

# SOLE PHILOSOPHY

## *Mindfulness*

### Resilience at work

In terms of mental well-being the new buzz word in town is resilience<sup>1</sup>. So what does it mean and how can I use mindfulness to help me build up this core strength?

Traditionally, health care interventions have used a model of resilience grounded in pathology, which emphasizes an individual's deficits and fixing problems. Focusing on concepts such as resilience redirects health care to recognize strengths and develop strategies to build on existing capabilities. Resilience connotes inner strength, competence, optimism, flexibility, and the ability to cope effectively when faced with adversity.

But resilience isn't just about pushing through difficult times, taking control or carrying on regardless of how you feel, it's about developing strategies that help you manage when facing situations you find stressful. So, a good way to think of resilience is your ability to cope with, or recover from, stressful and even traumatic experiences. This skill is learned through our experience of life, rather than innately passed on by our parents.

As lawyers, management consultants or business leaders we know all about how to fix our clients problems. That is what we are highly trained in and paid handsomely to do, but how good are we at spending so much of our lives in stress, without turning to addictive methods of self-medication, like the bottle, which eventually lead to ill health? Well learning a life-skill like mindfulness can help us stay away from stress burnout and increase the quality of our lives without needing to change or fix anything.

Mindfulness is increasingly now taught in schools to primary and secondary school children, as well as being adopted by many universities' wellbeing centres offering courses as a key part of life-long learning. You don't need to be ill with anxiety or stress to benefit from living mindfully, but where it has been missing is in the workplace. Until now.

Mindfulness is the awareness that comes from paying attention on purpose, in the present moment to things just as they are non-judgmentally (Williams, Teasdale, Segal and Kabat-Zinn, 1990). In their seminal works these four professors from Universities of Oxford, Cambridge, Toronto and Massachusetts, who re-invented mindfulness for today's secular society tell us that life holds both pleasant and unpleasant things, and that what we should not do is try and fix unpleasant things when they crop up, as they inevitably will.

The key to working out solutions to the unpleasant things in life is to accept them just as they are non-judgmentally, and in doing so coming out of our automatic pilot mode which reacts instantaneously to them (with our fight, flight or freeze automatic reactions triggered by the amygdala). What we need to do instead is take a step mental step back from the unpleasant thing that causes us pain and allow our brains instead to suggest the innate wisdom and knowledge we all possess by giving space to access the pre-frontal cortex where we store our executive function – our USP over the competition. This way of being (rather than doing) can then give us better access to the creative and new ways to respond, that we have gathered over our life time in practising law.

So what is the access to this way of being?

### **Take a deep breath in and follow the sensations of breathing out.**

The main access to mindfulness as a state of awareness is via meditation, although you can be mindful 24/7 by learning how to pay attention with each of our five senses during our everyday life and doing one thing at a time on purpose. In this way it doesn't mean we need to relax (or find relaxation), nor do we need to fix anything, or artificially build time into our day to meditate. Think of it more as being in the present to access "the zone" or "being in flow", just like a master sportsman, musician or artist.

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<sup>1</sup> If you want to check up on how resilient you might be then do a simple check like <https://www.bwcharity.org.uk/resilience-check> based on the Resilience Scale by Gail Wagnild & Heather Young 1993. This helps you to discover what you are already good at doing and identifies what you can do to improve your overall score by suggesting key things you can work on.

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Meditation skills help us to remain open to new ideas or creative solutions. But it also takes practice to remain open to this state of mind. Our default way of coping is by “Doing”, but over think the matter and you will fall prey to “driven-doing”, and you will end up going round in ever decreasing circles rather than remaining in prize winning top form.

Part of this teaching involves the ability for us to be kind to ourselves, and treat ourselves gently when things go badly, instead of allowing our inner critic to have a field day. We treat ourselves so often in a harsh way, instead of how we would treat a good friend or client.

By spending time cultivating friendship towards ourselves, you are gradually dissolving the negative forces of fear and guilt within. This reduces your adhesive preoccupation with your own mental landscape which in turn releases a wellspring of happiness, compassion and creativity that benefits everyone.

*Williams and Penman, Finding Peace in a Frantic World*

The four wise men have studied the effect of mindfulness in its various forms (there are over 200 different mindful practices described by the Buddhist suttas) and turned to clinical science to validate their findings before creating a secular program. Modern use of the MRI scanner with seasoned meditators and new meditators has shown us increase in grey matter connections in the prefrontal cortex after only a short time of practice, as well as showing activity in areas known to be used in creative top-down thinking, instead of the bottom-up fight, flight, freeze automatic reactions of the amygdala. Indeed, mindfulness has been recommended by NICE as a primary treatment for recurring depression over equivalent anti-depressant medication. But you don't need to be ill to benefit from living mindfully.

### **So how do you train yourself to remain in top-flight leading-edge condition?**

Well, learning mindfulness is one thing but carrying on a daily practice can help us to remain open to the state of being, so that when the phone call comes we can remain calm and know what to do. This can be cultivated by attending a meditation group, or by finding just 5 or 10 minutes a day to do a daily practice. Once you have learned the basics of secular mindfulness (traditionally via an 8-week course), you need to practice it daily just as if you were learning a new language or an instrument or seeking to stay at the top of any sports profession. In fact, mindfulness is something we can already do, if only we knew that was how we accessed states of excellence in the first place. We have all experienced that feeling of being in the zone where no problem was ever too much to handle and life just seemed to flow. Practice of mindfulness can help improve access to this state of being.

Sole Philosophy specializes in providing training and ongoing support with learning to create a practice of mindfulness in the workplace. Sophie Jane also holds one-to-one and group teaching in mindfulness at her practice at the Green Door Clinic in the Harley Street medical conservation area. She teaches mindfulness in the workplace at a number of different private businesses. Sophie Jane works with the legal charity LawCare as a listener and is a trained Mental health first aider with MHFA England.

#### ***About Sophie Jane Miller***

I first learned to practice mindfulness following a stress related breakdown. Mindfulness helped me to recover and return to work as a lawyer. The same stresses surround me, but I now know how to listen to my body rather than living solely in my head and relying totally on my intellect. As a result of that life event I learned how to teach others on the Masters degree course in Mindfulness Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT) at the world renowned Oxford Mindfulness Centre, part of the Oxford University Department of Psychiatry. My mission is to help others learn this simple tool for living, so that no one need get as ill as I did before they find for themselves what wonderful things living mindfully can reveal about our everyday lives.



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