Richard Goerling's organization Mindful Badge, teaches police departments in the Portland, Ore., area and in Northern California how mindfulness can strengthen officers' attention to detail in life-or-death situations.

Photo by Megan Holmes

Appears in Moving America Forward by Chris Peak on August 11, 2016

Mindfulness at Work: 7 Places Where Employees Benefit from Meditation

Practicing mindfulness can help workers reduce nerves and be more productive. Should meditation be added to your daily to-do list?

Mindfulness, the practice of being awake to the present moment, is now in vogue in American workplaces as varied as Google, Goldman Sachs, Aetna and General Mills. Backed by scientific research of the cognitive benefits of ancient Buddhist meditation, corporate types thinking of productivity and the bottom line quickly trained their workers how to focus using mindfulness. Outside of finance, tech and manufacturing industries, NationSwell found seven more workplaces where you find employees reaping the benefits of meditating on a regular basis.

1

Concert hall

Where: Tempe, Ariz.

After studying mindfulness for four decades, Ellen Langer, a professor of psychology at Harvard, is renowned as the field’s mother. Her concept of mindfulness differs from the common practice, in that she believes no meditation is necessary to change the brain’s chemistry; instead, she achieves mindfulness by existing in a state of “actively noticing new things,” she tells NationSwell.
As part of her research, she once split the Arizona State University Symphony Orchestra into two groups and instructed each to play a piece of music by Johannes Brahms, which she recorded. Langer asked the first group to remember their best performance of the familiar piece and try their best to replicate it. She told the other group of musicians to vary the classical piece with subtle riffs that only they would recognize. Langer taped both performances and played them side-by-side for an audience. Overwhelmingly, listeners preferred the second one. To Langer, it seemed that the more choices we make deliberately — in a word, mindfully — as opposed to the mindless repetition, the better our end-product will be. The most important implication for Langer came later, when she was writing up the study: In America, she says, we so often prize a “strong leader to tell people what to do,” but as the orchestra’s performance proves, when an individual takes the lead instead of doing what someone instructs her to do, a superior result is the likely outcome.

2
Primary school

Where: East Village, New York City

“The research is pretty conclusive: when kids feel better, they learn better. One precedes the other,” declares Alan Brown, a consultant with Mindful Schools where he offers mindfulness training to the private school’s freshman and sophomores. Brown incorporated a serious practice into his life at a week-long silent retreat, after “jumping out of my skin, reading the toilet paper, doing anything but to be with your own thoughts and with yourself.” He now teaches kids how to be attuned to themselves and recognize feelings that may be subconsciously guiding their lives, like when they’re hyped up with sugar or are stressed out about a test. (Solutions: spending a moment in a designated corner calming down, breathing through a freakout to restore higher cognitive functions.)

As someone in the caregiving profession, Brown reminds himself and his fellow teachers they need to adopt mindfulness practices as well. With them, “the way I interact with others comes from a place of much greater compassion for the kids: clearly this young person, who is not a fully-formed, self-regulating adult, is probably trying their best and probably has some really significant hurdles outside the classroom. I’m not going to let that get to me.” If teachers expect similarly enlightened behavior from their kids, Brown adds, they have to know, “You can’t teach what you don’t have in your own body” and better embrace a meditative practice to see the results at every desk.
3 Hospital


Modern mindfulness was formalized in 1979 at the University of Massachusetts Medical School, where Jon Kabat-Zinn created an eight-week meditation routine to reduce stress for the hospital’s chronically ill patients that’s now replicated worldwide. Back on the medical campus where it all started, a new mindfulness program is being offered this summer for the people on the other side of treatment: the physicians, nurse practitioners and care managers.

The Mindfulness in Medicine program works to combat the frequent feeling of dissatisfaction among doctors. Instructor Carl Fulwiler gives lectures about the clinical research on meditation’s benefits, teaches 90-minute workshops for busy staffers and leads full-blown courses for a dedicated few. His teachings focus on how to avoid burnout with strategic pauses; by taking a breath immediately prior to seeing a patient, doctors can focus solely on the interaction. “Often they’re thinking about what’s the next thing they have to do or the documentation. They’re not even hearing a lot of what the patient is saying,” Fulwiler observes. With mindfulness, they can see what “might be contributing to a bad encounter, what’s preventing us from being empathetic, compassionate and more efficient in our style of communication?” The whole interaction may be over in three minutes, but having that time be meaningful is vital for helping the healers themselves feel the rewards of a demanding job.

4 Government

Where: Washington, D.C.

Change rarely comes to our nation’s capital, but that’s okay in Rep. Tim Ryan’s mind. A meditative practice equipped him to deal with legislative gridlock and partisan bickering. The seven-term Democrat representing northeastern Ohio practices mindfulness in a half lotus position for roughly 40 minutes daily — a regimen he began after attending one of Kabat-Zinn’s retreats in 2008, after which he gained “a whole new way of relating with what was going on in the world,” Ryan tells The Atlantic. “And like any good thing that a congressman finds — a new technology, a new policy idea — immediately I said, ‘How do we get this out?’” Ryan first wrote the book “A Mindful Nation,” exploring the ways mindfulness is being implemented across America, and today, in sessions of the House Appropriations Committee on which he sits, the representative advocates for more funds to be deployed to teach meditation tactics. The money may not be forthcoming just yet, but that hasn’t stopped mindfulness from gaining more new converts like Ryan every day.

5 Police department

Where: Hillsboro, Ore.

Last month, Americans watched videos of officer-involved shootings in Baton Rouge, La.; St. Paul, Minn.; and North Miami, and they read about the five cops who died in a sniper attack in Dallas. While those crises were deeply felt by civilians nationwide, they were only a glimpse of what cops encounter regularly. “Law enforcement is a profession that is deeply impacted by trauma. On a daily basis, we bump up against human suffering,” says Lt. Richard Goerling, head of Hillsboro Police Department’s investigative division and a faculty member at Pacific University. “It doesn’t take very long for police officers’ well-being to erode dramatically,” he adds, ticking off studies that track early mortality and cardiovascular issues among public safety professionals.

Through the organization Mindful Badge, Goerling teaches several police departments in the Portland area and in Northern California how mindfulness can better cops’ performance: sharpening their attention to life-or-death details, cultivating empathy and compassion that’s crucial for stops and searches and building resilience before encountering trauma. The theory goes that once an officer receives mental training, he can sense when a stressor in his environment is activating his flight-or-flight reactions and then check those instincts. “If a police officer is in their own crisis,” Goerling suggests, “they’re not going to meet that person in a way that’s totally effective.” The lieutenant is aware mindfulness isn’t a cure-all for “a landscape of suffering,” but he believes it’s a first step to changing a “broken” police culture that takes its officers’ health for granted.

6 Athletic competition

Where: San Diego, Calif.
BMX bikers may not seem like a group that’s primed for meditation, but when an elite biker stuttered with anxiety at the starting line, his coach James Herrera looked into any way to solve the problem of managing stress before a high-stakes event. Herrera soon got in touch with the Center for Mindfulness at the University of California, San Diego, and he signed up his seven-man team for a small study into the effects of meditation on “very healthy guys who are at the top of their sport,” lead author Lori Haase tells NationSwell. Over seven weeks, the bikers practiced a normal mindfulness routine, but with extra impediments like having their hands submerged in a bucket of icy water to teach them to feel the sensation of pain, rather than reacting to it cognitively. As the weeks went on, their bodies seemed to prepare for a physical shock, without an accompanying psychological panic. In other words, participants’ bodies were so amped up and hyperaware that they didn’t need to react as strongly to the stressor itself compared to an average person. The study didn’t test whether it made them faster on the course, but it seemed to suggest that reaction times could be sped up by using mindfulness to slow down.

7
Military

Where: Honolulu, Hawaii

Like cops, members of the military have much to gain from situational awareness. A couple seconds’ of lead-time for a soldier to notice someone in a bulky jacket running into a public square could prevent a suicide bomb from taking out dozens of civilians and comrades abroad. But that’s not all mindfulness is good for in a service member’s line of duty.

Before soldiers even leave home, they must deal with leaving family and putting other aspects of their lives on hold. To prepare soldiers for deployment, University of Miami neuroscientist Amishi Jha offered mindfulness trainings at an Army outpost on Oahu to soldiers heading to Afghanistan. To fit the program into an already crowded training regimen, Jha drastically cut down the standard 40-hour model to an eight-hour practice scattered throughout eight weeks. Despite the stress of leaving that could sap the mind’s attention and working memory — “everything they need to do the job well when they’re there,” Jha notes — the mindfulness trainings prevented their minds from wandering. Tentative research Jha’s still conducting suggests those benefits persist post-deployment. Her session was just like boot camp, Jha found, only for the brain.

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