



# Mindfulness:

Thoughts From a Seasoned Coach on Managing Stress  
by Dorothy Doppstadt, Certified Five O'Clock Club Career Coach

*The problems we face cannot be solved by the same level of thinking that created them.*  
**Albert Einstein**

We live in a pressure cooker world. Whether coaching clients or teaching college students, I'm often struck by the high levels of stress people live with. They speak of feeling trapped in a never-ending cycle of deliverables. They tell me how overwhelmed they feel juggling family, career, school and paying bills; how squeezed and stressed-out they are from time constraints, trying to manage work, children, and chores. "And what about my time?" clients ask. "There's never any time left for me!"

It was CUNY college students who first asked me to teach a workshop on managing stress. "It's like I'm on a never ending hamster wheel," is how one student described it. Or in the words of author Wayne Dyer, in this culture "we are always striving but never arriving." We know that living with constant stress is chaotic and exhausting. But most importantly, stress kills.

Years ago, as an ABC news editor, I had six deadlines an hour. It was exciting but stressful. Very stressful. One time, the writers union wanted to negotiate extended retirement benefits. Our lawyer told us not to waste any political capitol on that one. "Uh, I hate to tell you this," he said, looking around the room "but actuarial tables show that broadcast journalists don't live very long. The job's too stressful."

## So What Can We Do to Help Ourselves?

Some people spend too much time standing on a grudge box thinking about their past. Is that you? If so, remember that ruminating on what happened in the past often leads to depression.

And there are those who spend a lot of time thinking about their future. Do you constantly want, wish or dream about what can or should happen? Having too many of these thoughts can also lead to feelings of anxiety.

We usually aren't aware of our thoughts because we're not mindful of them. Instead, we walk around asleep, going about our days on autopilot and defaulting into habitual behavior—even when it doesn't serve us.

Medical studies show one of the best ways to manage stress is to learn and practice how to stay in the present moment. It's our only point of power for choice. Being in the present allows us to begin to see what is real and what is not. Are we reacting to a situation or are we responding...mindfully. "When we are mindful, it's news we can use," says the American-born Buddhist monk, Pema Chodron.

**So an important method for managing stress is choosing what to think about.** Scientists estimate we have about two billion thought per day, although a lot of us aren't cognizant of what we're thinking about.

Neurologist Dr. Daniel Amen labels most of our thoughts as A.N.T.S., Automatic Negative Thoughts. He says by the time we get out of bed and brush our teeth we have been bombarded with thousands of A.N.T.S. – and we haven't even left our homes yet. No wonder we feel so stressed!

Or as one client I coached told me after practicing mindfulness, "I realize now that my mind is not my friend."

## Stress and the Brain

*There's certainly a level of conversation around neuroscience that didn't exist ten years ago, giving us causal mechanisms for what Buddhists figured out sitting in caves 2,500 years ago.*

**Doug Silsbee, author and executive coach.**  
(Personal interview)

It all started in 2002 with the landmark monks' study.

A researcher at The University of Wisconsin scanned the brains of sixteen Tibetan Buddhist Monks while they meditated. There were such large cerebral measurements in the part of their brains linked to joy that at first he thought the equipment was malfunctioning and his measurements were all wrong. Recent medical studies show that people who learn mindfulness, after three months of practice, have a lower level of cortisol, a hormone produced naturally in response to stress.

The fields of neuroscience, neurobiology, and social psychology all now recognize mindfulness as a highly effective tool for dealing with stress and chronic pain, while improving feelings of well-being and quality of life.

And there is another exciting scientific discovery for managing stress. Scientists now know there is more plasticity in the brain than previously believed. Studies show that the brain is constantly rewiring itself, based on daily life. That's important news for managing stress. Thoughtfully practicing what we choose to bring attention and awareness to, can allow us to re-wire the brain by changing the circuits of neural pathways—no matter how old we are!

In other words: neurons that fire together wire together. There is no such thing as a life without stress. Sorry. But it's possible to change how we think about things and how we feel.

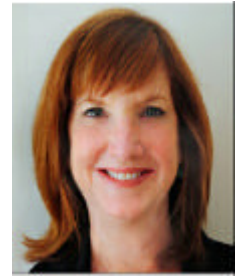
We can choose what to focus on—but only in the present moment!

*Most of the evils of life arise from man being unable to sit still in a room.*

**Blaise Pascal**

## Two Simple Practices for Learning How to Stay in the Present Moment

Both of these exercises do not require a blank mind. We're human. There's no such thing as a blank mind, because we're thinking all the time. Remember the A.N.T.S.!



If the mind begins to drift during the practice (believe me, it will!) simply bring it back to the breath, and keep bringing it back to the breath. By doing so, we strengthen our focus and learn how to start anew each time.

## Body Scan

Allow your attention to slowly and systematically move through your entire body. Starting with the toes, bring your attention to them. Simply observe them without judgment, and without seeking to change or alter the experience. Then slowly move up through your feet, ankles, calves, knees, thighs, and pelvic area. Move upward through your belly, chest, back, shoulders, and arms. Finish with your neck, face and head. Pause at each body part noting any tension or feeling of energy.

## Resting the mind

Assume a position in which your spine is straight and your body relaxed. Once you are positioned comfortably, allow your mind to rest in the awareness of whatever is passing through your mind, and simply watch. Take three breaths, then count each breath up to ten, and then begin again. If you notice your mind is elsewhere or that you've stopped counting, begin again. Do this for five minutes a day, then work up to ten, fifteen and twenty minutes.

*What lies behind us and what lies before us are tiny matters compared to what lies within us.*

**Oliver Wendell Holmes**

There's a story that a woman wanted to learn mindfulness. She found a teacher who told her to sit and focus on her breath. When her mind wandered, she was instructed to bring it back to her breath. Several months later the woman returned to the teacher and told him she could do it, and now wanted to learn advanced mindfulness.

"Good," the teacher told her. "Here are the instructions for advanced mindfulness: Go sit and focus on the breath. When the mind wanders bring it back to the breath." ●