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Blue Papers



# Meditation at Work

# Meditation at work: Managing your mind to manage information

*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.<sup>1</sup>*

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 that our minds wander an estimated 47% of the time. The mental and emotional back and forth is not only exhausting but can also lead to unhappiness. Yet there is an answer...

Up your happiness and your workplace productivity with a practice that's making wellness headlines - meditation. If you think meditation is just about 'monks and mountains' rest assured there is far more to it than that! In fact, meditation can deliver a whole host of benefits directly related to the workplace. Things like:<sup>2</sup>

- 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 quieten 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. This Blue Paper will explain how to practice meditation and then harness its positive effects to increase productivity at work.



<sup>1</sup> Melissa Kirsch. "Meditation at Work: Breathing Lessons." TheHuffingtonPost.com. Web. 11 Oct. 2014. [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/melissa-kirsch/meditation-at-work\\_b\\_831838.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/melissa-kirsch/meditation-at-work_b_831838.html)

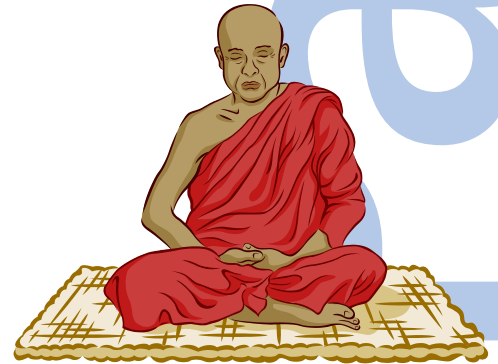
<sup>2</sup> "10 Benefits of Meditation." Infographic A Day. Web. 11 Oct. 2014. <http://infographicaday.com/infographic-10-benefits-of-meditation>

## From the top: The Jargon

As with learning anything new there's a whole host of buzzwords and terminology to understand. Before we get going on to discuss the concept itself. First, a look at stress and well-being:

- **Stress.**<sup>3</sup> A bodily response, stress begins in a very small part of the brain known as the amygdala. This is where 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.**<sup>4</sup> A broad term, wellbeing 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 it can do to a person, especially a young one. After a traumatic event in his early 20s, Andy decided to confront his stress head-on by leaving his UK home 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 "familiarisation with the present moment," he says. "It's the ability to recognise thoughts coming and going with no judgement."



Andy also knows about positive wellbeing. After a long stay in Asia, he returned home and established HeadSpace<sup>5</sup> a web based community committed to helping people to understand meditation and the benefits to be gained from it. In his TED talk<sup>6</sup> Andy talks about one of the fundamental tenets 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 might be a high-stress environment where productivity is a tall order. Think of meditation as a means to a more productive, more profitable end.

<sup>3</sup> Herbert Benson and Bronwyn Fryer. "Are You Working Too Hard?" *Harvard Business Review*. Web. 11 Oct. 2014. <http://hbr.org/2005/11/are-you-working-too-hard/ar/1>

<sup>4</sup> "Well-being." *Wikipedia*. Web. 11 Oct. 2014. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Well-being>

<sup>5</sup> Headspace. Web. 11 Oct. 2014. <http://www.getsomeheadspace.com/index.aspx>

<sup>6</sup> "All it takes is 10 mindful minutes." Video. *TED TALK*. Web. 11 Oct. 2014. [http://www.ted.com/talks/andypuddicombe\\_all\\_it\\_takes\\_is\\_10\\_mindful\\_minutes.html](http://www.ted.com/talks/andypuddicombe_all_it_takes_is_10_mindful_minutes.html)

# Too much information, too much stress, too much pressure

How often do you use your mobile 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 or phone call. The arrival of mobile devices means that 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!



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.”<sup>7</sup> This information overload and excessive distraction are directly tied to low productivity levels. According to a Deloitte report, Oracle found that ‘the average worker was spending 61.55 minutes per week locating documents in either email, personal folders or shared file servers in 2010, and once the information had been found, a further 74 minutes per week was spent converting it to different forms or re-entering it into different documents.’<sup>8</sup> That’s nearly 2.5 hours a week of time wasted per worker. A problem that is not only worth preventing but one that actually 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.<sup>9</sup> 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. This might sound like an odd relationship, but it’s true.<sup>10</sup> There is a correlation between the amount of stress we experience and the level of our performance. It’s called the Yerkes-Dodson Curve,<sup>11</sup> illustrated here:

<sup>7</sup> Tatiana Serafin. “Sit. Breathe. Be a Better Leader.” Inc.com. Web. 11 Oct. 2014. <http://www.inc.com/articles/201110/more-and-more-entrepreneurs-meditate-how-and-why-you-should-too.html>

<sup>8</sup> “The economic impact of the ‘Information Glut’.” Deloitte Access Economics. Web 11 Oct. 2014. [http://www.deloitte.com/assets/Dcom-Australia/Local%20Assets/Documents/Industries/Government%20Services/Public%20Sector/Deloitte\\_Economic\\_impact\\_of\\_information\\_glut.pdf](http://www.deloitte.com/assets/Dcom-Australia/Local%20Assets/Documents/Industries/Government%20Services/Public%20Sector/Deloitte_Economic_impact_of_information_glut.pdf)

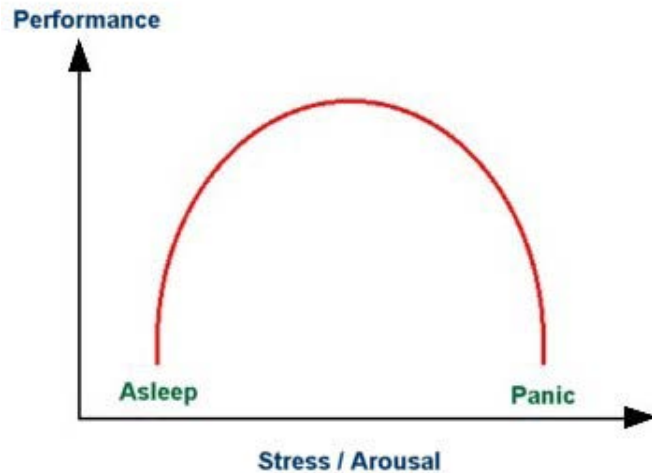
<sup>9</sup> Wendy Woods. “Meditating at Work: A New Approach to Managing Overload.” Institute of Noetic Science. Web. 11 Oct. 2014. <http://noetic.org/noetic/issue-nineteen-february/meditating-at-work/>

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> “Good and Adverse Effects of Stress.” The airline pilots forum & resource. Web. 11 Oct. 2014. <http://www.theairlinepilots.com/medical/effectsofstress.htm>

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## STRESS vs PERFORMANCE



**The Yerkes-Dodson Curve**

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-exam or just before making a speech - but it doesn't take much to throw this relationship off balance. Too much stress and performance drops precipitously.

When our information-saturated and pressurised worlds are compounded by day-to-day wins and losses, it's easy to see the origin of our stress - 'an energy zapper'<sup>12</sup> that's responsible for around 40% of work-related illness.<sup>13</sup> 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 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 wellbeing. A business won't thrive if its employees can't. In fact, '80% of workplace success is directly related to emotional intelligence, or the ability to manage oneself, relate to others, and deal with life's pressures.'<sup>14</sup>

Learning to control stress via meditation heightens energy levels, improves focus

<sup>12</sup> Marla Tabaka. "How to Increase Productivity." Inc.com. Web. 11 Oct. 2014. <http://www.inc.com/marla-tabaka/decrease-stress-increase-productivity.html>

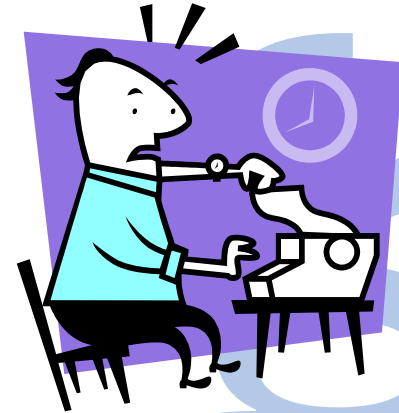
<sup>13</sup> Beat Stress at Work. NHS Choices. Web. 11 Oct. 2014. <http://www.nhs.uk/Conditions/stress-anxiety-depression/Pages/workplace-stress.aspx>

<sup>14</sup> Wendy Woods. "Meditating at Work: A New Approach to Managing Overload." Institute of Noetic Science. Web. 11 Oct. 2014. <http://noetic.org/noetic/issue-nineteen-february/meditating-at-work/>

and ultimately adds time to the day. It is a proven way to keep your employees productive, to ensure that 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, let's take a quick look at who trusts it first. Russell Brand, Jane Asher, and Gwyneth Paltrow are all high profile meditators.<sup>15</sup> When it comes to their wellbeing, each of these celebrities believe 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.<sup>16</sup> Google's 'Search Inside Yourself' classes, which combine science, meditation and business expertise, have helped Google's brightest to become even brighter with participants noting lower stress levels and improved focus.<sup>17</sup>



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.<sup>18</sup> There are many other benefits of meditation, but the reason that these people and organisations have already thrown their weight behind its practice is because the numbers prove it. Here are the findings from a number of studies to consider:<sup>19</sup>

- Researchers discovered that 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.
- Stanford University determined that participants who practiced a mere four minutes of loving-kindness meditation saw an increase in feelings of 'social connectedness and positivity towards strangers.'
- Meditation has also proven useful in separating matters of both

<sup>15</sup> "List of people who have learned transcendental meditation" Wikipedia. Web. 11 Oct. 2014. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_people\\_who\\_have\\_learned\\_Transcendental\\_Meditation](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_people_who_have_learned_Transcendental_Meditation)

<sup>16</sup> Wendy Woods. "Meditating at Work: A New Approach to Managing Overload." Institute of Noetic Science. Web. 11 Oct. 2014. <http://noetic.org/noetic/issue-nineteen-february/meditating-at-work/>

<sup>17</sup> Anita Bruzzese. "Meditation Can Keep You More Focused at Work, Study Says." USATODAY.com. Web. 11 Oct. 2014. <http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/money/jo.bcenter/workplace/bruzzese/story/2012-07-08/meditation-helps-your-work/56071024/1>

<sup>18</sup> "Are you working too hard? A conversation with mind/body researcher Herbert Benson." National Center for Biotechnology Information. Pub.med.gov. Web. 11 Oct. 2014. <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/16299960>

<sup>19</sup> Wendy Woods. "Meditating at Work: A New Approach to Managing Overload." Institute of Noetic Science. Web. 11 Oct. 2014. <http://noetic.org/noetic/issue-nineteen-february/meditating-at-work/>

personal and professional importance, a tremendous help in terms of decision-making.

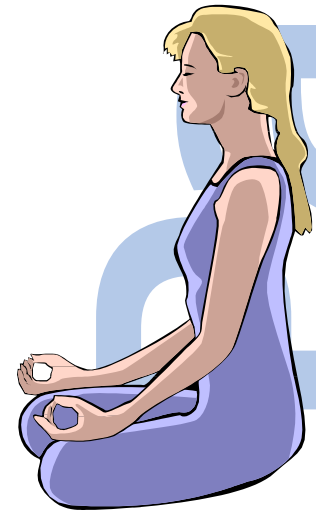
- And, in 2011 researchers noted that participants who had completed an 8-week exercise in mindful meditation were better able to regulate a special kind of brain wave that eliminates distractions.<sup>20</sup>

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:<sup>21</sup>

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 observe 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.



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 "concentrates 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."<sup>22</sup> Here's a look:<sup>23</sup>

- **One-word mantra.** Pick one word and repeat it to yourself. Go for a positive word like 'peace' or 'calm' and recite 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.

<sup>20</sup> Anne Trafton. "The Benefits of Meditation." MIT's News Office. Web. 11 Oct. 2014. <http://web.mit.edu/newsoffice/2011/meditation-0505.html>

<sup>21</sup> "3 Ideas for Meditating at Work." Mind Yourself Chicago. Web. 11 Oct. 2014. <http://www.mindyourselfchicago.com/3-ideas-for-meditating-at-work>

<sup>22</sup> Meditation. Visual.ly. Web. 11 Oct. 2014. <http://visual.ly/meditation>

<sup>23</sup> Jason Lee Overey. "12 Most Powerful Ways to Meditate Quickly at Work." Web. 11 Oct. 2014. <http://12most.com/2012/01/18/12-powerful-ways-meditate-quickly-work/>



- **Walking meditation.** A great kind of meditation for the afternoon, this is ideal for bright, sunny afternoons when you just need 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 step back from the task at-hand. Sync yourself with the music, any kind of music, and remember all the while to pay attention to your breathing.

You probably won't derive immediate joy from meditation, but it will help you.<sup>24</sup> 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 but, over time, your most prized muscle - your mind - will become stronger.

## Make meditation happen

Dr Herbert Benson is the founder of the Mind/Body Medical Institute in Chestnut Hill, Massachusetts, United States. He co-authored a book entitled *The Breakout Principle* with William Proctor in 2003. In it, they speculate that unmanaged stress can be destructive. They offer 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.'<sup>25</sup>

If you consider that 90% of today's thoughts and acts come through as tomorrow's thoughts and acts, action now is essential.<sup>26</sup> Meditation cuts the routine. Consider what follows as a crash course in how to implement meditation



<sup>24</sup> Robert Puff. "No More Excuses! How to Meditate Every Day." *Psychology Today*. Web. 11 Oct. 2014. <http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/meditation-modern-life/201202/no-more-excuses-how-meditate-every-day>

<sup>25</sup> Benson Herbert and Bronwyn Fryer. "Are You Working Too Hard?" *Harvard Business Review*. Web. 11 Oct. 2014. <http://hbr.org/2005/11/are-you-working-too-hard/ar1>

<sup>26</sup> "How Meditation Increases Your Motivation." *EOC Institute*. Web. 11 Oct. 2014. [http://www.eocinstitute.org/How\\_meditation\\_increases\\_your\\_motivation\\_s/510.htm](http://www.eocinstitute.org/How_meditation_increases_your_motivation_s/510.htm)



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 specialise in meditation. Contact them and ask if they're able to serve as a 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 talk to your team, sharing personal experience and how meditation might benefit them. Offer various days and times if you have a bigger company and, if you really want to get serious, ensure 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 everyone to understand the practice step-by-step and get them moving in the right direction. It should be an informal and relaxed class that helps people to feel more comfortable with the idea of meditating.
- **Professionals or podcasts.** You can continue to employ an external meditation expert 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 organising and facilitating daily employee meditation sessions with a little audio guidance.
- **It's a tool, not a test.** Company-wide meditation should be non-competitive, 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.
- **Aim for mornings.** The morning tends to be the best and most effective time to facilitate meditation sessions. That way, employees can clear



their minds and mentally prepare for the day before it actually begins. It will help to 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.

Yet, before any of this can happen, you'll probably have to talk with other movers and shakers within the business. As with any new initiative, it cannot be done alone. Build the case for meditation with the management team 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.<sup>27</sup>



Finally, let's look at two companies that have had success implementing meditation programmes in their organisations. Both companies, Genentech and General Mills, started dabbling in meditation over 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.

## Genentech<sup>28</sup>

In 2006, Genentech, a subsidiary of the Swiss global health-care company Roche, began offering employees the option of enrolling in meditation and mindfulness classes to a more far-reaching initiative called a Personal Excellence Programme,

<sup>27</sup> Tatiana Serafin. "Sit. Breathe. Be a Better Leader." Inc.com. Web. 11 Oct. 2014. <http://www.inc.com/articles/201110/more-and-more-entrepreneurs-meditate-how-and-why-you-should-too.html>

<sup>28</sup> Wendy Woods. "Meditating at Work: A New Approach to Managing Overload." Institute of Noetic Science. Web. 11 Oct. 2014. <http://noetic.org/noetic/issue-nineteen-february/meditating-at-work/>

or PEP, which is rooted in meditation to drive development and innovation. Altogether, the course is 10 months long. In that time, participants go through three separate phases. Here's what the programme delivered:

- Increased employee satisfaction by 10-20%
- Increased customer satisfaction by 12%
- A huge jump - 50% - 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 programme. And, as a result of its success, the company has also instituted a 'graduate' programme.

## General Mills<sup>29</sup>

Also in 2006, one of the world's largest food companies, General Mills launched a programme called The Mindful Leadership Series, a hearty combination of meditation, yoga and dialogue. The programme 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%) in the number of participants that 'take time each day to optimise personal productivity'
- There was another marked increase (from 32 to 82%) of the number of participants who 'make time on most days to eliminate some tasks/meetings with limited productivity value'
- 80% of participants reported a 'positive change in their ability to make better decisions with more clarity'
- And, finally, 89% 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 organisation ... because it's that good.

## 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 and one that will help you to turn in an unprecedented performance at work.



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