



The Wise Brain Bulletin

News and Tools for Happiness, Love, and Wisdom

Volume 4,10 (10/2010)

Mindful Working

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Although we walk all the time, our walking is usually more like running. When we walk like that, we print anxiety and sorrow on the Earth.

Thich Nhat Hanh

After years of defining myself by my accomplishments and allowing my career to consume me, the flying buttress of work ceased to prop me up, and I fell apart. Mentally exhausted and spiritually dead, I slumped in my airplane seat. When the flight attendant asked if I needed anything, I waved her away. I had lost so much weight I looked like a refugee from Dachau. During liftoff, I didn't care if the plane crashed. Nothing mattered. At the lowest point in my life, I had booked a sunny week in Jamaica to escape the pain of emotional stress and physical burnout.

When we live only in the external world and immerse ourselves into our careers, ignoring our inner selves, we are bound to hit a bottom at some point. Without an internal anchoring, we rely on outer conditions to fix an internal feeling, and our spirits die. Legions of the spiritually dead walk among us in desperate search of an outside cure for their work woes.

What is Mindful Working?

Most approaches to job stress, workaholism, and workplace problems impose change from the outside in. Sometimes this works, but more often it doesn't. When applied to unhealthy work habits, the practice of mindfulness brings about change from the inside out, regardless of workplace

Greetings

The Wise Brain Bulletin offers skillful means from brain science and contemplative practice – to nurture your brain for the benefit of yourself and everyone you touch.

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circumstances or the nature of job problems. I call this simple solution to an epidemic problem facing the American workforce mindful working—the intentional, moment-to-moment awareness of what's happening inside you and immediately around you with self-attuned, compassionate interest as you move through daily work schedules and routines. It involves

bringing your full non-judgmental attention to body sensations, thoughts and feelings that arise while working or thinking about your job. Instead of beating yourself up when things fall apart, a mindful self-compassionate attunement eases you through work stress and burnout, business failures, job loss, or worry and anxiety about career goals.

Mindful working is based on loving-kindness towards ourselves during the best of times and the worst of times. When we worry, stress out, or get depressed about a downturn in the economy, loss of a promotion, a faltering relationship with a boss or colleague, or fear of an upcoming job challenge, it creates suffering. Worry and

stress feed dread and uncertainty. Then the mind ruminates, and the worry and stress eclipse the problematic situation. We become hijacked by the internal suffering—a magnification of the original situation. In these instances, our minds are using us. When we practice mindful working, we use our minds to navigate workplace woes with clarity, self-compassion, courage, and creativity.

My Story

There was a time when I needed my work—and hid it from others—the way my alcoholic father needed and hid his bourbon. And just as I once tried to control my father's drinking by pouring out his booze and refilling the bottle with vinegar, the people who love me sulked, pleaded and tore their hair out trying to keep me from working all the time. Every summertime, for instance, just before we left on vacation, my life partner, Jamey, would search my bags and confiscate any work I planned to smuggle into our rented beach house on the South Carolina shore. But however thoroughly he searched, he would always miss the tightly folded papers covered with work notes that I had stuffed into the pockets of my jeans.

Later, when Jamey and our close friends invited me to stroll on the beach, I'd say I was tired and wanted to nap. While they were off swimming and playing in the surf—which I

considered a big waste of time—I secretly worked in the empty house, bent over a lap desk fashioned from a board. At the sound of their returning footsteps, I’d stuff my papers back into my jeans, hide the board and stretch out on the bed, pretending to sleep.

I saw nothing strange about my behavior; it’s only in hindsight that I say that I was a workaholic. By this, I mean something quite different from saying I worked hard. I mean that I used work to defend myself against unwelcome emotional states—to modulate anxiety, sadness and frustration, the way a pothead uses dope and an alcoholic uses booze.

The thought of a vacation or weekend without work was terrifying to me, and I structured my life accordingly. Throughout the 1980s, I carried a full college teaching load and volunteered for committee assignments, while also writing books, conducting research and establishing a clinical practice. Ignoring Jamey’s frequent pleas that we “just do something together,” I would work in my windowless office in our basement through evenings, weekends, Thanksgivings and Christmases. I even worked through most of the day of my father’s funeral: while my mother and sisters broke bread with our old neighbors, I was in my university

office twenty-five miles away, working on a project so insignificant that I no longer remember what it was.

I finally hit bottom when I stopped thinking of myself as an extraordinarily talented and dedicated professional with so much to offer the world and realized how empty my life had become. Up until then, I’d been proud of my career (which, although I didn’t realize it at the time, was built on mindless working) and was well rewarded for it. Jamey might’ve



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complained that I was never home—and that when I was, I didn't listen—but my university colleagues called me responsible and conscientious. Jamey might've called me controlling, inflexible, and incapable of living in the moment. But the promotions, awards, and fat paychecks that came my way built an ever-stronger case against his accusations, and I used them to further vilify him. Eventually, my mindless working took me down a path of self-destruction. I was a chain-smoking, caffeine-drinking work junkie, dogged by self-doubt. I had no close friends. I never smiled. I had surgery for gastrointestinal problems. My life was crumbling under my feet. I lost weight. I couldn't eat. I didn't care if I lived or died. My memory got so bad that family members worried that I was developing an early case of Alzheimer's.

At my lowest point, I got help, started my own mindful practices, and began the climb out of the work pit into a saner life. Once out of the work fog, instead of spending my Saturdays in my basement office, I looked forward to weekends of yard work, garage

sales, browsing at the farmer's market, watching the birds at the birdfeeder, and meditative quiet. When we go to the beach, I don't pretend to nap anymore. I'm fishing, building sandcastles and swimming in the surf. I enjoy and savor our time together as much as I had once savored my mindless working. Today, when I am working, I am constantly attuned to myself, to what's going on inside of me as I pace myself in the present moment throughout the workday.

Mindless Working: The Real American Idol

In a society based on mindless working, my old unhealthy work habits had plenty of camouflage. Flextime, 24-hour Walmart's and iPods, Blackberries, PDAs, Wi-Fi, Twittering, cell phones, and pagers have vaporized the line that once kept the office from engulfing the sacred hours of Shabbat, Sunday and the family dinnertime. We live in a rapidly-changing, turbulent world in which many of us are constantly trying to hold that line between calm and frantic work activity. Even before 9/11 and The Great Recession of 2009, which threw millions of people into an economic tailspin of anxiety and worry, the country was undergoing a technological revolution. This revolution has produced fast-paced, clever work gadgets that infiltrate personal time and a technologically-driven

work culture that has spun our lives into a blur of constant doing, eclipsing our ability to be.

There was a time when “Blackberries” were something you consumed, not something that consumed you. And when you had a “Bluetooth,” you went to the dentist, not to a conference call. The phrase “24/7,” household slang of the twenty-first century, has replaced the “9 to 5” dinosaur adage of the 1990s. These trends indicate how the constant demand of work has slithered its way into our personal space—the “Blackberrization” of our lives. Being wedded to our wireless technology allows us to fax a memo at midnight from the kitchen table, bend over a laptop on an island in paradise or call the office via cell phone from the ski lift.

Recently, I appeared on a major network television show. Three minutes before airtime, the host leaned into me, referring to her “crackberry”: “I used to sleep with my Blackberry,” she said, “So I wouldn’t miss anything at work. But now I’m starting to realize I don’t need to do that. Do I?”

Before I could answer, we were in front of a live American audience, her asking me about society’s problem with drawing the line with work and technology. I spoke about a study conducted in 2006, which showed that Americans are becoming more socially isolated than two decades ago, presumably because of our love affair with the internet and our electronic leashes. The study also reported a one-third drop in the number of



people the average person could call a friend: an average of two friends, down from three a few years ago. A second study revealed that cell phone use while driving (even when the phone is not hand held) has the equivalent effect of three alcoholic drinks. The mental images drivers have during conversations interfere with their attention to safety and response speed, causing them to make more mistakes such as missing exits and to have more accidents. In short, as technology continues to erase our lines and accelerate our lives, all of us face the risk of losing touch with ourselves, the present moment, and the people around us.

Little in our present culture teaches us when or how to say “no instead of yo” to unreasonable job demands and mindless

working. According to a US News and World Report, the average worker in 1988 clocked 44 hours of work per week – this jumped to 47 in 2000. Even more disturbing has been the slow evaporation of vacation days. According to Expedia’s tenth annual “vacation deprivation” survey—though Americans were given four more vacation days this year than last—37 percent said they will not take all of their vacation days this year, up from 34 percent last year.

A 2004 survey by Management Recruiters International reported that nearly one-half of US executives said they wouldn’t use all of their earned vacation because they were too busy at work, mainly because too much extra work makes it too stressful: “We have to get ahead of our workload in order to leave, and



then we have to catch up to our workload upon our return.” Fear is another reason. Increasingly, patients in my clinical practice say they are afraid to take vacation days for fear they will not be perceived as a team player. Some have said they were afraid to leave the office for lunch because if positions were cut, they would be the first to go. This worry has increased nationwide.

These wearying realities have so pervaded our lives that people speak of needing “downtime” as though they were machines. And overworking is often perceived not as a problem, but as a badge of honor. Workweeks of 60, 80, even 100 hours are common in major law firms and corporations; tribes of modern-day male and female Willy Lomans, manacled to cell phones, trundle through the nation’s airports at all hours with their rolling luggage; cafes are filled with serious young people bent over laptops; young workers at dotcoms are available for work 24/7.

Advertisers bathe constant working in the same glamorous light that they poured over cigarettes and liquor in the ads of the 1930s. A television ad for Metamucil bragged, “It can multi-task; it’s so 2010,” and a new Lexus ad in the Wall Street Journal boasted: “Workaholic? Oh, you flatter us. The relentless pursuit of perfection.” When it’s not praised, workaholism is dismissed as a joke. One recent

newspaper cartoon showed an empty meeting room with a “Workaholics Anonymous” sign at the front; the caption said, “Everybody had to work overtime.”

Our society’s dangerous immersion in overwork may help explain why we can’t see the water we swim in. Mindless working is this century’s cocaine, its “problem without a name.” In a society where many people work long hours, it’s important to make a distinction between mindless working and mindful working. My research team at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte compared a sample of 109 workaholics with non-workaholics. Across the board, workaholics showed the qualities of the mindless worker. They had statistically higher burnout rates, were more disconnected from their inner selves, and had less self-insight than non-workaholics. Whereas workaholics were more controlling and more impaired in their communication, non-workaholics showed more soul-like qualities of the mindful worker such as clarity, compassion, calmness, and confidence. And it’s no wonder, because workaholics focus—for the most part—outside themselves on the

Perspectives on Self-Care

Be careful with all self-help methods (including those presented in this Bulletin), which are no substitute for working with a licensed healthcare practitioner. People vary, and what works for someone else may not be a good fit for you. When you try something, start slowly and carefully, and stop immediately if it feels bad or makes things worse.

tsunami of work that they take on. Although I call this mindless working, you don't have to be a workaholic to work mindlessly.

Mindless workers are disconnected from themselves and see work as a haven in a dangerous, emotionally unpredictable world; mindful workers are more attuned to themselves and experience work as a necessary and sometimes fulfilling obligation. Mindless workers are on automatic pilot, allowing work tasks to engulf them, eclipsing other quarters of life: sales reports litter dining tables; desks are covered with dinner plates; commitments to self-care, spiritual life, household chores, friends, partners and children are frequently made and broken to

meet work deadlines. Mindful workers have present-moment awareness of their thoughts, emotions, and what they're feeling in their bodies as they navigate the workday. They know when to close the briefcase, mentally switch gears and be fully present in the moment—at a son's Little League game or the celebration of their own wedding anniversary.

Mindless workers seek an emotional and neurophysiological payoff from frantic working and get an adrenaline rush from meeting impossible deadlines; mindful workers, as a result of their inner attunement, get a payoff of calm and confidence that brings a sense of satisfaction and joy to their



work. Mindful workers can turn off their work appetites, paying attention to their surroundings; work appetites of mindless workers are insatiable, occluding awareness of self, others, and physical surroundings. Mindless workers are preoccupied with work no matter where they are—walking hand-in-hand at the seashore, playing catch with a child or fishing with a friend. Family and friends, or any kind of inner awareness, are little more than a vague, if pleasant, backdrop. The mindful worker is as emotionally present in off-work times as they are during work hours; whereas, the relationship with work is the central connection of the mindless worker's life, the place where "life" really takes place, the secret repository of drama and emotion, as compelling as the one addicts experience with booze or cocaine.

In contrast, scientists have discovered that mindfulness practices slow down heart rate and brain-wave patterns, boost the immune system and cardiac functioning and that people who meditate have less stressful lives, fewer health problems, improved relationships, and longer lives. As Jon Kabat-Zinn points out, mindfulness allows us to appreciate the deep mystery of being alive without the need for work highs or numbing ourselves with multi-tasking and busy activities:

"Mindfulness provides a simple but powerful route for getting ourselves unstuck,

back into touch with our own wisdom and vitality. It is a way to take charge of the direction and quality of our own lives, including our relationships within the family, our relationship to work and to the larger world and planet, and most fundamentally, our relationship with ourselves as a person."¹

Are You a Mindful Worker or a Mindless Wreck?

Has work become an invisible leash that leads you around 24/7, causing you to lose touch with who you are? Or do you stay mindfully attuned to your needs throughout the workday, protecting your personal time by putting the job aside when necessary? Grade your work mindfulness by answering yes or no to the following questions regarding your typical workday:

- ___1. Do you crack the whip, driving yourself with anxiety and worry?
- ___2. Is it hard for you to get work off your mind when trying to relax?
- ___3. Do you berate and punish yourself when you fall behind schedule?
- ___4. Does working too much ever interfere with your personal relationships?
- ___5. Are you more task-focused than self-focused as you move through the workday?
- ___6. Is your mind more centered in the past or future than in the present when you're working?

- ___7. Do dread and anxiety overwhelm you during or before going to work?
- ___8. Do work projects move too slowly or not get completed fast enough to suit you?
- ___9. Are you more interested in the finished product than in what's happening on the inside of you?
- ___10. Do the pace and demand of work trump personal attention to physical and emotional needs?
- ___11. Are you more compassionate than irritated with yourself when things fall apart?
- ___12. Do you maintain a satisfying connectedness with yourself and others while working?
- ___13. Do you have frequent bursts of creativity and expressions of joy on the job?
- ___14. Do you work more from confidence than from fear?
- ___15. Does your curiosity trump the tendency to judge and blame yourself or others when mistakes are made?
- ___16. Do you have a sense of clear-mindedness and direction on the job?
- ___17. Are you able to stay calm and worry-free instead of racing against the clock?
- ___18. Do you enjoy the process of your work as much as reaching the final outcome of a project?
- ___19. Do you protect private time by preventing wireless devices from interfering with personal relationships?
- ___20. Are you able to let things happen at a reasonable pace instead of make them happen?

SCORING:

Start with 60 points. Subtract 2 points for each yes answer to questions 1-10. Add 2 points for each no answer to questions 1-10. Subtract 2 points for each no answer to questions 11-20. Add 2 points for each yes answer to questions 11-20.

YOUR REPORT CARD:

Below 60 F

You're a mindless wreck. Ask yourself if your work style has eclipsed personal needs, causing you to lose touch with yourself and miss out on life's important moments.

60-69 D

You're more of a mindless wreck than a mindful worker. Work has the upper hand, and personal awareness and self-care are off the radar screen.

70-79 C

You're half way between a mindless wreck and a mindful worker.

80-89 B

You're more of a mindful worker than a mindless wreck. You have some awareness of personal needs and probably come up for air or take breathers from time to time.

90-100 A

You're a mindful worker. You're doing a great job of paying attention to your physical and emotional needs and treating yourself with loving-kindness while meeting job demands.

Working in the Now

How many times have you started a new job, excited about the newness only to find that over time you develop a completely different feeling about it? The place didn't change—you did. You can change your daily work world simply by the view you take of it. You can rediscover your workplace and see that same world with new insight and greater clarity.

Sometimes as we become familiar with the daily work grind, we lose the fresh outlook we once had. Rarely do we keep the enthusiasm with which we started our first jobs or the exhilaration with which we began parenthood. As bills pile up and work gets us down, it's easy to go through the boredom

and monotony of workdays on automatic pilot, chugging Red Bulls and Starbucks to meet pressure-cooker deadlines; regretting the past, worried about the future. We wail at the clock and shake our fists at the Heavens when the Internet is down or our cell phones drop calls. The thrill and wonder of life's glow have vanished, and we find ourselves mired in work misery.

If you could view your life through the fresh eyes of a foreigner, what would you see? Unpaid bills and drudgery of another pressure-cooker day? Or the freshness and richness of being alive with exciting challenges that lay ahead? Would you push through with your head stuck in newspapers, laptops, stacks of reports? Or would you look at co-workers with intrigue, engaging



them in conversation with renewed interest in what they have to say? Would you snap at loved ones or try to be more tolerant of their human frailties without trying to change them?

When you live each day through mindful eyes as if it's a first-time experience, something magical happens. Life automatically takes on a fresh glow. You gain a deeper appreciation for the people and things around you that have escaped your attention. You find a renewed respect for co-workers, loved ones, and others whom you might have taken for granted. You slow down and approach challenges with more calm, more ease.

Try this exercise: The next time you go to work, imagine that you have entered your workplace for the first time. Notice the

entranceway, the architecture of the outside and inside of the building and the people at their workstations. Look at people around you as if you have never seen them before, appreciating them with renewed interest.

Notice what hangs on the walls, the textures and colors of the wall, ceiling and floor.

Smell the flowers on someone's desk. Be aware of how your colleagues are dressed and the colors of a blouse or jacket a colleague is wearing. Pay attention to who conforms and who marches to the beat of their own drum. What sounds do you hear and what smells permeate the air? Be aware of as many sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and textures as you can.

Look into the eyes of a business associate, subordinate, or boss. Then look further behind their facial expressions and into their



hearts, where their true humanity resides, noticing what you see imprinted there. Do they look happy or sad? Ready to brace the day or wishing they were back at home in bed? Are they smiling or frowning? Who has wrinkles and worry lines, and whose face is stress free? Do people in this work environment touch or keep their distance? Do they affirm one another or put each other down with sarcasm and cutting remarks? Are they pulling together as a team or working against one another? Be aware of what you're thinking and feeling inside.

Mindful exercises like this one help you discover another world always available to you. You can find beauty in the ordinary, elegance in the simple, wisdom in the shallow, and excitement in the dull. It is possible for you to rediscover yourself and your workplace by looking at each new day in a new way. Just as you start to see your job differently through mindful eyes, change your perspective again and you'll continue to have a renewed outlook on your career.

According to the Buddhist Monk, Thich Nhat Hanh, the mindfulness with which we walk that line between work and our personal lives determines our happiness: "When we are able to take one step peacefully and happily, we are working for the cause of peace and happiness for the whole of humankind... We can do it only if we do not think of the future or the past, if we know that life can only be found in the present moment." 2

1. Jon Kabat-Zinn. 1994. *Wherever You Go, There You Are: Mindfulness Meditation in Everyday Life*. New York: Hyperion, p. 5.
2. Thich Nhat Hanh. 1991. *Peace is Every Step: The Path of Mindfulness in Everyday Life*. New York: Bantam Books.

Resources for Mindful Working

Books

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Self-Soothing

Calm your inner Guard Dog

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*I wish I could show you when you are lonely or in
darkness the astonishing light of your own being.*

Hafiz

So many people get down on themselves for the simplest mistakes, with a barrage of harsh criticism: “How could you be so stupid?”, “what an idiot”, and so on. I suspect many of us have internalized the verbal abuse of parents, teachers, and even school-yard bullies. This habitual response results from years of reinforcing the same neural pathways, over and over again.

You can think of this inner critic as a harsher version of your inner Guard Dog: trying to keep you in line, reign you in, or make you behave in some acceptable fashion. The positive intent is a protective function; the problem is that it comes across in such a punitive manner. Instead of encouraging us, it tends to shame us, lowering our self-esteem, which makes it even less likely that we’ll be able to follow through on our best intentions.

But it’s possible to “retrain” your guard dog by creating alternative neural pathways of self-soothing! Instead of putting yourself down with harsh condemnation, you’ll feel inspired and encouraged.

Seven Steps to Calm Your Guard Dog and Tame the Inner Critic

Here’s a systematic method to calm your Guard Dog and tame that inner critic:

1. Recognize the critic: (like, “You stupid idiot!”)

Oh, here I am harshly condemning myself.

2. Recognize the protective function of the Guard Dog:

Wanting to do a good job.

3. Acknowledge the irrational belief:

That I should always be perfect, and never make a mistake.

4. Get in touch with the underlying feeling:

I’m disappointed I made that mistake.

5. Feel how this emotion registers in your body:

I feel constricted, and pulled in.

6. Tighten the constriction, hold your breath, then let it go.

7. From this more relaxed place, get in touch with a more realistic view of your true abilities:

Yes I messed up, and I’m disappointed with myself, but

I've learned something from this mistake, and I can use that insight to do better next time.

When I've clunked my head against the cupboard door for the umpteenth time, I still get mad at myself, even after all these years! But it doesn't last as long. After the first rush of annoyance, I can catch myself fairly quickly now, and instead of continuing to condemn myself, I try having more compassion:

"Oh, poor guy, that really hurts! Yes, another painful reminder to watch where I'm going, slow down, pay more attention to what I'm doing." Then I put a cold pack on my head, and relax for a while before going back to work.

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Rik Isensee, LCSW uses mindfulness, body awareness, and insights from the neuroscience of happiness in his psychotherapy practice in San Francisco.



To see more about how to Shift Your Mood, visit www.ShiftYourMoodBook.com. Get a free copy of "14 Proven Ways to Enhance Your Happiness" by signing up for Rik's newsletter.

Join Rik at Esalen for the weekend after Thanksgiving:
<http://www.your-pathway-to-happiness.com/shift-your-mood-events.html>



Words of Wisdom

With mind distracted, never thinking, "Death is coming," To slave away on the pointless business of mundane life, And then to come out empty - it is a tragic error.

Huston Smith

Each place is the right place--the place where I now am can be a sacred space.

Ravi Ravindra

You have to remember one life, one death--this one! To enter fully the day, the hour, the moment whether it appears as life or death, whether we catch it on the inbreath or outbreath, requires only a moment, this moment. And along with it all the mindfulness we can muster, and each stage of our ongoing birth, and the confident joy of our inherent luminosity.

Stephen Levine

You've got to think about big things while you're doing small things, so that all the small things go in the right direction.

Alvin Toffler

Feelings, whether of compassion or irritation, should be welcomed, recognized, and treated on an absolutely

equal basis; because both are ourselves. The tangerine I am eating is me. The mustard greens I am planting are me. I plant with all my heart and mind. I clean this teapot with the kind of attention I would have were I giving the baby Buddha or Jesus a bath. Nothing should be treated more carefully than anything else.

In mindfulness, compassion, irritation, mustard green plant, and teapot are all sacred.

Thich Nhat Hanh

We should notice that we are already supported at every moment. There is the earth below our feet and there is the air, filling our lungs and emptying them. We should begin from this when we need support.

Natalie Goldberg

We too should make ourselves empty, that the great soul of the universe may fill us with its breath.

Lawrence Binyon

If the sight of the blue skies fills you with joy, if a blade of grass springing up in the fields has power to move you, if the simple things in nature have a message you understand, rejoice, for your soul is alive.

Eleanora Duce

Fare Well

May you and all beings be happy, loving, and wise.