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# M E S S E N G E R A INVEST EAP P

## Supporting a Healthy Organization

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### Mindfulness Tools for Happiness and Wellbeing

Have you ever driven your car somewhere and arrived at your destination realizing you remember nothing about your journey? Or started eating chips and suddenly noticed you've eaten the entire bag? Most of us have!

Unlike other animals, humans spend a lot of time thinking about things that aren't happening to them in the present: contemplating events that happened in the past, might happen in the future or may never happen at all. Psychologists at Harvard University found that people spend about 47% of their waking hours thinking about something other than what they are doing. They also found that this mind-wandering makes people unhappy.

"The ability to think about what is not happening is a cognitive achievement that comes at an emotional cost," wrote the researchers, Matthew Killingsworth and Daniel Gilbert. "How often our minds leave the present and where they tend to go is a better predictor of our happiness than the activities in which we are engaged."

The researchers used an iPhone web app to gather data points on subjects' thoughts, feelings and actions as they went about their lives. They found that only 4.6% of a person's happiness in a given moment was

attributable to the specific activity he or she was doing. Time-lag analyses suggested that their subjects' mind wandering was generally the cause, not the consequence, of their unhappiness.

In this busy, hyper-connected world we live in, it's all too easy to lose ourselves in "autopilot" for much of the day, every day. When our attention is absorbed by our wandering minds we are not really present in our own lives. We work, eat, drive and get through daily tasks *mindlessly* instead of really experiencing things. When we aren't paying attention to what we're doing in the present moment, we are more prone to accidents and mistakes. We miss rapport with people around us and become vulnerable to anxiety, stress and depression.

#### Anchoring Attention

*Mindfulness* is the opposite of *mindlessness*. It means waking up out of autopilot and using the steering wheel of our attention again. We can develop a habit of mindfulness by doing daily mental exercises.

We can think of these exercises as being mental workouts, the equivalent of repetitions in lifting free weights: Every repetition strengthens the mindfulness muscle a bit more. Mindfulness exercises strengthen the brain's

circuits for noticing when your mind has wandered, for letting go, and then returning to your chosen focus. Mental

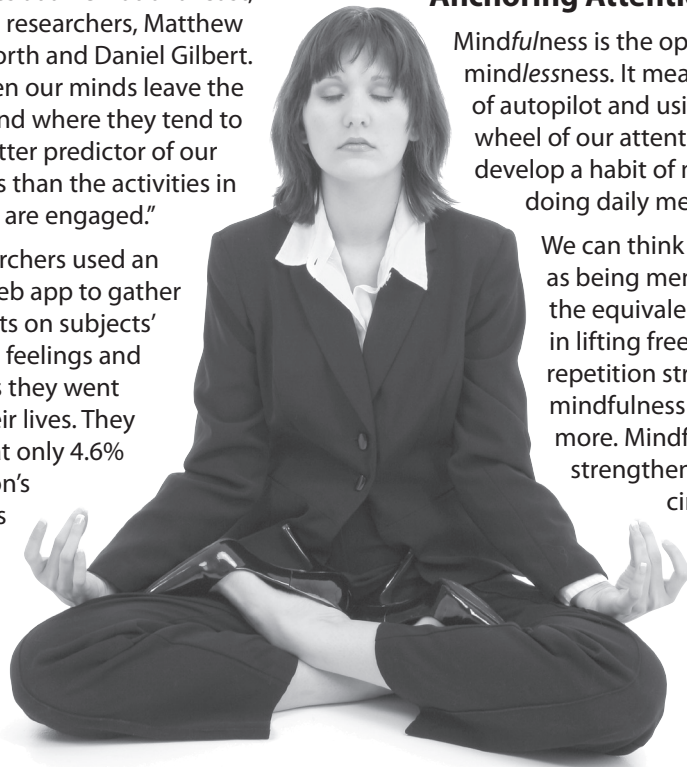
workout sessions can be short — five to ten minutes of practice every day for several weeks will help create a habit. Here are some to try.

**Mindful breathing meditation.** Meditation with a focus on breath trains the brain to do one thing at a time. This provides a break from a "go-go-go" way of being and helps create a calm state to access when feeling anxious or stressed. With practice, this concentration improves focus for other tasks and activities.

To practice: Sit upright, close your eyes and bring your attention to your breath. Don't try to control your breath, just let it be natural and easy. Notice the full inhalation and full exhalation. Sense the air coming in and going through your nostrils. Feel the rise and fall of your belly. Tune in to the sensations that are most vivid for you. Doing this helps us be fully aware of the breath. Whenever your mind wanders, just bring it back to your breath. Keep your attention anchored there.

**Visualization.** Visualization is a mental rehearsal: we create mental images of accomplishing something or achieving a goal, then repeat these images over and over again, daily for five to ten minutes a day. It's often helpful to listen to a visualization podcast or app.

Studies of athletes show that visualization increases athletic performance through improved motivation, coordination and concentration and reduced anxiety. According to research using brain imagery, visualization works because neurons in our brains interpret imagery as equivalent to a real-life action. When we visualize an act, the brain generates an impulse that tells our neurons to "perform" the movement. This creates a new neural pathway —



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clusters of cells in our brain that work together to create memories or learned behaviors. This in turn primes our body to act in a way consistent to what we imagined.

**Mindful Eating.** Eating mindfully means directing our attention to our food and staying fully engaged in a meal. To practice mindful eating: Before sitting down to eat, ask if you're really hungry, what you're hungry for, and why. Turn off the screen, put away the newspaper, and stop talking. Focus only on the food. Put a forkful in your mouth and then put the fork down. Chew slowly and tune in to your thoughts and physical sensations. Perceive flavors, aromas, textures, and your feelings after each bite. When hunger signals fade, stop eating.

### Mindful Optimism

Feeling hopeful enables us to handle stress and supports mental and physical well-being. Optimism also helps reduce risky behaviors that lead to illness and emotional distress, such as overeating, smoking and excessive alcohol use. An encouraging attitude can even improve immunity. Scientists exposed people to rhinovirus and influenza virus and found those with the highest levels of optimism were less likely to get stuffy noses and sore throats.

Here are some ways to stay upbeat.

**Think Positive.** Studies show that focusing on something positive reduces stress and anxiety and alleviates depression, often reducing symptoms as much as antidepressant medications do- without the drugs' side effects. When we experience stressful events, as psychologists suggest, the key to rebounding from these is to balance negative emotions with positive ones. When something bad happens, we can look for humor, sing a happy song, or help someone in need. When we find ourselves dwelling on negative thoughts, we can choose to accentuate the positive and improve our outlook.

**Exercise.** A workout routine positively impacts on depression, anxiety and stress. The International Society of Sports Psychology concludes that regular physical activity has the equivalent emotional benefit to taking antidepressant medication. Exercise releases dopamine, serotonin and

norepinephrine. These are the brain's happiness chemicals, which when released in the brain, can lift mood for up to 12 hours. Physical activity also improves memory, mental sharpness and creativity. For those of us new to exercise, it can help to have small goals to start, such as to walk for 10 minutes each day, and then gradually increase the amount of time or effort.

**Find three good things.** Gratitude makes us happier. When researchers picked random volunteers and trained them to practice gratitude over a few weeks, the volunteers reported feeling happier, more optimistic, socially connected and enjoyed better quality sleep than control groups.

To practice gratitude: Each day try recording three things you are grateful for and why. The three "gratitude's" should be different every day and specific. Instead of saying you are grateful for your family or your health, be specific about why. It's helpful to choose the same time each day for doing this, such as right before bed or at the start of your day. "Gratitudes" can be written in a journal or typed on a smart device. Taking time for this provides an opportunity to slow down and open up to feelings of appreciation for a loved one's hug, a word of encouragement from your partner, a few minutes of extra time to do something for yourself, the food in your pantry, the warm sunshine during your walk or the generosity of friends.

The key to increasing our happiness is to transform these practices into habit — something we do on a regular schedule. Spending just five to ten minutes a day on these activities can improve focus, reduce anxiety and tap into all the benefits of a happier brain – better health, less binge eating, less distracted driving, stronger relationships and more success.

For other tips on how to increase happiness and reduce the impact of stress, take a look at our website: <https://www.investeap.org/mental-health/stress>

### RESOURCES

- Achor, Shawn. *The Happiness Advantage: The Seven Principles of Positive Psychology That Fuel Success and Performance at Work*. <http://www.shawnachor.com/the-books/the-happiness-advantage/>
- Guided mindfulness meditation and visualization recordings: <http://thehappinesscoach.biz/wp-content/uploads/2012/08/Mindfulness-Meditation-4-min.mp3>  
<http://marc.ucla.edu/mindful-meditations>
- Karpinski, Eric, "The Happiness Coach." *Happiness Infusion Blog*. Biweekly blog posts on the science of positive psychology. <http://thehappinesscoach.biz/happiness-infusion-blog/>
- *mindful* magazine: <https://www.mindful.org/magazine/>
- *Track Your Happiness* iPhone app: <https://www.trackyourhappiness.org/>



- Being mindful helps avoid mistakes and accidents, reduce stress and increase happiness.
- We practice mindfulness by maintaining awareness of our thoughts, feelings, sensations and surroundings.
- Daily mental exercises, such as mindful meditation, mindful eating and visualization, develop a habit of mindfulness.
- Taking an optimistic view and exercising regularly promote mental and physical well-being.



### EAP SERVICES

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