LESSON 8

Harness the Power of Mindfulness

Inviting stillness, inquiry, and reflection. Paying attention in the moment and not glancing at our iPhones every minute.

Breathing. Offering ourselves and others the gift of a loving-kindness meditation. Pausing before responding in order to be generous and kind in comments to colleagues, students, and everyone we greet each day. All of this is what mindfulness offers me as a leader. We are creating a new generation of leaders in healthcare by offering these ideas and concepts to our students, faculty, and healthcare providers at UVA.

—Dorrie K. Fontaine, RN, PhD, FAAN, dean and Sadie Heath Cabaniss Professor of Nursing, School of Nursing, University of Virginia, Charlottesville

“Attention,” wrote philosopher Simone Weil, “is the rarest and purest form of generosity.” But while the concept is simple enough, being truly present is incredibly hard to do. Our attentiveness is continually interrupted by a host of forces, especially electronic ones, that rob us from the moment. And although many routinely blame their gizmos, the real culprit is Americans’ propensity to live either in the past or the future—not the present. We, and those around us—from our children to our spouses, from our colleagues to our clients—suffer as a result.
The most authentic leaders understand what it means to pay homage to the present. They practice paying attention and consciously notice new things—those with whom they come into contact, the connections that exist between others, the impact of the environment, how their bodies respond to particular situations, and how their minds interpret external stimuli. This practice, in its essence, is mindfulness—and it has the ability to shape one’s destiny in powerful ways. Research has revealed that, if practiced effectively and often, mindfulness exerts a positive effect on health and well-being by redirecting stress and anxiety. Research has also shown that those who practice mindfulness are often more charismatic, are more creative and innovative, are less judgmental, and tend to procrastinate less often. Being mindful, not “mind-full,” is simply a better way to live, to work, and to care.

 Though a certain amount of life and work involves routine and repetition, all activities can be conducted mindfully. If you operate continually (or even partially) on autopilot, you might miss something important—a nuance, a random but inspired idea or notion, or perhaps a connection to another that may lead to a better practice, a different way of thinking, perhaps even a new job. It pays to pay attention.

 When you live mindfully, serendipity often follows. Matt, for example, told his former professor and adviser how frustrated and restless he was at his current job, mentioning that he wanted to return to an urban area in the Mid-Atlantic. His professor kept Matt’s card, mulled over possibilities for him, and a few weeks later found himself seated next to the CEO of a Richmond hospital who asked him whether he knew of any good candidates for a certain job she needed to fill. The professor gave her Matt’s card, and although Matt did not get that particular job, he did land another position at the Richmond hospital a few months later. Invariably, connections are made if people are open to them. In Matt’s case, a positive outcome resulted from paying attention, making connections, getting the right people together, and being open to serendipity.
Mindfulness can also be practiced in more deliberate, less serendipitous ways. Some hospitals teach clinicians activities such as the relaxation response—a 20-minute breathing and visualization exercise that involves a pattern of head-to-toe muscle tension and release—as a way to deal with stress and anxiety. Other hospitals offer regular meditation and yoga classes or have a special quiet room where clinicians and others can go to recalibrate after difficult interactions or emotional cases. Some hospital staff deliberately re-center themselves in a collective pause amid the chaos of an emergency department; others observe a moment of silence after a patient’s death or after the stress of sharing a bad diagnosis. However mindfulness manifests itself in a healthcare organization, those at all levels of the organization must be able to tap their inner resources. If the organization does not emphasize and provide access to such mindful practices and behavior, burnout and turnover—which are costly in terms of both financial and psychological bottom lines—often ensue. Healthcare is a rewarding field precisely because the work done matters so much. If healthcare workers have no way to keep their spirits buoyant and to deal effectively with adversity, their tenure will be short, and ultimately their impact will be diminished.

There are many ways to practice mindfulness, but all have in common a movement toward relaxation and a conscious effort to center on the present without distraction. In your practice, do what works best for you. Discipline and a certain suspension of disbelief may be required, but the rewards are many. The following are a few techniques that are used for mindfulness:

- Meditation
- Centering prayer
- Yoga
- Exercise
- Writing
- A mental focus on a certain visual, such as mountains or a body of water
Whichever technique proves best, make it a habit. Put it on your schedule. Some hospital CEOs meditate with colleagues each week before breakfast. Others wake up at 5 a.m. and spend time writing in their journals. Still others take a solitary jog on deserted streets at sunrise. The point is to do it regularly. And keep in mind that mindfulness isn’t about checking something off a list; it’s about making room to breathe and taking time to be still and present—nothing more. You don’t have to become a New Age guru to do it—just a thoughtful person aiming to continue to be more so.

What can you do to be more mindful at work? Ellen Langer, who has studied mindfulness for 40 years, offers the following advice:

- As you determine your level of emotional investment in a problem, ask yourself, “Is this a tragedy or merely an inconvenience?”
- Imagine that your thoughts are totally transparent and visible to those around you.
- Think about how best to integrate work and life, not balance the two in equal parts.
- Familiarize yourself with an issue’s “other side” to understand that both sides have good arguments.
- Seek win–win solutions.
- Show compassion to others when they may not be in a mindful place; aim to understand where they are coming from.
- When giving feedback to employees or evaluating their performance, be sure to emphasize that it is your perspective and not a universal one. Be willing to be wrong and to change your views when you receive additional information.
- Don’t rely solely on checklists or computer-prompted questions that lack a qualitative component; they encourage mindlessness.
EXERCISE 1

Read more about mindfulness by selecting one of the recommended resources, or Google the word **mindfulness**.

EXERCISE 2

Make a list of three mindful techniques, and schedule 20 minutes on three different mornings in a given week to try each. Then select the technique that works for you.

RESOURCES


