



## Mindfulness Meditation Reduces Motivation

**Acceptance of the present moment can impact the will to work hard and get things done.**

In recent decades, mindfulness meditation has taken the Western world by storm. Tech companies in the United States routinely offer mindfulness training programmes and tens of millions of people have downloaded meditation apps. Overall, one in seven Americans reports having a mindfulness practice. The concept of mindfulness has become so popular that it is even being used to sell products like mayo (MindfulMayo).

Rooted in 2000-year-old Buddhism, mindfulness entails focusing the mind on the present moment and accepting things as they are. It can be instilled in as little as eight minutes of **meditation**. The benefits of mindfulness are manifold: It helps with anxiety, depression, stress, sleep, job satisfaction, relationship quality and **decision making**.

Against a backdrop of thousands of scientific articles on the benefits of mindfulness, we asked a simple question: When might mindfulness have a downside?

Given its basis in experiencing and accepting the present moment, we thought mindfulness may be counterproductive in the context of work tasks, chores, goals and other responsibilities. As goals researchers, we know that motivation is borne out of discontent with the state of the world at present; it is served by focusing on the future (a disposition inherent to pursuing any goal or completing any

task) and feeling energised. Our **research**, appearing in the July issue of *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, tested whether there is a tension between being mindful and being motivated.

### **Mindfulness meditation and performance**

We had some people meditate by listening to an approximately ten-minute meditation exercise guided by a professional mindfulness coach, a technique similar to popular mindfulness exercises and one we used in prior **research**. Other people listened to the same coach guiding them to let their minds wander. Mind-wandering is the opposite of mindfulness and, not incidentally, what most people's minds do much of the time.

We then gave them a small job to do. The jobs were similar to daily activities such as editing a cover letter or wordsmithing. Before they began the task, we asked them how motivated they were. Did they want to do the task? Did they plan to spend much time on it?

The results were clear. After meditating, people lacked motivation. They didn't feel like doing work, nor did they want to spend much time on it. Being mindful made people focus less on the future and instilled a sense of calm – just as it promises – but that came at the cost of wanting to get things done.

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We also measured how well people performed on the tasks. There we saw no effect of mindfulness. That is, after meditating, people performed no better or worse than people who did not meditate, although mindfulness should have helped people perform better because it allowed them to focus on the task at hand. These benefits seemed to be washed away by the lack of motivation.

A meditation instructor at a major U.S. corporation told us that CEOs find mindfulness appealing because it places the responsibility for stress reduction on employees rather than the boss. Our results may serve as a cautionary tale for organisations that consider mindfulness interventions primarily to increase the productivity of their employees. Mindfulness makes people feel better, but seems to discourage them from working hard.

***Andrew C. Hafenbrack*** is an Assistant Professor of Organisational Behaviour at the Católica-Lisbon School of Business and Economics. He has a PhD in Management from INSEAD.

***Kathleen D. Vohs*** is Distinguished McKnight University Professor and Land O' Lakes Chair of Marketing at the Carlson School of Management, University of Minnesota.

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