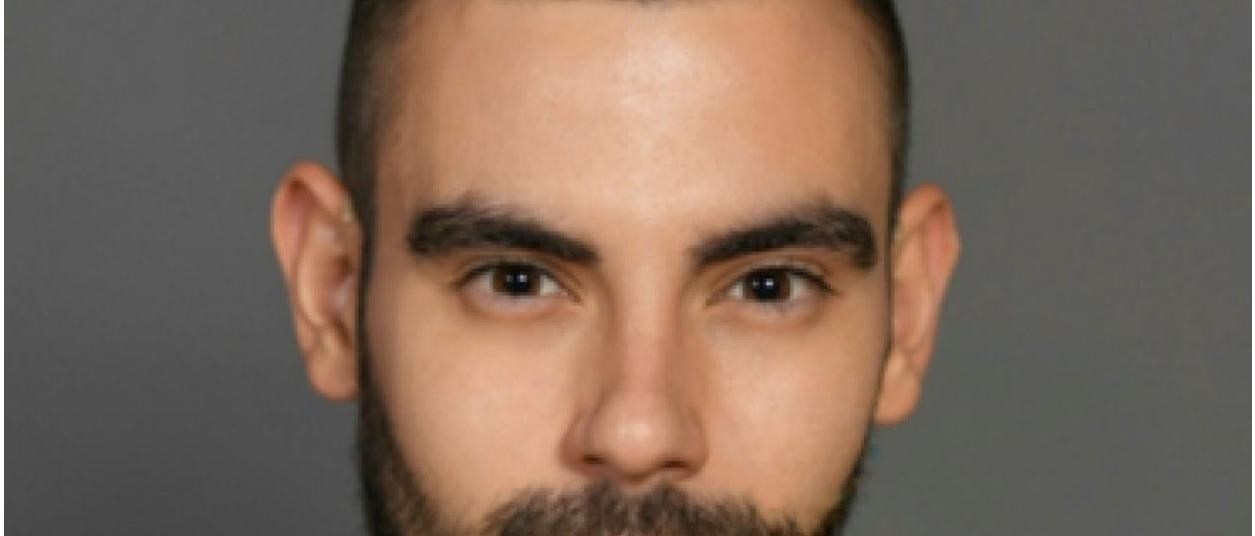

How a Few Minutes of Meditation Makes You a Nicer Co-Worker



By Andrew C. Hafenbrack , Lindsey Cameron , Gretchen Spreitzer, Chen Zhang, Laura Noval and Samah Shaffakat

Become more helpful and generous after just eight minutes of mindfulness practice.

Reduced stress. Increased awareness. More focus on the present. The benefits of mindfulness are well known by now, following the proliferation of **corporate mindfulness training programmes** in the past decade. Rooted in Buddhism and embraced by office workers, soldiers and athletes, mindfulness has been widely studied for its **benefits on a person's mind and emotions**. Increasingly, researchers also find that developing a non-judgemental awareness of the present boosts empathy and other-focused perspectives, leading to more behaviours that benefit the people around you.

Those findings, however, have limited implications for the workplace as they are based on up to 12 weeks of training aimed at cultivating mindfulness as a personality trait. Not everyone has the time or resources to be away from work and family that long.

Our latest paper, “**Helping People by Being in the Present: Mindfulness Increases Prosocial Behaviour**”, looks at temporary or *state* mindfulness that one can easily practice at work. In five experiments involving diverse samples of office workers and business school students in North America, Europe and Asia, we found that after as little as one session of seven or eight minutes of mindfulness meditation, participants demonstrated more prosocial behaviour at work such as helping a co-worker or donating money to someone in financial distress.

More mindful, more helpful

We conducted our first experiment among 146 employees of a large US insurance company. The participants were randomly assigned to the mindfulness group or a control group. Over five work-day mornings, the former group engaged in breath practice by listening to a seven-minute audio recording that induced mindfulness. The control group received no intervention. All participants completed afternoon surveys on their prosocial behaviour at work, such as teaching a co-worker something new. Those in the mindfulness condition reported significantly higher levels of helping behaviour than control participants.

The second experiment was similar to the first, except that it lasted only a day and participants – 250 employees of an IT consulting firm in India – rated the helpfulness of other team members in terms of providing guidance. Again, participants in the mindfulness condition engaged in more prosocial behaviour.

Suffering not required

To capture a more objective measure of helping, we designed a third experiment that was not a field study. This time, we recruited 144 alumni of an Indian business school and randomly assigned them to either the mindfulness or control group.

Both groups of participants – all full-time employees – were then asked to imagine receiving a bonus of US\$1,000, which they could keep or share with a co-worker in financial difficulties. On average, mindfulness participants indicated that they would give their co-worker US\$482, compared to US\$375 among control-group participants.

Experiment no 4 was similar to no 3, except that the windfall this time was in the form of a real €120 jackpot and the proposed beneficiary was not described as being in financial distress. We asked 66 business or economics students at an Austrian university to decide how much they would give to another participant if they won the €120.

Again, participants in the mindfulness condition proved to be more generous than control-condition ones, donating on average €41 vs €23. This finding, unlike previous research that involved recipient suffering, suggests mindfulness can make you more prosocial and altruistic even towards people who don't have an immediate problem.

To each her own practice

We also found that mindfulness enhanced prosocial behaviours beyond devoting additional time or money, such as acting compassionately. Such behaviour was mediated by empathy and thinking from others' perspective.

In our fifth experiment, we recruited 139 employees in the United States and randomly assigned them to three conditions: focused breathing meditation, loving kindness meditation (participants focused on giving feelings of warmth and kindness to themselves and others) or a control condition where they listened to the news. They were then asked to write a note to a colleague to inform her that she had been denied a promotion.

Participants in the two mindfulness conditions demonstrated significantly higher levels of compassion in that note, as well as greater positive emotions, empathy and perspective-taking than those in the control group. This finding suggests that different mindfulness practices such as focused breathing and loving kindness can have similar results in the workplace, and individuals can simply choose the one that resonates with them. While many people meditate as a means to pursue enlightenment, our findings show that even secular meditations can improve the way we treat others.

Tool, not panacea

Our study, in press at *Organisational Behaviour and Human Decision Processes*, is one of the first to look into the prosocial effect of state mindfulness at the workplace. It contributes to the body of research on mindfulness by showing that you can become more prosocial at work – not just self-rated but also assessed by co-workers – after just one short session

of meditation. And you can practice at your desk by listening to an audio recording. Mindfulness, in short, can be very accessible and relevant for the workplace.

We also showed that it is possible to run a study on mindfulness in a business setting without resorting to a multiweek programme. You can get someone to do a single secular attention exercise in the morning for eight minutes without telling them it is mindfulness. Such a study design provides a more robust test of hypotheses as it reduces any **demand or placebo effects** and gives more confidence in the results. If participants don't know what you are testing, they are unlikely to give you the answer that they think you want to have.

It must be said, however, that notwithstanding its various benefits, mindfulness is not a panacea and can indeed be counterproductive at work. One of us (Andrew) previously found that people **lacked motivation** after mindfulness meditation. Others have found that mindfulness meditation rendered practitioners prone to **avoidance** or susceptible to forming **false memories**.

The key is to see mindfulness as an extremely useful tool that helps you in certain conditions. This requires you to have sufficient insight into your situation. If you are feeling unmotivated at work, for example, mindfulness is unlikely to give you a push. If you face a decision that would benefit from a present focus or are about to meet with someone with whom you need to work but have trouble empathising, mindfulness is highly desirable.

If you are experiencing negative emotions, mindfulness weakens them, which can help if those emotions are making you overly anxious, or hamper if the emotions alert you to something you really ought to be doing. Research such as ours on the benefits and the costs of mindfulness can help you know when it's time to put on those headphones and meditate.

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