After a near-death experience in a skiing accident, Mark Bertolini, the CEO of Aetna, changed his approach to leadership. He introduced free mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) programs for all employees (including meditation and yoga classes), transforming the culture of an established, traditional corporate insurance company. According to the New York Times, over a quarter of Aetna’s 50,000 employees have participated in at least one class, reporting a significant reduction in their stress and pain levels, as well as an improvement in sleep quality.

Aetna isn’t the only company to have adopted mindfulness training in a corporate setting: Google, Adobe, General Mills, and Target all have introduced internal mindfulness programs to promote stress reduction and employee engagement in the workplace. But for the majority of us who don’t work at companies that offer such training, it’s still possible to reap the benefits.

*mental_floss* spoke with mindfulness experts to discover the benefits of increasing your awareness in the workplace.

1. MINDFULNESS CAN POSITIVELY IMPACT BOTH MENTAL AND EMOTIONAL HEALTH.
“Large population-based research studies have indicated that the idea of mindfulness is correlated with well-being and perceived health,” says Ellen Langer, a professor of psychology at Harvard University who is often called the “mother of mindfulness” for her pioneering work in mindfulness theory. “Studies have shown that rumination and worry contribute to mental illness and that mindfulness-based interventions are effective in the reduction of worry.”

According to Langer, mindfulness is the act of deliberately noticing new things, being present, and considering new perspectives—or “the essence of engagement.” It’s considering a fresh look at a particular situation or a new way of completing a task. In the workplace, she says, mindfulness can increase engagement and emotional intelligence.

**2. IT HAS ALSO BEEN SPECIFICALLY SHOWN TO INCREASE STRESS TOLERANCE.**

According to a 2015 Gallup poll, 51 percent of U.S. workers reported in 2014 that they were “not engaged” at work—American Millennials were the least engaged group, with only 28.9 percent saying that they felt engaged. Mindfulness may be key to rediscovering happiness—and subsequently, success—at work.

“The reason that work becomes dissatisfying is that people mindlessly assume that work has is in the way we look at things, not in the experiences we actually have,” fall into a mindless routine and do things in the same way over and over again. Mindfulness enables us to see things differently and appreciate our work better, resulting in increased happiness and engagement.

In 2014, Jha published a study analyzing the effect of short-form mindfulness training on undergraduates’ attention spans. Traditionally, she says, it’s understood that undergraduates’ attention spans decline over the course of an academic semester. “By the time you get to finals, you’re actually worse off than when you started,” says Jha. “Students make poorer health choices and are more likely to engage in risky behavior [towards the end of the semester].”

But Jha’s study found not only that just seven hours of mindfulness training kept students’ attention steady, but improved their task accuracy over the course of the semester.

**4. AND IT CAN EXPAND YOUR WORKING MEMORY.**

Jha states that her studies have found that MBSR practices not only reduce anxiety but improve working memory. A separate 2013 study from the University of California, Santa Barbara [PDF] found that a two-week mindfulness training course improved GRE scores and working memory through reducing distracting or intrusive thoughts.

“The workplace setting is a really powerful place to offer this,” says Jha. “I start many of my meetings with a mindfulness practice. In the same way that health clubs are part of workplace benefits, I think mindfulness training should be offered in a workplace setting.”

**5. MEDITATION CAN BOOST YOUR WORKPLACE MORALE.**

“There’s a sort of resilience that comes through mindfulness,” says Sharon Salzberg, a bestselling author and teacher of Buddhist meditation practices. “I find if I have a regular period of meditation each day... it will change the momentum of my day from being absent or frantic. For me, meditating each day is like a muscle-training session.”

While there are many different ways to practice mindfulness, Salzberg argues for meditation as a method for focused, mindful attention-training. Personal meditation, she says, can reduce “tunnel vision” in the workplace and help practitioners hone their entrepreneurial aspirations.
“Maybe the job description is not the job of your dreams—[through meditation] you can find meaning in every interaction in the workplace,” says Salzberg. “We would say the purpose of meditation is not to stop thinking, but to have a different relationship to your thoughts. You’re not being drawn into your thoughts; you’re not taking them to heart.”

6. **BY MAKING MINDFULNESS AS ROUTINE AS GOING TO THE GYM, YOUR BRAIN GETS THE EXERCISE IT NEEDS.**

According to Salzberg, the best corporate programs, like Google’s “Search Inside Yourself Leadership Institute,” combine some form of mindfulness and emotional training to improve team-building and interdependent thinking. But there are usually local classes, workshops, or even apps and recordings where people can learn and practice.

“Nobody thinks it’s weird that we have this cultural understanding that daily exercise to your body is necessary to be fit,” says Jha. “We don’t have that understanding of the mind. That’s what a lot of my work is interested in promoting. The brain is no different than any other body part.”

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