

# Reduce Stress with Mindfulness

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**Maria Gonzalez**, author of *Mindful Leadership*, explains how to minimize stress – not just manage it. Contains a brief guided breathing exercise.

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**SARAH GREEN:** Welcome to the HBR IdeaCast from Harvard Business Review. I'm Sarah Green. I'm talking, today, with Maria Gonzalez, the author of the book and the app *Mindful Leadership*. Maria, thanks so much for talking with us.

**MARIA GONZALEZ:** Oh, it's my pleasure. Thank you for inviting me.

**SARAH GREEN:** So one of the things that really drew me to your work was how you talk about actually going beyond managing stress and actually decreasing stress. At this point in my life, as an HBR editor, I've heard so much on managing stress that I'm not sure it even occurred to me that one could decrease the stress. So tell us, what's the difference there, and sort of how you look at that?

**MARIA GONZALEZ:** Well, I think it's a really important distinction because when we talk about managing stress—now, absolutely this is important, so managing stress is extremely important. But when we look at managing stress, what we're really saying is we're going to take everything that's there, and we're going to try to manage it to the best of our ability. When we talk about decreasing stress, we're actually looking at what's going on in our lives and saying what is it that we can actually eliminate? Because there's so many things that happen in our lives that contribute to stress, and they're really the result of our reaction to the event that is arising as opposed to, in objective terms, that it is, in fact, something that is stressful.

So when I talk about that, I talk about how do we separate that out? How do we look at the way in which we are reacting to a situation? And rather than react, how about responding? When we respond to a situation, we essentially start decreasing that stress, but it happens in a couple of ways.

One very important way is the notion of equanimity, and that's not necessarily a common term, although it is becoming more popular. But equanimity literally means that gentle matter of factness that says whatever is is. It really is a state of balance, and in that state of balance, we're not thrown off. In that state of balance, we're basically saying, if we can't change something, then we're going to go with it because it doesn't make sense.

It's like hitting your head against a brick wall. The minute you start letting go of those things that you cannot control— and I'm not underestimate how difficult that is. But the minute that we're able to do that, we immediately decrease stress.

**SARAH GREEN:** So that's interesting because it seems to me so much of this is about control, accepting what you cannot control, but also feeling more in control. I would be willing to bet that, probably, a lot of HBR IdeaCast listeners are pretty used to being in control or like the feeling of being in control. Is this extra hard for people who have a high need for control?

**MARIA GONZALEZ:** You know, there's a real irony to this because, in essence, if we can train the mind— which is essentially what mindfulness is. That's the way in which we deal with this stress. If we are able to control our minds, that put us in a very different situation because, most of the time, what's really happening is that our mind is controlling us.

So, yes, of course, your listeners are accustomed to being in control, and that's how they've been successful. And that's how it's going to continue to be because you try to control your environment, circumstances, the output that you have, the creativity, the being better than the other, essentially being more competitive. And that all presumes that we are in control. But in essence, one of the things that we don't realize is how often we are not in control of our minds, and what this is about is controlling the mind. And when we're able to control the mind, everything else falls into place far more easily.

**SARAH GREEN:** Using the term mindfulness, that is a term that I think has really come more into the mainstream from the field of psychology. But I'm curious if any of our readers haven't really become that familiar with the terminology or the background or the return on investment of mindfulness. Can you just give us a little bit of background? You sort of gave us that quick definition, but why does it really work? And why is it something that is worth investing in?

MARIA GONZALEZ: Well, you bring about some really important issues, and first of all, let's just define mindfulness. Mindfulness is not a technique. It's become known as a technique, but in essence, it's not a technique. It's a skill.

It's the skill of being fully present and fully aware, and what that means is that you're not trying to change the circumstance, the way you're perceiving the circumstance. You're just aware of what is, plain and simple. You're aware of the situation. So let me give you an example.

You're negotiating a deal, and this is something that's very close to my heart because of my background in M&A work. So you're negotiating a deal, and you're looking at the folks across the table from you, and you're like, oh, my god, this is not going well. This is not going well. And in essence, what are you doing at that point?

In your head, you're not out there. You're in your own head, judging the situation. Now, you may be correct. It, in fact, may not be going well, which means now how can I turn this situation around, but if we're locked in our heads, we're missing the cues, we're missing the opportunities, that we can see across the table that might actually give us the right in.

So mindfulness is about being right here, right now. Not getting bogged down with your own feelings, your own emotions, and not being so in your head that you can't see what's going on around you. So it's the state of being present, the state of being aware. It's the state of being conscious, like just right here, right now.

And that sounds really simple, and it's a little bit tougher to do. But all it takes is practice. So that would be the sort of thumbnail definition of what is mindfulness. It's just being right here, right now, without trying to change the present moment, just being aware of it.

Now, where does it come from? It really is a very old tradition. It's 2,500 years old, and it's really the science of the mind.

If we look at it from its origins, we're talking about the original meditation done by the historical Buddha. I'm not talking about the religion of Buddhism. I'm talking about the historical Buddha. And what he discovered was really that, essentially this, essentially mindfulness.

The beauty of it, the beauty of mindfulness, is that it really is just about training the mind, and it's completely secular. And so that's why it's so appealing to business people. That's why we use it, and we use it so effectively, because we know how to apply it to our work. It's very easy to apply to absolutely everything you do moment by moment.

SARAH GREEN: So put the pieces together for us a little bit, because we've talked about, now, decreasing stress and equanimity and mindfulness. But can you just bring those together for us? And how would you actually begin to pull those things together so that you could decrease your stress?

MARIA GONZALEZ: OK, that's a very good question. What you're doing when you practice mindfulness is you're essentially working on a three attentional skill set. And that skill set is concentration, clarity, and equanimity. Concentration means that you're able to concentrate on whatever it is you wish to concentrate for as long as you wish, no judgment around what that is.

It could be watching a video. It could be making a presentation. It could be running a marathon. It does not matter what it is.

So that's concentration, and it's really interesting to see how our ability to concentrate is seriously compromised the more we multitask. And technology, which has been tremendously useful to us in so many ways and continues to be, in this area of concentration has actually not helped us. And why? Because we don't know how to use it as opposed to allowing it to use us. So that's the whole area of concentration.

The next aspect of the skill set is clarity. Clarity, essentially, is clarity of thought, really being able to have good judgment, being able to put together different pieces of what's going on and really seeing them for what they are instead of our own judgment that clouds the situation. And the more we practice mindfulness, the greater the clarity becomes.

And then the third piece, which we touched on previously, is equanimity, that ability to just go with the flow. And an example of that, in addition to what I gave previously, would be to say, you know what, the markets go up and down. Can you alter that? Really, as an individual, no. You've got to go with that flow.

If the markets are doing really well, they're doing really well. If they're doing really poorly, they're doing poorly. You actually cannot alter that, so to allow yourself to be swept away by that really alters judgment.

So that clarity gets clouded, but if you're OK with that, you're like, OK, well, maybe I need to change my portfolio. That make sense if, in fact, this is a sustained change that has occurred. Or I may need to change the mix of my investments, but it isn't coming from a place of anxiety, of angst. So it's really that three attentional skill set that's being developed as we practice mindfulness.

Now, why does it work? That's a really important question, Sarah. And what we've seen is that, consistently, all the research that has been done, and it's been done extensively for over the last 15 years, is that it decreases blood pressure. It regulates the heart. It increases the immune function, enhances memory, and we see these things happening

time and time again.

And one of the things that happens is that when you start to concentrate more clearly, more deeply, you automatically feel calmer. It's fascinating. It's like the mind gets agitated by all of this distraction, all of this, you know, we're here, we're there, we're almost- we're nowhere. And so I'm part of a study with the Harvard Medical School that has been looking at the impact of meditation on the brain. The results should be out shortly, early in 2014.

Again, preliminary results are saying the same thing that other results have said. Whether it's from the University of Wisconsin at Madison, from Stanford, they're all saying the same thing. They're saying that it enhances our lives because, essentially, it rewires our brain. The beauty of it is that it's in our hands, and it doesn't take that long to be able to achieve it.

SARAH GREEN: OK, so I'm sold. You've sold me on mindfulness. How would I actually go about doing that so that I can start to really get some of those benefits?

MARIA GONZALEZ: OK, so here's an example of what you can do, just essentially walking down the street or in the office. You would create a trigger for yourself, and a trigger could be anything. It could be a red light. It could be a stop sign.

It could be the phone ringing. It could be every time that you sit down at a meeting. Essentially, a trigger, what I call a trigger, is a reminder, a reminder to be in this moment, just for a few moments. Not asking you to be in this moment for the next 10 minutes. How about just the next 10 seconds, the next 20 seconds?

And so in the past, I remember when I started doing this, I would get to a red light, and I'd be going, darn, I missed that orange. And all of a sudden, it would be, OK, how can I turn this into something positive? And the way in which that happened for me is, ah, OK, now that a red light is here, I can use that as a reminder to be right here, right now, and take a breath. That's it. Nothing more.

Just become aware of your body, become aware of your feet on the floor, or on the pedal if you're driving, and just take that breath. And as you take that breath, you're just right here, right now. You're not anywhere else, just right here, right now. So that would be a very simple thing that you can do, and you can create a trigger anywhere.

So generally speaking, it's best to create triggers or reminders of things that happen to you relatively often in your day, so if your phone is ringing off the hook all the time, that's a wonderful trigger. Rather than be annoyed and going, oh, god, there's another interruption, that's a trigger to I'm just going to come right here, right now, and as I pick up that line, I'm just going to take a breath. That's it.

Every time I go to a meeting, if you spend time in meetings, what I do is I'm up and down all day meeting with people, so every time I stand up or sit down, that's my trigger. I'm just going to take that breath. I'm right here, right now, just for these seconds. And that would be like a micro meditation that really doesn't take much, but you could actually do that 10, 20 times a day.

SARAH GREEN: So, Maria, I'm wondering when you mention those kind of one minute exercises, could we just do one right now?

MARIA GONZALEZ: Absolutely. Really, it's one of those things that you'll find, if you get into the habit of doing regularly, just really calms down the system. And it comes down the system for a very simple reason, and that is I'll describe the technique, but I'll also describe why it is that it works. And we're going to use the breath. Try it right now.

All you need to do is become aware sitting right here, right now, wherever it is that you're sitting. And just become aware, now, of the breath, and be aware that you're breathing in, and you're breathing out. And that's all you're doing. You're breathing in, and you're breathing out.

And if your mind wanders, just very gently come back. Very gently come back to that breath. You're breathing in, and you're breathing out.

And now that you've done that, allow that breath to go a little deeper. Maybe you can just put your hand on the belly, your abdomen, and just notice. Notice that, as you breathe in, the belly expands, and as you breathe out, it contracts. And what you're trying to do is get that breath down there. It's just diaphragmatic breathing or belly breathing.

So just take a few breaths. Be very conscious. Take the next three, four breaths. Breathe in, all the way down to the belly, and breathe out. And breathe in, and breathe out.

It doesn't take much. Literally, it just takes a few breathes, and the reason this works- I mean, we've literally done this for about 60 seconds. I don't know if you feel a difference. You might. You might or might not.

For some people, it takes a little more practice. But literally, in a few seconds, you can feel for that, and the reason you feel it, it's very simple. What you're doing is you're activating the parasympathetic nervous system, and that's what's built into us.

All we need to do is activate it, and when we activate it, there is a calming effect on the body. There's an immediate calming effect on the body. It's physiological. All you're doing is the activity of that breath down there, but physiologically, there's an impact. There's an immediate impact, and that's the beauty of it.

And I've placed a lot of emphasis- the Mindful Leadership app includes literally dozens of meditations in different categories, and there's a very large category on decreasing stress and creating relaxation. And there's a lot of working with the breath because the breath is really very helpful, particularly if you breathe certain ways. But right now, just try again. Breathe into the belly, and breathe out.

And all you need to do when you find yourself stressed in the middle of the day- there's a deadline, you're feeling like you're just not going to make it, or you've been working 12 hours straight, and now you need to do a couple more hours, or whatever is arising in your life. It could be a personal crisis. Just take a moment and breathe into the belly. Do that two, three times. Get it to the point where it's a habit, and by doing that, you're automatically putting into place a mechanism, a physiological mechanism, that will cause calmness.

SARAH GREEN: Well, that was great. I feel really calm now.

MARIA GONZALEZ: Good for you.

SARAH GREEN: Thank you. That was wonderful.


MARIA GONZALEZ: It's my pleasure.

SARAH GREEN: OK, well, I think we will leave you listeners with that. Maria, thank you again for talking with us today.

MARIA GONZALEZ: Oh, it's my pleasure. Thank you for inviting me.

SARAH GREEN: That was Maria Gonzalez, author of Mindful Leadership, the book and the app. For more, visit [hbr.org](http://hbr.org).

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