizona State University, Schmidt teaches a course called “Stress Management Tools” to show students “there are ways of relaxing that work better than overeating or overindulging in parties and alcohol.” Students from throughout the world, from all faith practices and none, learn about the biological response to stress and how to rewire the brain's pathways through mindfulness practices, which has been shown to improve academic performance dramatically.

Despite the fact that U.S. organizations annually spend \$600 per employee on wellness and health promotion, 70% of employees say they are not engaged and only 8% of employees report they are happy at work.

“Here's the problem: We monetize health,” Schmidt said. “We train employees that the way to get their incentives is to show up for a screening. We hook them on the coolest, latest gadget. People get caught up in thinking about health as a commodity. That type of thinking focuses attention on earning money, not something that's more important: the intrinsic reward of improving your quality of life.”

“Forward-thinking organizations have recognized that mindfulness-based interventions pay big dividends when it comes to helping their employees feel better at work and improve their quality of life.”

Over the past year, Schmidt worked with a company that wanted to add a mind-body-spirit-focused, multiculturally appropriate component to its successful wellness program. The company already offered yoga—a mindfulness intervention that tends to attract more women than men—but wanted a more comprehensive program.

Schmidt credited the enthusiastic support of company leaders and planned communications to employees about how stress affects their bodies for the fact that 99% of employees participated in the mindfulness intervention. To measure quality of life before the intervention began, Schmidt designed an employee survey asking 32 evidence-based questions aimed at measuring preintervention components of mindfulness including mindful attention awareness, mindfulness skills, mindfulness of the body, connections to co-workers (team building) and responding to adversity.

For 12 weeks, employees learned about mindfulness through topics chosen by the employer such as promoting happiness, the biological stress response, and emotional and mindful eating. Each week included a mindfulness practice taught to employees in small groups and even right in team department meetings.

“It became possible to replicate this knowledge across the workforce because we also trained 40 people as mindful mentors who were released on a weekly basis to teach the intervention,” Schmidt said. The intervention was scalable (it could be used with small groups, including call center workers who couldn't leave to go to a class), affordable and sustainable.

When the 12-week intervention was ended, a remeasurement of employees' quality of life in all areas showed a statistically significant increase.

“I suggest that if you focus wellness efforts and improvement on self-reported quality of life instead of ‘How much money can I get if I show up and get my finger pricked?’ . . . then you've given them much more than an intervention that gives them money. You've actually changed their life.”