

STRESS

If Mindfulness Makes You Uncomfortable, It's Working

by Amy Jen Su

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I recently had a conversation with a client named Claire, who shared that her company had been touting the benefits of mindfulness, and she was giving mindfulness a try with a meditation app. But she was frustrated that it wasn't helping her feel more relaxed – instead, she was actually a bit more agitated of late. While the situation was clearly a source of consternation for Claire, it didn't mean the meditation app wasn't working.

Now that mindfulness has hit the mainstream, it's been defined in a variety of ways: moment-to-moment awareness, being in the here and now, relaxing fully into the present. And somewhere along the way we've come to equate mindfulness with "good feeling" emotions such as joy, relaxation, and happiness.

While mindfulness can lead us to experience the good things in life more fully, this only tells half of the mindfulness story. In fact, becoming truly mindful and aware means that we are also able to see, name, and more fully experience things when we are angry, sad, jealous, anxious, vulnerable, or lonely – this, too, is mindfulness.

Therefore, we have to redefine mindfulness as more than feeling good, and instead see it as having an increased capacity to sit with the full spectrum of being human, experiencing it all – the good, the bad, and the ugly – and learning to be less reactive so that we can make better choices each day.

I told Claire two stories about leaders as a better way of understanding mindfulness and leadership choices.

The first is about a leader named Randy, who is working on elevating himself as a leader. Over the course of the last year, he hired good people and helped them get up to speed. Now he wants to take time to be more strategic in his role and build more visibility for himself and his team, but he admits that he hasn't made much progress. Sometimes, he says, it just feels like he "can't help himself," and he dives into the details instead of delegating or empowering his team.

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Then there's Natalie, who is working on becoming a more patient leader. Over the course of the past year, she received feedback that her hard-changing style rubs others the wrong way. The tone of the feedback suggested that if she didn't make some

measurable changes, she could derail her career. Sometimes, she says, it feels like she “just can’t help herself,” and she lashes out with a negative tone and body language.

For both Randy and Natalie, cultivating mindfulness means being able to see the patterns at play, become less reactive, and make clearer leadership choices. Each took the following steps:

1. “Witness” and track the pattern. Over a period of time, Randy and Natalie observed themselves in action, like a witness without judgment, and logged their observations in more concrete terms.

- What was the trigger when you had an “I just can’t help myself” moment?
- What body sensations did you experience?
- What was the “voice-track” in your mind?
- What was the underlying emotion you experienced?
- What did you do?

For Randy, he began to notice that he felt a pit in his stomach when he wasn’t in his comfort zone of “doing.” He found the corresponding voice-track really tempting: “*Randy, wouldn’t it feel good to take care of email or head into the detail here?*” Randy discovered that underneath it all was an underlying feeling of vulnerability and a fear of letting go of things he was really good at.

Natalie began to notice that she felt her jaw tighten and her blood pressure rise most acutely when someone on her team didn’t perform. The voice-track was a harsh critic that screamed, “*This person is so incompetent! How dare she risk how others perceive me?*” As Natalie shared, “What I came to realize was how much I dislike the feeling of being embarrassed. It’s been a big turning point for me to understand why I react the way I do in these situations.”

2. Notice, name, and pause. As Randy and Natalie became more skilled at noticing and naming their body sensations, voice-track, and emotions, they were able to hit the pause button more often. My fellow Paravis managing partner, Pam Krulitz, describes this step in these terms: “In cultivating mindfulness, we learn to not scratch the itch right away.” One of my clients described it as “noticing the initial feeling of discomfort, becoming aware of it, and taking a deep breath to bring things back to the frontal lobe.” And Chade-Meng Tan, author of the book *Search Inside Yourself*, calls this the moment of “sacred pause.”

When we experience the “sacred pause,” we become less compelled by what simply makes us feel better (e.g., diving into the details, e-mail, that afternoon candy bar), and we feel less compelled to attack, run away, or give in to what makes us feel bad.

This is the “so what” behind having a more regular mindfulness practice. Whether we are deep breathing, sitting in meditation, or just moving mindfully through our day, we are in effect building our capacity to witness our body sensations, voice-tracks, and emotions without reacting. There’s a range of practices – from the informal to the formal – that can help us strengthen this ability:

Less formal things you can do on your own:

- Take one deep breath in between meetings
- Check in with your body
- Commit to doing one activity per day more mindfully
- Meditate for two minutes

More formal practices to try:

- Body-scan meditation (bringing your attention and awareness to different regions of your body, where you experience the sensations in the body without trying to change or react to anything)
- Sitting meditation
- Walking meditation

- Regular body work (e.g., massage, rolfing, etc.)
- Yoga
- Martial arts

For Randy, whenever he noticed the body sensation of having a pit in his stomach, he was less reactive to the corresponding voice-track trying to tempt him. Instead, he used it as a cue to step away from the keyboard and ask himself, “Should I really be doing this task?” For Natalie, whenever she noticed her jaw clenching, she was less reactive to the screaming inner critic voice. She would take a deep breath and say the mantra “peace” to bring herself out of a heated reaction.

3. See more clearly, choose more clearly. It’s when we can see and experience the situation or moment with less reaction – even if we are experiencing anxiety, fear, anger, or sadness – that a more constructive set of choices emerges: Can I reframe this situation? Is there someone I can reach out to for support? Is there a request I need to make here? What is the right thing to do here that preserves my overall integrity, vision, or values, even if it’s the harder choice to make?

For Randy, he realized that he needed to be less hard on himself and build a sound plan of transitioning items to his team while ramping into a more elevated role. Natalie realized that a lot of her interactions were driven by a pattern of needing to prove herself, even though she had the respect and confidence of others in her expertise.

And Claire, who was not feeling relaxed after using her meditation app, discovered that her meditation was bringing forth a set of emotions that she was repressing, thus leaving her feeling agitated. The irony, said Claire, was that she had started using the meditation app in the hope of escaping those feelings.

As Claire became more of an objective witness, she began to see more clearly that she had outgrown her role at work, even though that realization was uncomfortable. She was avoiding dealing with this, and her mindfulness practice was now bringing her closer to the truth.

Instead of running, Claire saw that she now sat at a much more honest, authentic juncture in the road, where choice became more possible: Was it time to have a difficult conversation about her next career steps with the organization? Was it time to create and articulate a vision and game plan for what would come next? What did she want to do, and would she have the courage to lean into it?

Mindfulness is not all gloom and doom, nor is it all sunshine and flowers. With mindfulness, we are just a little less tossed around by running away from or crushing what feels bad. We're less compelled to indulge in our desires and excesses for what gives us a temporary high. Instead, we see with greater clarity just how blue the sky is on a beautiful day and we see and feel the depths of our hearts being pierced when we've experienced a meaningful loss. And somewhere in that fuller human experience, we connect and tap into a deeper source of motivation and choice that is more aligned with our integrity, our values and ethics, and our authentic essence.

Amy Jen Su is a co-founder and managing partner of Paravis Partners, a boutique executive coaching and leadership development firm. She is co-author, with Muriel Maignan Wilkins, of *Own the Room: Discover Your Signature Voice to Master Your Leadership Presence*.

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