

# 10 Ways to Be More Mindful at Work

You don't need to block out 30 minutes to practice meditation in order to experience the benefits of mindfulness at work. Here are a few ways you can stay in the present moment to do your best during a busy day.

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Mindfulness may seem like a great idea, but how do you become more mindful in the context of a busy work day? You may have emails, phone calls, meetings, and presentations to deal with. And, of course, your own work! In the middle of all that, how can you apply the principles of mindfulness so that you feel more alive and present, as well as being productive? Here are a few popular and other more radical ways to be mindful at work.

## 1. Be Consciously Present

Mindfulness is, above all, about being aware and awake rather than operating unconsciously. When you're consciously present at work, you're aware of two aspects of your moment-to-moment experience—what's going on around you and what's going on within you. To be mindful at work means to be consciously present in what you're doing, while you're doing it, as well as managing your mental and emotional state. If you're writing a report, mindfulness requires you to give that your full attention. Each time your mind wanders to things like Helen's new role or Michael's argument with the boss, just acknowledge the thoughts and bring your attention back to the task in hand (see [how to stop thinking](#)). This scenario sounds simple, but many aspects of your experience can get in the way.

Here are some ideas to help you stop being mindless and unconscious at work and more mindful and consciously present:

- **Make a clear decision** at the start of your workday to be present as best you can. Pause for a few moments before you start your work day to set this intention in your mind.
- Make an effort to work more consciously, even if that means that you need to **work a little slower at first**—doing so pays in the long run.
- Keep all the **advantages of working mindfully** in mind to motivate you.
- **Connect with your senses** rather than getting lost in trains of thought when you're doing a task.
- Give your **full attention to seemingly mundane tasks** like washing your hands, opening doors, dialling phone numbers, and even just feeling your breathing as you're waiting in a meeting room. These little moments add up to make the day a more mindful one.

## 2. Use Short Mindful Exercises at Work

Mindful exercises train your brain to be more mindful. The more mindful exercises you do, the easier your brain finds it to drop into a mindful state, thus optimizing your brain function. In the busy workplace, finding time for a 30-minute mindful exercise can be difficult. So does that mean you can't be mindful at all at work? Nope. Mindful exercises can be as short as you wish. Even one minute of consciously connecting with one of your senses can be classified as a mindful exercise. You don't need to close your eyes. You don't even need to be sitting down. Be creative about finding slots in the day to practice mindfulness exercises. At times of excessive pressure at work, [practicing a short mindfulness exercise](#) can be a saviour. The process helps to rebalance your nervous system, toning down the fight-or-flight

response and engaging the wise part of your brain, so that you make reasoned decisions rather than automatically react to situations.

### 3. Be a Single-Tasker

Single-tasking is doing one thing at a time. Multi-tasking is trying to do two or more tasks at the same time or switching back and forth between tasks. Nobody can actually multi-task. In reality, your brain is madly switching from one thing to the next, often losing data in the process. Most people know multitasking is ineffective nowadays. If multi-tasking is so inefficient, why do people still do it? The reason was uncovered in a study by Zheng Wang at Ohio State University. She tracked students and found that when they multi-tasked, it made them feel more productive, even though in reality they were being unproductive. Other studies found that the more you multitask, the more addicted you get to it.

Here are a few ways to kick the multi-tasking habit and become a mindfulness superhero:

- **Keep a time journal** of what you achieve in a block of time. Work out when you're single-tasking and when you're multi-tasking. Note down what you achieved in that time block and how mindful you were.
- See whether you can **notice your productivity going up when you single-task**—noticing the benefits can motivate you to do one thing at a time in a mindful way.
- **Group tasks in categories.** For example, put together emails, phone calls, errands, and meetings. Then you can do them all together in one block of time rather than switching from emails to calls to running an errand.
- **Switch off as many distractions as you can.** Silence your phone, log off from your email account, and so on. Then set a timer for the amount of time you need to work, and record how much you get done. Do what works for you to focus on one task for a fixed period of time.
- **Practice mindfulness in your breaks** between tasks. Stretch, take deep breaths, or go for a mindful walk.

### 4. Use Mindful Reminders

The word “mindful” means to remember. Most people who've read about or undertaken training in mindfulness appreciate the benefits of mindful living. Unfortunately, they keep forgetting to be mindful! The reason you forget to be

mindful is because your brain's normal (default) mode is to be habitually lost in your own thoughts—running a sort of internal narrative. When you're going about your usual daily activities, your brain switches you into this low energy state, which is unmindful, almost dreamy. Doing some things automatically, without thinking, is fine but research undertaken at Harvard University showed that 47 per cent of a person's day can be spent lost in thoughts. The same research found that day dreaming can have a negative impact on well-being. Being on auto-pilot means that you're not fully present and awake to the opportunities and choices around you. You can't be creative, plan something new or respond appropriately if you're operating mechanically. By using some form of reminder, you can be mindful again. The reminder shakes you out of auto-pilot mode. Try these reminders:

- **Setting an alarm on the phone** – even a vibrating alarm that doesn't disturb others can work well.
- **Putting mindfulness in your calendar** – setting an appointment with yourself!
- **A small note or picture on your desk** to remind you to be mindful.
- **Associating certain activities with mindfulness**, such as meal times or meetings or when finishing one task and starting another.
- **Using the sound of bells and rings** in the workplace as “bells of mindfulness.”

So, every time your phone rings, you take a mindful breath. Every time you hear the ping of a text message, you pause to be mindful of your surroundings rather than immediately reacting by checking the message. All these things are opportunities to come back into the present moment, to see yourself and your surroundings afresh. You take a small step back and reflect rather than automatically react to what's coming at you in the form of demands, tasks, and challenges.

## 5. Slow Down To Speed Up

Mindfulness at work does seem counter-intuitive. You're considering the fact that, by stopping or slowing down, you can become more efficient, productive, happy, resilient and healthy at work. You may not think that slowing down and being conscious can have such an effect (see How to Stop for more tips on that).

Imagine being asked to stop sleeping for a week. Sleeping is resting—and resting isn't work. So, simply stop sleeping and just keep working. Maybe you've experienced this when studying for exams or trying to meet a deadline

at work. Eventually your efficiency drops to almost zero; you're completely living out of the present moment and perhaps even hallucinating! You need to sleep at least seven hours every night to be able to function effectively.

Clearly, rest can increase efficiency. If you do manage to get about seven hours of sleep and achieve a certain amount of work, imagine what would happen if you also did a few mini-mindfulness exercises during the day? Your brain would become even more efficient, focused, effective at communicating with others, and better at learning new skills.

Being in a panicky rush leads to bad decisions and is a misuse of energy. Instead, pause, focus on listening, stroll rather than run, and generally take your time when at work. Effective leaders, workers, and entrepreneurs slow down and reflect to make the best decisions and actions—they slow down to speed up. That's a mindful way of working.

## **6. Make Stress Your Friend**

Recent research conducted at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, asked 30,000 people the same question: "Does the perception that stress affects health matter?" The results were astonishing.

The researchers found that people experiencing high levels of stress but who believed that stress was good for them had among the lowest mortality rates. Whereas highly stressed people who believed that stress was bad for their health had the highest chance of dying. Your beliefs about stress clearly affect how they impact on your health and well-being. Another study even found that the blood vessels constricted (as is seen in those with heart disease) in people who believed that stress was bad for them, but stayed open and healthy in those who believed that stress was good for them.

If reading this didn't make you go "wow," try reading it again. It's the most exciting research I've read this year!

So if you want to make stress your friend, you need to change the way you think about it and, in turn, your body's response to it.

Mindfulness can help you achieve this change in perception. The next time you're facing a challenge at work, notice how your heart rate speeds up and your breathing accelerates. Observe these responses and then switch your attitude—respond to your stress creatively rather than negatively. Be grateful

that the stress response is energizing you. Note that your body is preparing you for your upcoming challenge and that a faster heart rate is sending more oxygen around your body. Be grateful that the process is sharpening your senses and boosting your immune system. By viewing the stress response from this perspective, you see your upcoming problem as a positive challenge and recognize your body preparing to meet it. This small change in attitude can literally add years to your life and improve your productivity and achievements in the workplace.

## **7. Feel Gratitude**

Humans have a “negativity bias.” Essentially, this means that you’re much more likely to focus and dwell on something that’s gone wrong than on things that have gone well. Behaving in this way every day means that you ultimately adopt an excessively negative and unbalanced way of thinking.

Gratitude is the antidote. Plenty of evidence suggests that actively practicing gratitude makes you feel better and has a positive impact on your creativity, health, working relationships, and quality of work. Gratitude makes being at both work and home more positive experiences.

If you feel like you’re stuck in a job you don’t enjoy, the first step is to practice gratitude. What’s going well in your job? Maybe you’re grateful for the money? Even though it may be less than you’d like, you probably prefer it to having no salary at all. You may not like your manager, but maybe you’re friends with a couple of colleagues? You hate the office politics, but they give you insight into what you don’t like in a job, so in the future you know what to look for. After practicing gratitude, you can then consider whether you want to continue in that role or need to find another job.

Being mindful of what’s going well at work helps to improve your resilience. Rather than allowing your mind to spiral into anxiety or dip into low moods as you brood over all the aspects of the job you don’t like, you can feed your mind with thoughts of gratitude to raise your well-being. Then, if you do decide to find another job, your positive mental state can help you select an appropriate position and optimize your performance in the interview. People hire positive people, not those who just complain about what’s going wrong. Use gratitude to neutralize your brain’s natural negativity bias.

## 8. Cultivate Humility

Humility comes from the Latin *humilis*, meaning grounded. Humble people have a quiet confidence about themselves and don't feel the need to continuously remind others of their achievements. Humility may seem counter to our culture of glorifying those who make the most noise about themselves, grabbing our attention. But actually, humility is attractive—no one enjoys being around those who continually sing their own praises, and most people enjoy the company of those who are willing to listen to them rather than talk about themselves all the time.

In Jim Collin's hugely popular book Good to Great, he identified leaders who turned good companies into great ones. He found that the companies exhibiting the greatest long-term success (at least 15 years of exceptional growth) had leaders demonstrating all the skills of your standard leader but with one extra quality—personal humility. They were willing to work hard, but not for themselves—or the company. If things went wrong, they didn't seek to blame other to protect themselves. And if things went well, they immediately looked outside of themselves to congratulate others. They didn't have an inflated ego that needed protecting all the time.

Humility is often confused with meekness or timidity but they're not the same. Humility does not mean seeing yourself as inferior; rather, it means being aware of your natural dependence on and equity with those around you.

How is humility linked to mindfulness? Mindfulness is about accepting yourself just as you are, and being open to listening to and learning from others. Mindfulness is also synonymous with gratitude—you appreciate how others have helped you. And someone who is grateful for the contribution of others is naturally humble.

To develop a little more humility, try the following:

- **Undertake mindful exercises:** Mindfulness reduces activity in the part of the brain that generates the story of your self—sometimes called the narrative self. Giving too much attention to you and your own story is unhealthy. Mindfulness practice helps you to be more connected with your senses—the present self. Your attention widens and you can see how much others contribute to your everyday successes.
- **Consider who has helped you right now:** Spend a few minutes thinking about the number of people who have enabled you to read this page: your parents, guardians, or teachers who taught you to read; your employers who help you afford to pay for it; the people involved in writing, editing and

producing the copy; the distributors, sales people, providers of ink; the trees that were used to make the paper. We could go on. Think in this way from time to time to identify just how many people help you every day.

- **Show appreciation:** When someone helps you out, in whatever way, show appreciation. It sounds obvious, but doing so is an act of humility and reminds you to value the contribution of others: the driver who let you into her lane; the postman who delivered your letters; the person who held the door open and the cleaner who vacuumed your office—they all count.
- **Value other people's opinions:** If someone makes a point that challenges yours, suspend judgement. You can easily jump in and argue—but that implies that they're wrong and you're right. How can you be so sure? Stop and consider in what ways they may be right, too. This is true mindfulness in action—non-judgemental awareness together with curiosity and respect.

## 9. Accept What You Can't Change

Acceptance lies at the heart of mindfulness. To be mindful means to accept this present moment just as it is. And it means to accept yourself, just as you are now. It doesn't mean resignation or giving up. But it does mean acknowledging the truth of how things are at this time before trying to change anything.

Here's a workplace example. If you went \$30,000 over budget, that's a fact. It's already happened. As soon as you accept that, you can move forward and try to deal with the situation. Lack of acceptance can lead to denial of the fact (maybe causing you to go even more over budget) or avoidance (you keep skipping meetings with your boss) or aggression (you vent your anger at your team unnecessarily, adversely affecting relationships and motivation). Instead, you can accept the situation, talk to the necessary people, learn from your mistakes, and move on. Acceptance actually leads to change.

Personal acceptance is even more powerful. Self-acceptance is embracing all facets of yourself—your weaknesses, shortcomings, aspects you don't like and those you admire. When you accept yourself, you cut down on energy-draining self-criticism. You're then much better able to enjoy your successes and smile at your shortcomings. Through self-acceptance, you can create a clarity of mind that allows you to work on those aspects of yourself you wish to improve. The starting point of self-improvement and personal development is self-acceptance.



## 10. Adopt a Growth Mindset

According to Carol Dweck and her team at Stanford University researcher, people essentially adhere to one of two mindsets—a growth or a fixed mindset. People with a fixed mindset believe that their basic qualities, such as their intelligence and talents, are fixed traits. Instead of developing their intelligence and talents, they spend their time hoping their traits will lead to success. They don't seek to develop themselves, because they think that talent alone leads to success. They turn out to be wrong—brain science has proved otherwise.

People with a growth mindset believe that they can improve their intelligence and talents with effort. By applying themselves, they think that they can get better. They see brains and talent as just the starting point, and build on them with hard work and determination. Brain scans have actually revealed that effort does lead to growth in intelligence and enhancement of initial talent over time. People with this mindset have a love of learning and demonstrate greater resilience. Success at work depends on having a growth mindset.

Mindfulness is about adopting a growth mindset. Mindfulness is about giving attention to the present moment and not judging your innate talent or intelligence, but being open to new possibilities. When you adopt a growth mindset at work, you don't mind getting negative feedback as you view it as a chance to discover something new. You don't mind taking on new responsibilities because you're curious about how you'll cope. You expect and move towards challenges, seeing them as opportunities for inner growth. That's the essence of mindfulness at work—believing that you can improve and grow with experience, moving towards challenges, living in the moment, and discovering new things about yourself and others.

Use the following four steps to develop a growth mindset, based on research by Dweck and colleagues:

1. **Listen to the voice of a fixed mindset in your head.** This is about being mindful of your own thoughts when faced with a challenge. Notice if the thoughts are telling you that you don't have the talent, the intelligence or if you find yourself reacting with anxiety or anger when someone offers feedback to you.
2. **Notice that you have a choice.** You can accept those fixed mindset thoughts or question them. Take a few moments to practice a mindful pause.

3. **Question the fixed mindset attitudes.** When your fixed mindset says “What if I fail? I’ll be a failure,” you can ask yourself “Is that true? Most successful people fail. That’s how they learn.” Or if fixed mindset says “What if I can’t do this project? I don’t have the skills,” reply with “Can I be absolutely sure I don’t have the skills? In truth, I can only know if I try. And if I don’t have the skills, doing this will help me to learn them.”
4. **Take action on the growth mindset.** This will make you enjoy the challenges in the workplace, seeing them as opportunity to grow rather than avoid. Use the above system if you mind starts leaning towards the fixed mindset.

Over time, you’ll find yourself habitually of a growth rather than fixed mindset, leading to greater success and personal mastery than before.

*This article was adapted from Shamash Alidina’s book Mindfulness at Work for Dummies.*