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## Slow down to speed up

Mindfulness meditation is not flakiness

Sarah Treleaven, Financial Post

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Ten minutes a day of deliberate meditation can be done at your desk, on a treadmill or lying on your floor at home. It's a relaxation of the body that encourages the mind to follow.

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There are already so many things you're forced to do at work. Drink sub-par coffee as a break from mundane chores. Come up with creative ways to cut costs. And now your boss wants you to meditate?

Meditation has been gaining a slow and steady fan base in financial and professional environments as a way to combat the ravaging physical and psychological impacts of stress.

Maria Gonzalez is the founder and president of Argonauta Strategic Alliances Consulting, a company that integrates mindfulness meditation with the development of business strategy and strategic alliances. When she started meditating 17 years ago, she found that it made her far more effective at work. "You could be calm when everyone else wasn't, and you could concentrate," she says. "That meant you could do things much a c fYei JW n"

Ms. Gonzalez offers one-on-one coaching and group sessions, and her business credentials - including teaching stints at McGill University and articles published in The McKinsey Quarterly - help quell concerns about flakiness. Because mindfulness meditation teaches the practitioner to focus on the moment, students often find that they are more calm, more efficient, able to listen more effectively and able to dismiss distractions, casual slights and irritations.

She says that the recent economic flux has increased interest in her practices. "People are really stressed and not knowing where this is going," she says. "The people I've been working with, like the investment bankers who have been meditating for the last few years, are responding really differently."

Students of Ms. Gonzalez's practices are happy to offer testimonials about how the incorporation of meditative practices has improved their lives and allowed them to eliminate personal and professional clutter. Lesley Parrott, a consultant and keynote speaker, says that since she began meditating two years ago things have become more clear, calm and directed. "When I start something, I can finish it," she says. "One's own energy is so much more under control. You very quickly learn that it can get you into a really nice space [and] it's like another sense kicks in."

Barbara Symmons, a psychotherapist and life coach who has been meditating for more than a decade, put her first mindfulness meditation class together five years ago for a group of female managers at the Ministry of Natural Resources in Peterborough, Ont., who were feeling the stress of their work environment. "They were trained as scientists and they had to manage men who liked huntin', fishin' and shootin'," Ms. Symmons says. The group responded quickly to the practice; blood pressures dropped and sleeping habits improved.

Practising mindfulness meditation doesn't require much in the way of paraphernalia. Ms. Gonzalez simply introduces students to formal practice, the 10 minutes a day of deliberate meditation that can be done at your desk, on a treadmill or lying on your floor at home. It's a relaxation of the body that encourages the mind to follow.

Ms. Symmons says that the classic introduction to mindfulness meditation is to hand a student a raisin and have her smell it, touch it, put it in her mouth and then wait a whole minute before swallowing it. "That is a visceral, concrete demonstration of slowing down," she says.

Gradually, the process becomes instinctual and encompassing, and students find that they're able to apply it when sitting in a meeting or interviewing for a job. Ms. Symmons is currently coaching a senior partner in a law firm who is hoping to accomplish some degree of work-life balance.

"When she's at work, she's at work; when she's at home, she's at home; and when she's on the streetcar in between, she's meditating," she says. "We can't change the law firm and we can't change the demands that are put on her and we can't change her family situation, but we can help her to manage it better," she says.

"It's really just about doing what you're doing more effectively," Ms. Gonzalez says.

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