

Mindfulness: The New Zen of Time Management

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As a licensed psychologist and business coach who has spent over two decades helping people who work in various business environments and professions - from the corporate world to small business, from CEOs to lawyers, artists and more - I've repeatedly heard comments confirming that almost everyone these days is harried, hurried, and exhausted. It's not an overstatement to say that the majority of us are having a significant crisis with Time and we've become Time's victims. What's more, we have no idea how to find freedom.

Here are just a few examples of comments I've heard not only from clients, but from colleagues as well:

"With work and my family occupying most of my time and energy, I feel the continuous pressure to meet my responsibilities. I constantly 'keep on going' and I never sleep or relax. I have no idea how to pull myself out of this cycle!"

"All day long, virtually every day, I feel imprisoned by email, Facebook, my cell phone, and my Blackberry. It's consuming my life to the point that I can't focus on all that I want and need to get done."

"When I'm working in my office, my plans for the day constantly get derailed with interruptions and demands. I don't complete what I set out to do."

"I spend so much time thinking about the past or the future that I feel like the present is slipping away. I know I'm missing out...."

"Because I don't love my job, I feel unfulfilled at the end of the day. I don't have time to focus on what really matters."

Why The Old Solutions Don't Work

Clearly, this widespread problem requires a radical solution. But most traditional approaches to "Time

Management" only ask us to change our behaviors, as if all our conflicts with Time could be solved simply by "establishing our priorities," "sticking to a concrete schedule," or "organizing our files." These external solutions are logical, but they're not psychological; they ignore the internal emotional conflicts and pressures that influence us on the most fundamental levels.

While it must be acknowledged that external pressures and distractions inundate us constantly, their effect on us can trigger internal psychological conflicts. These conflicts cannot be addressed only on an external or behavioral level. In fact, when left unaddressed, internal conflicts influence our behaviors profoundly, potentially wreaking havoc on our ability to maintain a healthy equilibrium with Time.

When we only try to change our behaviors, in neurobiological terms we're using the left hemisphere of our brain to logically decide how to manage our time. These external, behavioral resolutions, however, can easily be undermined by reactions from the limbic brain, which push us into a fight or flight survival state. This disrupts even our best-made plans, from completing tasks to following schedules, and makes interpersonal relationships more difficult (Siegel, 2007).

Here are two examples of how internal psychological issues can interfere with efficient Time Management:

* Imagine you're the director of a branch of a real estate company. You're writing a promotional piece to advertise a new housing complex. Each time you sit down to work, you're inundated with interruptions. A co-worker asks you a time-consuming question. The phone rings while your secretary is out to lunch; it's your daughter calling from school to say that she's sick. By the end of the day, exhausted, you realize that you wrote your

piece within scattered, fifteen-minute chunks of Time.

* Imagine you've been assigned to prepare a presentation at work for a group of your colleagues. With the best of intentions, you decide to start working on the project in the morning, when your energy is at its best. Even though you've planned to leave your whole morning free, you put off working on the presentation until the last minute. By procrastinating, you've wasted your best energy and wind up rushing to finish the presentation.

Although the first example might seem to describe only external factors interfering with time, varying degrees of internal conflicts might be at work under the surface as well. These could range from the inability to create professional boundaries, to trouble setting limits, to fear of delegating responsibilities and giving up control. In the second example, no amount of external time management solutions can address the unconscious internal conflicts that cause procrastination. These could range from beliefs rooted in childhood experience, such as "They'll judge and attack me," "I'm not good enough to do the job well," or "I'm terrified to speak in public."

In both of these situations, old neural nets from childhood are likely suppressing our ability to function from a balanced state of mind. From infancy, neural nets that can hamper us as adults are generated when early caregivers aren't sufficiently attuned to our physical and emotional needs. These experiences create implicit memories, including nonconscious mental models about our worth, our abilities, and the way the relational world works. When there is not sufficient empathy in our early environment, such neural nets remain dissociated from the flow of the integrating brain, so when they are triggered in adulthood, our rational choices are overwhelmed by the super-fast limbic rush of these mental



models. We may fully intend to work on a pressing project, and find ourselves consuming ice cream instead. Because these experiences are dissociated from connection with the middle prefrontal cortical regions, we are deprived of the complex processing available there, including the capacity to see a range of options and the response flexibility to choose the best option and act on it. Consequently, we're less able to address clearly and potently the issues that arise regarding ourselves, others, and the task at hand, making it virtually impossible for us to make decisions from a place of choice and freedom (Siegel, 2007).

Although we can't always change our external situation, we do have the ability to influence our degree of neural integration, giving us the power to change our internal and external responses to challenges. The freedom given by increased capacity for choice is an effective time management skill that frees our energy for the task at hand, while changing the quality of our work and life.

Ideally, each of us experiences the integration of body, thoughts, and feelings – or, to say it neurobiologically, body, left hemisphere, and right hemisphere. Any successful approach to time management must incorporate all of these aspects of our being, each of which shapes the way we interact with and relate to Time. In order to manage Time successfully, we first must learn to manage ourselves. It's important to recognize the significant difference between "management" and "control." Rather than closing off from difficult feelings or beliefs in order to regain control, true self-management involves being in touch with *all* parts of ourselves. In this way, we can gradually develop the capacity to respond to any situation from a place of awareness and choice, rather than be pulled off track by external pressures, old neural nets, and our own feelings and beliefs. As we become increasingly aware of internal (psychological, emotional, and bodily) factors that inform the way we relate to Time, our middle prefrontal cortex begins to integrate with previously dissociated limbic firing. So the next

question is, “How do we promote the neural integration that will lead to greater freedom in regard to Time?”

Mindfulness: A Radical Solution to Time Management

Originally derived from the Buddhist tradition, but increasingly applied to a wide spectrum of Western modalities for mental and physical well-being, mindfulness is the practice of bringing your awareness to what is emerging in the present moment. This refers to what is occurring for us internally (our thoughts, feelings, and beliefs) and externally (the environment around us) from moment to moment. It is a radical wake-up call to become conscious of all parts of ourselves, bringing to awareness the unconscious behaviors, thoughts, and beliefs that have been running us.



Research demonstrates that mindfulness facilitates brain-wide integrative processes, including vertical integration (body, limbic, and cortex) and bilateral integration (right and left hemispheres). Mindfulness meditation shifts the brain laterally toward the left, which increases the potential for approach states of mind, allowing us to confront and resolve problems (Davidson, 2004). Correspondingly, Lazar and colleagues have found that long-term mindfulness meditation increases the thickness of the middle prefrontal cortical region (Lazar, et al 2005). For there to be measurable changes in cortical thickness, a great many new synaptic connections must be made. As integration between the middle prefrontal and limbic regions occurs, we are more resilient under stress and have increased response flexibility, allowing us to pause and process our responses to

any situation more slowly and completely (Lutz, Duane, and Davidson, in press).

One key to improving our relationship with Time is developing a “mindful awareness” of ourselves at all levels. This offers a fresh perspective from which we can nonjudgmentally witness whatever is arising for us in the present, internally and externally, from a place of curiosity and openness. When we encounter the present with new eyes, we are less likely to identify with the unconscious feelings and beliefs that interfere with our relationship with Time. This opens the door to new possibilities and solutions.

Research by Baer, Smith, Hopkins, Krietemeyer and Tenet (2006) indicates that the more mindful we are, either by nature or by practice, several benefits will result:

- we are much less likely to react to thoughts and feelings as they occur;
- we increasingly notice, observe, and attend to our sensations and perceptions;
- we increasingly act with awareness;
- we have the increased ability to describe all of our experience in words;
- we become increasingly non-judgmental.

With enough practice, mindfulness can become a trait of being, rather than just a transient state of mind as it is when we first begin to practice. This will profoundly affect the functioning of our body and brain, our thoughts and feelings, and our relationship with ourselves and others (Siegel, 2007).

Simple Steps for Developing Mindful Awareness

If you are a newcomer mindfulness practice, taking a kind attitude toward yourself is an important part of the process. For many of us, our minds are used to running very quickly in many directions, so it will take some time for the capacity for focus to emerge. As you approach your practice each day, coming to it with an open state of mind, without expectations about how it will go relieves the additional tension that comes with pre-judging the experience.

Here's a traditional, easy-to-follow exercise to help develop mindful awareness:

- Sit down in a room where you won't be disturbed.
- Close your eyes and focus your attention on your breathing.
- Become aware of yourself inhaling and exhaling.
- It's natural for your attention to become distracted from your breath. When your attention becomes distracted, don't judge yourself. Simply gently return to your in-breath and your out-breath.
- Practice the above steps until you've developed the ability to sustain focus on your breath.
- From this place, continue to focus on your breath, and expand your focus to allow your thoughts, feelings, beliefs, and bodily sensations to enter your awareness, receiving all experience with an attitude of openness, curiosity, and love.

Developing mindful awareness isn't just limited to exercises like this. Mindfulness can be practiced in many other ways: from washing the dishes, to weeding the garden, to listening to music, to doing yoga. Any activity can be an opportunity to stay in the present moment and allow the richness of experience to change the way we perceive and behave.

The more we become mindfully aware of ourselves from moment to moment, each level of our being will communicate to us with increasing power. This open channel of communication with all parts

of ourselves will reveal the internal mental, emotional, and interpersonal issues that are interfering with our ability to manage our Time.

Making Mindfulness a Way of Living

In the words of the poet Stanley Kunitz: "You must grab ahold of time and draw it into your self. You must train it so that it corresponds to your own interior rhythms. Otherwise, you'll be chasing [time] all your life."

To truly manage Time requires making mindfulness a way of living, as we remain aware of our bodies, feelings, and beliefs from moment to moment. This means respecting our own natural energetic rhythms and responding to each situation accordingly. As soon as we notice that we've slipped back into our automatic reactions, triggered by dissociated limbic neural networks, we can mindfully choose to "wake up" again.

When we live from a mindful place of alignment and integration, new possibilities and solutions will emerge. All parts of us work together as a whole. Just as a choir that sings in harmony, where each individual's voice synchronizes perfectly within the whole, through mindfulness we become more than the sum of our parts, reclaiming the full power of who we are. The challenges and conflicts that once overwhelmed us and ran our lives no longer threaten us. We're able to pay attention to important deadlines and timeframes while still giving ourselves the space to enter the fullness of the present moment, the source of our calmness, creativity, and inspiration. In this way, we live at the intersection of Time and Timelessness. This is true freedom.

For over two decades, **Dr. Lynda Klau** has applied her integrative approach to mind, body and spirit as a licensed psychologist, coach and holistic business strategist. An educator, author, public speaker, and workshop leader, she has served as a tenured Assistant Professor at Ramapo College of New Jersey, and an Assistant Professor at Downstate Medical Center. Currently she is on the faculty of The Association for Spirituality and Psychotherapy. Her broad spectrum of skills and cutting-edge tools for transformation form the foundation of her company, Life Unlimited: The Center for Human Possibility. Her practice is based in New York City, where she lives. For more information please visit www.DrLyndaKlau.com.

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