

MINDFUL PRACTICE

BY BEATA C. LEWIS, JD, MSC

Consciousness – your innate ability to think about your own thoughts – is a double-edged sword. The good news is it allows you to steer your life. You can set your path and intention. The bad news is that it's easily hi-jacked by your conditioning and your environment. The hijacking takes you down a path where you can find yourself thinking, feeling, or doing what is “default” or familiar but not what you intend. Like getting upset when you intended to stay calm. Or saying the thing that reflexively popped out of your mouth rather than the thing that would have had the impact you prefer. Deliberately practicing how you direct your own attention is like pushups for your mind.

Pushups for your mind help you think, feel, connect and perform better. You cultivate your capacity for self-observation and self-regulation. You reflect on and select specific qualities or moves you want to develop and integrate. You turn insight into deliberate, dedicated, daily practice. It brings you back to yourself and your capacity to make new choices more skillfully and consistently.

Pause for a moment here to consider ways you want to catalyze change and the impact you want to have. How might mindful practice help you?

THE INSIDE STORY

Mindfulness increases our capacity to reframe, using the space between stimulus and response for conscious, skillful choice rather than reacting mindlessly. It's the practice of being aware of and paying attention to the moment in which you find yourself. As a practice, mindfulness trains our physiology – our neuro-muscular patterning – to focus attention on the self or the soma. It provides space for a convergence or integration of IQ (cognitive intelligence), EQ (emotional intelligence), C-IQ (conversational intelligence), and SQ (somatic intelligence). This convergence or integration is necessary for skillful performance – physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual – especially in stressful situations. Mindful practice can help you access a kind of clarity, efficiency, and ease that people experience in the “zone” or a flow state – the centered self.

Recent discoveries in neuroscience validate and accentuate the importance of integrating daily mindful practice for high-performance leaders and teams. In addition to improving immune and cardiovascular functioning, it strengthens the integrative areas of the brain that are regulatory. The way to cultivate mindfulness is through what can be called *time in*, a looking or tuning inward consciously and intentionally. Of all the items on Daniel Siegel, MD, and David Rock's *Healthy Mind Platter*, which do you neglect most?



The Healthy Mind Platter, for Optimal Brain Matter

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You're in great company if your answer is *time in*. How does your capacity to be fully present, resourceful, and functioning in a healthy way factor into your definition and practice of leadership?



COACHING FOR LEADERSHIP AND COLLABORATIVE EXCELLENCE

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MIND = BRAIN + HEART + MORE**MIND**

Being “mind”-ful begs the question: “What is *mind*?” Daniel Siegel, a leader in the field of interpersonal neurobiology, defines *mind* with an eye toward what is a *healthy mind*. According to Siegel, mind includes and is not limited to the activity of the brain (the gray matter in your skull). Mind is embodied and relational, giving rise to our subjective experience and awareness. Mind is a systemic, self-organizing regulatory process that connects mental life with neural functioning (brain is headquarters) and relationships with differentiated parts of the living system. Our experience of mind is each person’s inner life, arising from energy and information flow. A healthy mind is an integrated mind, creating the capacity to be adaptive and resilient.

BRAIN

Integrative neuroscience has identified four classes of dynamics in our brain – beyond the organizing principle of minimizing pain and maximizing pleasure.

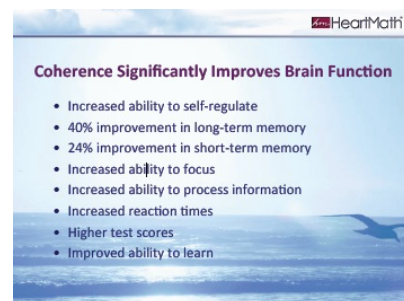
- **First** is the capacity to register emotions; this capacity occurs automatically in response to physical stimuli in a fraction of a second. This is the capacity to “read” each other and get a “vibe” of what’s going on in our environment. There’s an emotional response to all stimuli, mostly without our conscious awareness.
- **Second** is the capacity to feel the emotional reaction.
- **Third** is the capacity to think about the physical stimulus and emotional reaction. We can be aware, reflect, pay attention and plan ahead.
- **Fourth** is the capacity to self-regulate. According to integrative neuroscience, this is the most “plastic” dynamic of the brain. This fourth function is the most important for thriving personally and professionally in the 21st century.

Emotions and stress are intertwined with decision-making. Our ability to self-regulate to be more effective is what we cultivate with mindful practice.

HEART

Cultivating mindful practice involves the whole self – brain, heart, and body. What happens when you direct the energy of the heart? The *Institute of HeartMath* has discovered that core cells of the amygdala synchronize to the heartbeat. “Put your heart into it” and “listen to your heart” take on a whole new meaning! The heart can help power and direct the brain. Learning how to self-regulate our heart rhythms helps us better self-regulate our emotions.

According to the *Institute of HeartMath*, positive emotional coherence is an optimal state in which the heart, mind and emotions are operating in sync and balance. You gain coherence by deliberately directing your attention towards positive emotions while breathing in a rhythmic and deeper pattern. In a state of coherence, your immune, hormonal and nervous systems function in greater energetic coordination. Physiological benefits of positive coherence include: reduced blood pressure in hypertension, increased calmness and emotional stability.



Significantly, positive coherence builds resiliency and improves brain function. Heart signals especially affect the brain centers involved in strategic thinking, reaction times and self-regulation. To find out more about practices that bring you to positive coherence, see <http://www.heartmath.org/free-services/articles-of-the-heart/coherence.html>. As we continue, I will provide more variations on this theme for your practice.

MORE

Consciously center into life's grabs. In somatic coaching, we work with the concept of a "*grab*." It's a thought, impulse or perception that "grabs" and redirects your attention. The point of working with this somatically is that all thoughts and perceptions take place in our biology, not just in our thinking. All "grabs" have a neuro-muscular, bio-chemical reality that affects our whole system and capacity either to react from a conditioned tendency or respond with conscious choice. Whatever gets you stressed, keeps you stressed, amplifies your stress...all this is a grab. Whatever puts you at ease, makes you smarter and more resourceful, and amplifies your well-being...all this can be a grab, too. Grabs are neither negative nor positive, *per se*. What matters is where we go with them.

You can think of mindful practice as something you do "outside of" your normal day, something that you weave into the interstices of your day, or something that is integral to any moment of your day. Mindful attention doesn't take more time but it requires *deliberate, focused practice*. Deliberately redirecting your awareness is at the heart of cultivating a centered presence. In any given moment, you consciously redirect your awareness to what is true right then (body sensation, mood, thoughts), what you care about, and what you are choosing next. With a quieter, more open and integrated mind, you gain access to greater resources within you, including your intuition and information beyond your conscious awareness.



BASIC PRACTICE: HEART-FOCUSED BREATHING

Heart-focused breathing is a technique developed by the *Institute of HeartMath* and is central to their Brain Fitness Program. You can do this technique anywhere. It helps you bring your mind, emotions and nervous system to a state of “neutral.” It is especially helpful when you want to slow or stop an energy-draining reaction. Practice it when you’re reacting or stuck in a negative view of a situation. Practicing this regularly, you can restore heart-brain coherence more reliably and easily. With the Quick-Coherence technique, you can learn to shift into a position emotional state or more balanced attitude by choice.

1. NEUTRAL TECHNIQUE

- **Breathing:** Focus your attention in the area of your heart. Imagine your breath is flowing in and out of your heart or chest area. Breathe a little slower and deeper than usual. Counting so as you inhale and exhale can help, for example a count of 4 or more in each direction.
- **Self-Talk:** As you breathe, tell yourself to “take out the drama.” Ask yourself from a sincere heart: “Do I really want to drain energy over this?” and “What if there is more to this picture than I can know at this time?”

2. QUICK COHERENCE TECHNIQUE

- **Breathing:** Focus your attention in the area of your heart. Imagine your breath is flowing in and out of your heart or chest area. Breathe a little slower and deeper than usual. Counting so as you inhale and exhale can help, for example a count of 4 or more in each direction.
- **Feeling:** Focus your attention on something or someone you genuinely appreciate or care about. For example, evoke the feeling that you have for someone you love, a pet, a special place, an accomplishment, etc. Or focus on the feeling of calm or ease. Breathe a genuine feeling or attitude of appreciation through your heart for one or more minutes. When you notice you’re mentally multi-tasking, focus back on the feeling of appreciation and breathing through the area of your heart.



BASIC PRACTICE: SEATED MEDITATION

Meditation is an effective way to cultivate mindful attention and deepen your centered presence. In meditation, you become aware of where your mind goes and mindless patterns of inattention, distraction, and habit. In a real sense, we meditate all the time but by other names. Stress-oriented meditation might be called worry, preoccupation, or being stuck in an internal loop, etc. Mindful meditation is a way to practice your way into new patterns and new coherence.

As with any practice, start in a way that's easier for you. As you develop the appetite for more, your practice will evolve. Meditation is meant to restore your energy. Here are some guidelines for getting started.

1. EXPECTATIONS / SET-UP

- Let go of any expectations that the purpose is to attain a completely quiet mind and total inner stillness. Your practice is more to build your capacity to listen within, allowing what is without getting “caught” by the “grab” of it.
- You need no special equipment. Certain things like a quiet environment, sound or visualization help focus your attention and prevent unnecessary distraction. As you practice you will find that all you need is already with you.
- Having a designated place or support for meditating can help. Some options include: a comfortable straight-backed chair, a place where your pet hangs out (they're attuned to energy), a quiet closet, headphones (noise cancelling), a special cushion or fabric, a yoga mat, being in nature or a sacred place (church, monastery, temple, etc.), using a CD, or practicing with a partner or group.
- Consistent meditation practice will eventually make it possible to meditate anyplace and anytime.

2. POSTURE

- You want a comfortable posture in which you will stay alert (not dose off). Meditation experts recommend a seated position in which you can comfortably sit upright (with a straight back, not slouched). Sitting in a chair, you might be tempted to lean back. Since that impedes the flow of energy, it's better practice sitting upright without leaning. An upright posture will ultimately be less stressful and promote greater balance for your physical and energy body.
- The easiest thing is to leave your hands in an open and upward facing position, probably resting them uncrossed on your thighs. This position allows your body to release excess energy through the hands as you meditate.
- One thing you might not think of is where to place your tongue. Meditation experts advise allowing your tongue to rest on the roof of your mouth. Doing so creates an energy channel, called the central meridian, allowing your brain and body to function more effectively as a whole. When you do this you may experience the need to yawn. Yield to that urge and breathe deeply.

3. TIMING / PREPARATION

- You will find ideal times for you to meditate. Consistent practice is what matters. A little bit every day is better than a lot at once and then nothing for a long time.
- Here are some “energy hygiene” tips. If you can, ...
 - Have a shower or bath before you meditate; the water helps you return to your body and clear off energy you collected during your day.
 - Remove your shoes before meditating. Shoes pick up energy wherever they've stepped.
 - Move your body first. You can gentle bounce in place for several minutes to get energy moving through your whole system. You might meditate after working out. If you've been



sitting for a long time, a little bit of gentle exercise restores energy flow. Moving your body refocuses your attention so you're less wrapped up in your thoughts. You may find it's helpful to stretch and move a bit afterwards, too.

- Nourish yourself first. If all you can think about is how hungry you are, meditation will be hard. If you've eaten so much that it takes all your energy just to stay awake, meditation will be hard. Be kind to your body. You'll figure out what is "just right."
- Remove your watch and jewelry before meditating. Watches and jewelry collect energy from daily life and can subtly contribute to "busy/noisy mind." Give yourself a rest.
- Meditate when you want to feel energized, not when you want to sleep. Meditating energizes your brain and system so doing this within an hour before bed can be problematic. Notice for yourself what works.
- Do something other than meditate when you are angry or frustrated. If you meditate when feeling angry, you end up meditating on the anger thereby magnifying it. Do something (like physical exercise) to allow your system to come back to center first.
- Stay in the practice even if you feel fidgety. It's a sign of energy moving. Stay with it.

4. BREATHING

- Conscious breathing is central to meditation practice of any kind. As you get settled, notice your breathing and consciously shift into slower, deeper, more rhythmic breathing. As you bring your attention to the breath, notice where you may be holding tension. Can you soften in the area of your eyes, lips, mouth, jaw, neck, shoulders, ribs, diaphragm, lower belly, arms, legs, feet?
- A basic breath technique for meditation is to inhale through the nose and exhale through the mouth. Starting here, you can notice whether you're holding your jaw or shaping your lips. Allow them to soften and relax. Eventually, you will inhale and exhale with relaxation through the nose.
- A basic meditation practice is to count as you breathe. First, exhale all the air from your lungs, then inhale through the nose to the count of 4 (or more). Hold the breath to the count of 2 (or more). Exhale through the nose to the count of 4 (or more). Hold the breath to the count of 2 (or more). As you do this, allow the breath to fill into your low belly first – like filling a jug from the bottom up. A likely tendency will be to fill the upper chest, raise your shoulders and tighten your abdominal muscles. See if you can let the chest and shoulders be more still and the motion be in your belly, like a bellows. The belly expands out as you inhale and contracts in as you exhale.