

Mindfulness and Stress Management:

Creating Cultures of Optimal Performance

by | **Lisa R. Schmidt, CEBS**

Workplace stress, which comes with a \$264 billion annual price tag for the U.S. economy, is one of the driving forces behind escalating employee benefit costs. Through mindfulness and stress management, employers can potentially reduce those costs and create a healthier culture for employees.

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Stress at work remains one of the largest drivers of employee benefit costs.¹ In addition to the economic disadvantages, the health consequences of stress and its impacts on employee well-being are profound. According to research from academic institutions, the economic cost of stress in the workplace is \$264 billion annually.² Stress is a significant, causal factor in five out of the six leading causes of death.³ Those who manage employee benefits budgets and employee performance outcomes have known for more than 30 years that stress is a big problem at work, yet interventions have had limited success in addressing stress in meaningful, measurable ways.

The practice of mindfulness holds promise for mitigating negative effects caused by stress. A corporate benefits plan with an effective mind/body/spirit program may see measurable outcomes such as improvements in self-reported quality of life, lowered incidences of depression and anxiety, increased resilience, improved team and individual performance, and gains in physical health.

This article will explain some of the concepts and biology behind mindfulness and offer ideas for science-based mindful interventions, including a breathing activity—Noticing the physical and emotional effects for one’s self can help in teaching and implementing workplace interventions. We’ll end with some tools that employers can use in the workplace to potentially improve bottom-line organizational results and create a culture of optimal performance.

What Is Mindfulness?

Mindfulness is about being fully aware of whatever is happening in the present moment, without filters or the lens of judgment. It can be brought to any situation. Put simply, mindfulness consists of building awareness of the mind and body and living in the here and now. This universal practice can be thought of as mental training for learning how to notice and pay attention to thoughts and feelings before they move into habitual patterns that may cause stress and impact relationships at work or at home.

Mindfulness is observing, watching and examining. People become not judges but rather scientists of their own minds. This practice can profoundly impact stress levels, with positive results for workplace culture.

There are many ways to practice mindfulness. Some

forms, such as meditation, body scanning, breath awareness and focusing the mind on a word or an object, have been practiced for nearly 5,000 years. Other mindful awareness methods such as body-focused yoga, tai chi or qigong are more recent adaptations of the practice of paying attention to the present moment.

With guidance, employees can practice calming their minds, noticing the body and learning the signals the body sends when it is under duress. Through patient and diligent practice, people can train their minds to mitigate the effects of stressful situations, opening up their lives to less emotional reactivity, increased stress tolerance and fewer interruptions from intrusive, distressing thoughts.

Life and Stress

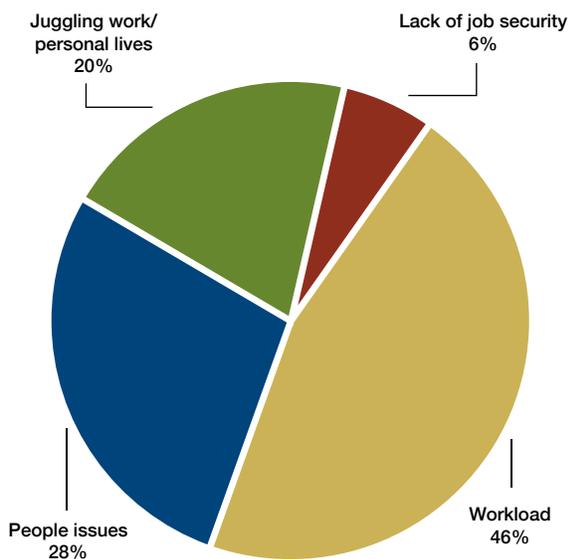
Living with stress and anxiety, inside and outside the workplace, is much more prevalent than you might imagine. Millions of people are burdened by life’s challenges every single day—from difficult life events and balancing professional and personal responsibilities to acute pain, illness and chronic health conditions. For most, stress is caused by a combination of all or some of these factors. Most people don’t want to talk about stress and anxiety, nor do they wish to face its causes. Employees may bring their stresses to work and carry them around in ways that exacerbate their professional challenges (see Figure 1). Typical of the culture is the tendency to minimize, avoid or altogether deny fears and feelings and to resist talking about difficulties in problem-solving ways or even practicing methods to mitigate stresses. It’s almost as if mental and emotional difficulties are a no-go zone, which is ironic, since people universally face these challenges.

Emotions such as stress, anxiety, tension and fear are all part of the human experience. But life experiences also contain positive emotions such as love, comfort, relaxation, safety and pleasure. Although people may prefer comfortable experiences to stressful ones, the human nervous system helps us deal with anxiety-inducing experiences in a successful and balanced manner. Learning more about the nervous system and the way it helps people navigate life’s diverse experiences as well as how people can help the nervous system change, learn and adapt are ways to start improving stress resilience and health outcomes in the workplace.

As neuroscientists learn more about the brain and how neural pathways connect thoughts and emotions to bodies, people can better understand the stress response and how it

FIGURE 1

Main Causes of Stress



Source: 2006 *StressPulse Survey*, ComPsych.

can cause harm over time. On a positive note, the science of mindfulness provides ample tools to help people understand—and potentially change—the unconscious responses of stress. Physiological changes in the brain, which include increases in tissue volumes in some areas, occur through mindfulness practices. Other benefits include improved thinking skills, faster reaction times and less inclination toward various forms of stress.

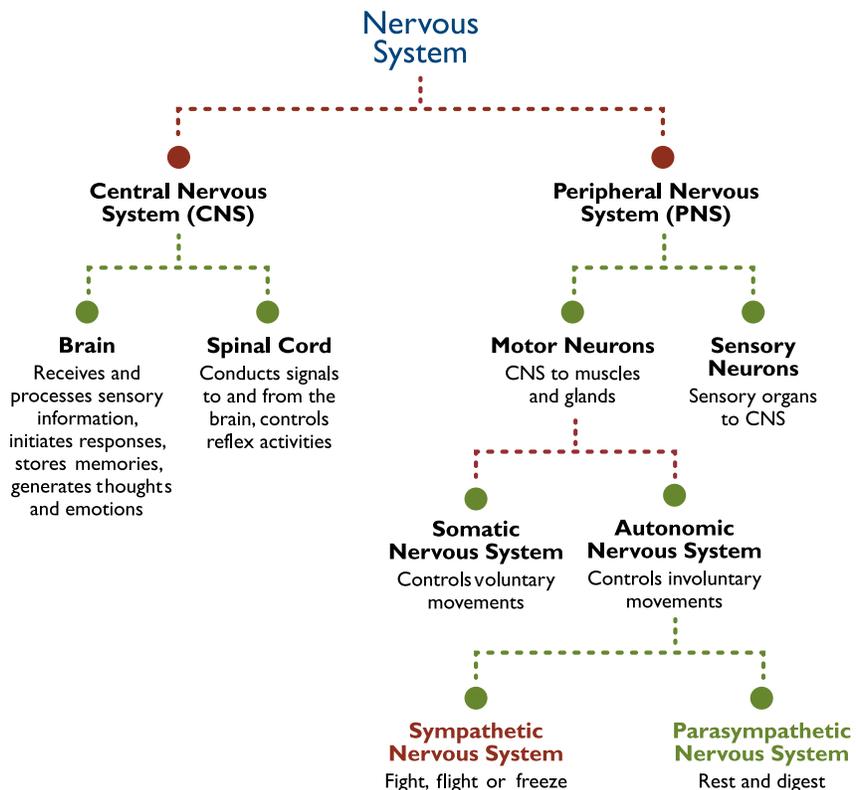
The Nervous System

Knowing how the nervous system is designed can help people work with it more easily—and more successfully. Working with the nervous system means having some impact over the biological stress response. The two main parts of the nervous system are the *central nervous system* (CNS), which is comprised of the brain and spinal cord, and the *peripheral nervous system* (PNS) (see Figure 2). The PNS has two branches, or divisions: the voluntary nervous system and the involuntary nervous system. Since humans have both voluntary and involuntary controls built into the nervous system, people can learn how to work with these controls to consciously regulate between states of stress and relaxation.

The *sympathetic nervous system* (SNS) increases the rate of body processes, preparing people for a fight-or-flight response to real or perceived danger. The SNS also helps control organs. When the body perceives danger or comes under stress, the SNS responds by stimulating some organs to work faster (like increasing the rate of breathing or heart rate) and others to slow down (like digestion). This mobilization of resources results in the

FIGURE 2

Nervous System



Source: © Lisa Schmidt Counseling, LLC. All rights reserved.

release of stress hormones, which prepare people to run away from danger (see Figure 3). The stress response does not discriminate between real and perceived danger. Instead, the SNS operates all the time, constantly energized, alert and ready to respond defensively at the first sign of danger. Whether people's lives are truly threatened—or they are just angry over a miscommunication in their pension benefits—the biological response is the same.

The job of the *parasympathetic nervous system* (PSNS) is to promote rest, which is key to healing and well-being. Think of the SNS as the gas pedal pushing people forward in response

to stress; the PSNS acts like the brake. Both systems work to restore equilibrium by adjusting whenever something gets out of balance.

The SNS slows down when it is interrupted by the PSNS. Through the PSNS, people can intentionally develop the ability to shift the body from the fight-or-flight response into the rest-and-digest response, releasing the body from a habitual pattern of stress response. The ability to intentionally create a more relaxed state comes from the practice of mindfulness. As employees learn more about their bodies, their responses to stress and the triggers that move them into fight-or-flight mode,

learn more

Education

To watch Lisa Schmidt's recorded webcast presentation "Mindfulness and Stress Management: Creating Cultures of Optimal Performance," visit www.ifebp.org/webcasts.

From the Bookstore

Workplace Wellness That Works

Laura Putnam. Wiley. 2015.

Visit www.ifebp.org/books.asp?9058 for more details.

they can begin to practice skillful responses that promote relaxation instead of stress.

Activity: Three-Minute Guided Breath Practice

As people begin to pay attention to sensations in their bodies, they can learn how to return distracted minds to the present and achieve greater awareness, compassion and peace. Focusing on breathing is one way to anchor the

mind; another is working to accept things the way they are. This might mean simply noticing and acknowledging job stress or anxiety rather than repeating old patterns of running away from it. This is all part of the practice of mindfulness.

Through practice, people can become more skilled at noticing sensations in the body, thoughts in the brain and habits of the mind, creating an opportunity to move away from automatic pilot and respond to stress with more skill.

The sidebar "Mindful Breathing" is a breath exercise that can be implemented in the workplace to help employees.

Health-Related Quality of Life

Originally coined by the World Health Organization, the phrase *quality of life* had such a broad and subjective definition that it became difficult to measure any changes or improvements. The valuable measure *health-related quality of life* (HRQOL) can now be used as a tool to track the effectiveness of wellness interventions in the workplace. The concept of HRQOL and its determinants have evolved since the 1980s to encompass those aspects of overall quality of life that can be clearly shown to affect health—either physical or mental.⁴

On the individual level, HRQOL includes physical and mental health perceptions (e.g., energy level, mood) and their correlates—including health risks and conditions, functional status, social support and socioeconomic status. On the community level, HRQOL includes resources, conditions, policies and practices that influence population health perceptions and functional status. On the basis of a synthesis of the scientific literature and advice from its public health partners, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has defined HRQOL as "an individual's or group's perceived physical and mental health over time."⁵

The self-definition of quality of life provides a potent tool to measure wellness interventions before their implementation and again afterward. HRQOL covers both physical and mental determinants of health, and information is publicly available (and therefore free for employers). Policies and procedures can be designed to support HRQOL, with measurable results.

Mindfulness and Health-Related Quality of Life

Since 60-90% of all health care-related spending is due to stress (or consequences of chronic stress), workplace pro-

FIGURE 3

Stress Hormones



Some of the physiological changes resulting from circulating stress hormones. Source: "Twelve Weeks to Mindfulness: A Workplace Stress Management Program." Schmidt, L. (2016). Scottsdale, Arizona: Mindful Benefits publisher.

grams that focus on stress hardiness, resilience and mental ease can create a culture of optimal health performance and better health care outcomes.

Employers can create optimal performance in the workplace by enhancing HRQOL.⁶ Tools to enhance HRQOL include worksite mindfulness programs that can help employees develop stress hardiness.

The evidence for mindfulness-based programs includes clinical trials showing that the practice of mindfulness can improve the ability to proactively manage stress, allowing people to build tolerance for challenges created by workloads, deadlines and interpersonal conflict. People can build greater clarity and focus and, in turn, improve critical thinking and problem solving. By learning how to pay attention to the present moment without judgment, workers can become engaged in the here and now, which increases employee engagement. As the capacity for innovation and creativity improves, people can find new possibilities in difficult team or interpersonal relationships by replacing habitual reactions with more considered responses.

The most effective wellness programs are evidence-based, incorporate all areas of personal health through a mind-body-spirit focus and include measurements that can show improvements in employee engagement.

With stress as a driver of health care costs, an effective stress intervention should be included in wellness programs. Having a forward-thinking approach to stress management and skill building for your employees is an opportunity to create a wellness program with measurable outcomes and big dividends for participants.

Mindful Breathing

Make yourself comfortable. (You can sit in a chair, lie down or sit on the floor in any comfortable position.)

Take a few moments to settle in and become still. Congratulate yourself for taking time to practice self-care and mindful awareness.

Focus on your breathing wherever you feel it most prominently in your body. It may be at the nose, neck, chest, belly or somewhere else. As you breathe in normally and naturally, be aware of breathing in and, as you breathe out, be aware of breathing out. Simply maintain this awareness of the breath, breathing in and breathing out.

There is no need to visualize or count your breaths; just notice your breathing in and out. Without judgment, watch the breath ebb and flow, like waves in the ocean. There is no place to go and nothing else to do; just be in the present, noticing the breath, existing simply one inhalation and one exhalation at a time. As you breathe in and out, be mindful of the breath rising on the inhalation and falling on the exhalation. Ride the waves of the breath, moment by moment, breathing in and breathing out.

From time to time your attention may wander from your breathing. This is normal. When you notice this, simply acknowledge where you went and then gently bring your attention back to the breath. Breathe normally, naturally and without changing the breath in any way. As you breathe in, think “soft.” As you breathe out, think “belly.” Again, notice where you feel the breath in your body.

Think only about where you feel the breath. Repeat “soft” on the inhale and “belly” on the exhale. Use the words as an anchor for your mind. Soften. Breathe. Allow.

Mindfulness and Resilience

A study highlighting the link between mindfulness and resilience in the journal *Personality and Individual Differences* found that “Mindful people . . . can better cope with difficult thoughts and emotions without becoming over-

whelmed or shutting down [emotionally].” Pausing and observing the mind may help people resist getting stuck in their story and as a result may empower them to move forward.⁷

Difficult emotions such as fear or anger are not the enemy. It is the reactivity

takeaways

- Stress has a significant impact on employee health and well-being and remains one of the biggest drivers of employee benefit costs.
- Research has shown that mindfulness, or the ability to become more fully aware of mind and body in the present moment, can help employees deal with workplace stress and interpersonal conflict.
- About 60-90% of health care-related spending is due to stress, so workplace programs that focus on resilience and mental health can help to improve work culture and optimize performance.
- A study in the journal *Personality and Individual Differences* showed that people with improved mindfulness can better cope with difficult thoughts and emotions. In turn, this could lead to better task performance, decision making and work relationships.
- Employers interested in creating a mindfulness-based intervention should consider their culture, integrate the offering with other employee benefits, conduct a needs assessment, and design and deliver a measurable program.

toward these difficult emotions that are most harmful. Often when anger or fear is present, the lower brain is in charge. The *lower brain* is the oldest, most primitive part of the brain, where the fight-or-flight response originates. It is responsible for maintaining human survival. The more people go over a scary or angry experience, the more anger and/or fear they continue to feel and, thus, they get caught up in reactivity. The lower brain doesn't have control over actions—That's the job of the frontal cortex, the home of executive functioning. When mindfulness is present, people can support the higher brain to see the bigger picture with calmness and clarity.

Mindfulness-based practices in the workplace can enhance self-regulation of thoughts, emotions and behavior, with links to performance and employee well-being in the workplace. In addition, mindfulness can enhance social relationships at work, making employees more resilient in the face of challenges, increasing task performance, and improving relationship quality, resilience and decision making.

Building a Mindfulness Tool Kit

Employers that are interested in offering, promoting or creating a mindfulness-based intervention for the workplace should consider the following.

bio



Lisa R. Schmidt, M.S., CEBS, CBC, CN, CYT, SEP, is the founder and lead consultant of Mindful Benefits, a firm that specializes in consulting, plan design and training in mindfulness-based stress management programs and practices to improve individual and organizational effectiveness. In addition, she is an instructor and researcher at the Arizona State University School of Social Work, where she trains future leaders in multiculturally appropriate, science-based interventions in stress management and healthy behaviors. Schmidt is the author of two academic textbooks: *Sustainable Living & Mindful Eating* (2015, Kendall Hunt Press) and *Twelve Weeks to Mindfulness: A Workplace Stress Management Program* (2016, Lisa Schmidt Counseling LLC). She is a former human resources executive and is a Certified Employee Benefit Specialist (CEBS).

- Culture matters. Conduct a strategic conversation with key decision makers, offering ideas, suggestions for best practices and cost estimates.
- Integrate your offering with other employee benefits in order to provide measurable benefits.
- Conduct a needs assessment.
- Design and deliver a measurable intervention.
- Use publicly available surveys to measure quality of life, or use an online program. This can lower your overall cost.

Remember that increases in self-reported mindfulness translate into improvements in quality of life, and increases in quality of life can translate into lower anxiety and depression among employees.

Terrific implementation tools exist as apps, podcasts and online programs, including free options that could be a great way to provide a start for many employees. Employers can also consider a curriculum-based approach, via either soft copy or online delivery, customized for their organization. Finally, think about investing some time and resources with a wellness professional skilled in both employee benefit delivery as well as mindfulness practices. It may be tempting to simply invite a meditation teacher to hold a weekly sitting group, but the opportunity to demonstrate measurable efficacy could be lost. For best results, measure what matters, and design a workplace intervention that addresses stress at its root cause. ☯

Endnotes

1. See www.stress.org/workplace-stress.
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