

How Mindfulness can help us achieve a successful work/life balance

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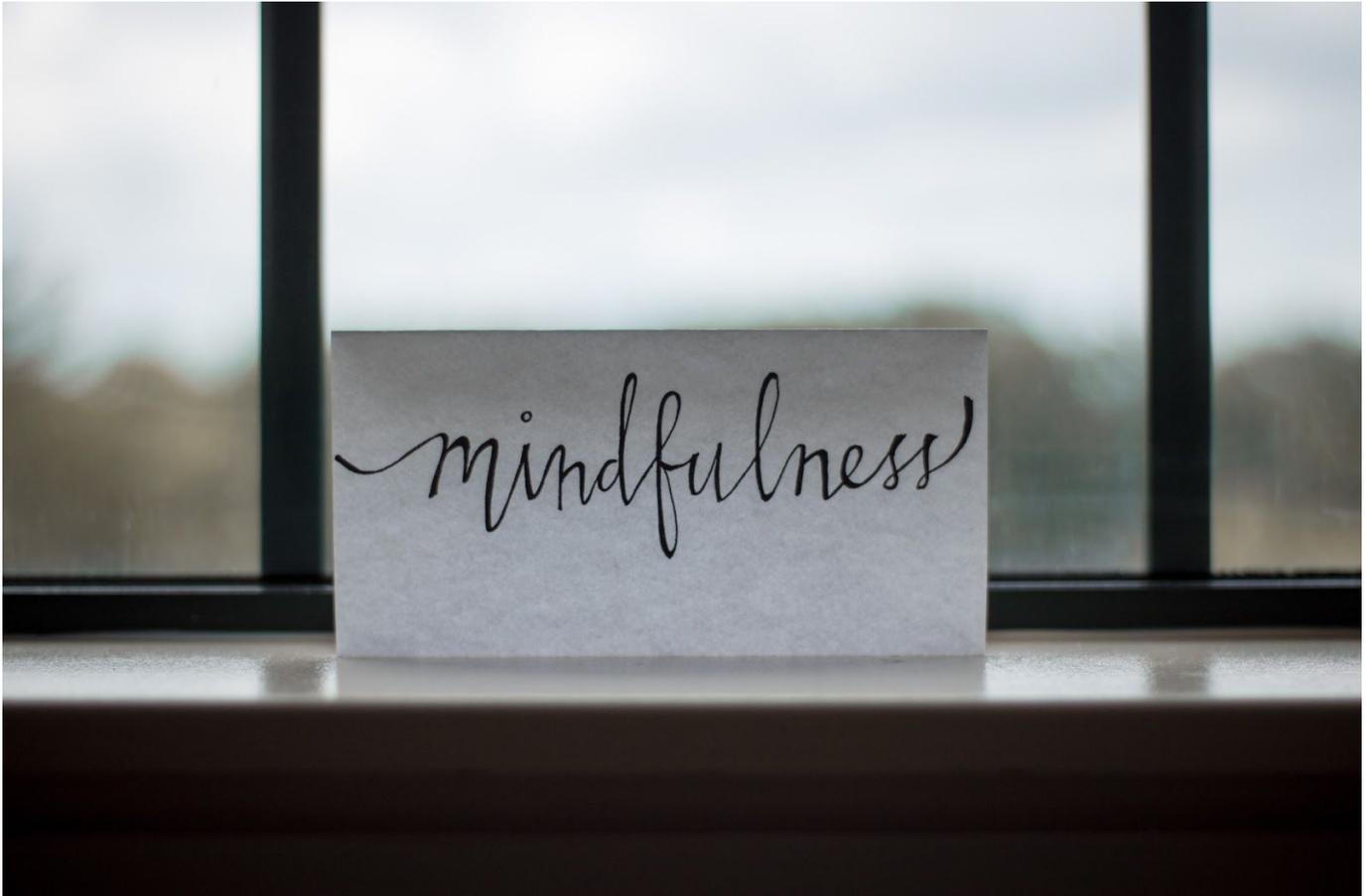
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Summary

Can Mindfulness assist with work/life balance? As Mindfulness can reduce stress, increase resilience, enhance cognitive and work performance and improve relationships and overall well-being it seems it can. We know that achieving a work/life balance comes from these things and maintaining a healthy lifestyle and having a good support system which works for you, so we can use mindfulness as a key to finding that perfect balance.

As Psychologists we know of the growing body of research showing that mindfulness is an effective strategy to improve many facets of well-being. Research shows that mindfulness can:

- Reduce stress, anxiety and depressive symptoms
- Increase resilience and peace of mind
- Enhance cognitive performance (e.g. concentration, memory and processing speed)
- Improve study and work performance
- Improve relationships and overall wellbeing.



Many psychologists now use mindfulness as a therapeutically based strategy to assist their clients. It's also a crucial way to ensure we look after our own well-being and psychological health.

But what is mindfulness?

Personally, I still like the simple explanation of Mindfulness from the beautiful children's book "[Mindful Monkey, Happy Panda](#)", by Lauren Alderfer and Kerry Lee Maclean which goes like this;

"True Happiness, comes from bringing all your attention to whatever you are doing right now. There is no need to think about what happened yesterday. Yesterday's gone, over, done. And there's no need to worry about tomorrow. Tomorrow isn't here. But today is all around us. Bringing your mind back to this moment, right here, over and over again, is called mindfulness"

Mindfulness involves a series of attention-training practices and cognitive strategies that can help you unhook from unproductive thought patterns and behaviours. It also involves developing an attitude of friendliness towards yourself, as opposed to habitual patterns of criticism or judgement. For me, this translates into treating myself as I would treat my best loved friends - sparing self-criticism and giving myself positive messages and experiences.



Research shows that when we are not deliberately paying attention to something, our brain enters Default Mode. This is characterised by mental chatter, mind wandering, dwelling on the past and worrying about the future, judgement and criticism. Default mode has been found to activate specific areas of the brain, mostly in the temporal and parietal lobes, along with the hippocampus and certain prefrontal areas.

With mindfulness however we engage different parts of the brain; primarily prefrontal regions of the brain such as the insula and anterior cingulate cortex. In this mode we tend to experience things more directly through our senses. We typically experience this way of being while exercising, playing music, being in nature, engaging in hobbies and spending time with loved ones, for instance.

Thus when we practice mindfulness, the neuroplastic nature of the brain activates the prefrontal regions and they grow stronger while the default mode areas become quieter.

The benefits of mindfulness

Brain imaging research shows that regular mindfulness practice for 15 minutes a day over a 6-week period produces growth in brain areas associated with learning and memory processes, emotion regulation, self-referential processing and perspective taking. The [Aura app](#) claims you can feel better in just 3 minutes with a mindfulness meditation.

As a school psychologist I know mindfulness has a positive effect on learning as it teaches students and staff to focus on fully developing and using their senses, which enhances every aspect of learning.

[Mindful learning](#) gives our brains higher quality information than without a mindfulness focus and therefore enhances our problem-solving, cognitive skills and our ability to be kind.

And this might seem a little left of centre, but mindfulness can even make eating more enjoyable, focusing us on the tastes and textures of food, extracting more pleasure from the simple act of eating.

Mindfulness and work/life balance

So, what does work/life balance mean? Why is it important, why do we want it and how can it be achieved?

An explanation that I like is that “*Work-life balance refers to the level of prioritisation between personal and professional activities in an individual’s life and the level to which activities related to their job are present in the home.*”

Thus the ideal work-life balance is open to discussion and must be determined personally.

I use Mindfulness to help me achieve a good work/life balance. I practice Mindfulness constantly throughout the day. As I wake I mindfully use of all my senses to feel the day and conduct a body scan to gently awaken and give thanks for another day. As I shower I am fully present in enjoying my time under water. As I sip my morning coffee I focus on the taste, smell and feel the coffee gives me.

I do this as achieving a good work/life balance revolves around the extent to which I engage in work, home and community activities mindfully. We need to be more present in all settings to get the balance right. When we are fully present in what we do we can then determine whether we are prioritising appropriately.

So, what can we do if we feel our work-life balance isn’t as we wish? There are many ways to deal with this reality and Mindfulness can be very helpful.

One solution posited by [Stewart Friedman](#) is to view your life as a comprehensive system consisting of 4 components: work, home, community and self. Seek out changes you can make that create “4 way wins” - that is, strategies that improve performance across all 4 parts of life. Doing things mindfully is one such strategy as it can be seamlessly incorporated into everything we do and enhances each activity by connecting us more closely to it.

So, how else is work/life balance to be achieved in addition to using Mindfulness? It’s not necessarily easy, but it’s best managed by regularly reviewing and assessing your priorities. Here are a few ideas:

- Set clear goals around what you value and hope to achieve in each of the 4 areas of life: work, home, community and self
- Manage your time more effectively by reviewing your job activities, prioritise the most important ones and then schedule them into your day
- Leave work at work by setting strict boundaries on doing work outside of work times
- Build resilience by learning how to [reframe](#) setbacks and develop [positive mindsets](#)
- Avoid stress, mental exhaustion and burnout by not overcommitting



- Maintain a healthy lifestyle: sleep, diet, physical activity
- Enlist a good support system both at work, but also in your personal life
- Find ways to enjoy your work.

Final words

Everything is more enjoyable done mindfully and doing so can help you achieve a better work/life balance. An easy way to begin is just to attend to all your five senses (sight, sound, smell, taste, touch) in the present moment. For more formal instruction in mindfulness consider trying apps like [Aura](#) and [Calm](#).

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