

Mindfulness: Is It Relevant to My Work Life?

Suzanne M. Olbricht, MD

In preparation for a presentation at the 58th Annual Meeting of the Noah Worcester Dermatological Society (April 6-10, 2016; Marana, Arizona) entitled “Burnout: The New Epidemic,” I sent out a brief survey with 4 questions, one of which asked what changes members planned to make to deal with burnout symptoms. I offered the following list of possibilities: retire early, go to more dermatology meetings, work fewer hours, see fewer patients, change jobs, leave dermatology, leave the profession of medicine altogether, restrict practice to previous patients, restrict practice to certain types of insurances only, restrict practice to self-pay patients only, and hire additional help. One of my colleagues tested the survey and suggested that I add both practicing mindfulness at work and volunteering in underprivileged settings. Mindfulness? Interesting, but it seemed unlikely that anyone would select that answer. Needing some filler answers, I added both to the list on the final survey.

Burnout is defined by episodes of emotional fatigue; development of a negative, callous, or cynical attitude toward patients; and a decreased sense of personal accomplishment.¹ Survey responses showed that 58% of 48 respondents indicated that they experienced a symptom of burnout and stated that their primary issues were helplessness in the ability to shape their role or their practice, difficulty in obtaining medications that they prescribed for their patients, and too many hours at work. What did they choose as their primary actions to deal with burnout? Forty-two percent of respondents said they would work fewer hours, 38% said they would retire early, and a startling 35% said they would practice mindfulness at work.² Because one-third of these practicing dermatologists thought they would find

value in practicing mindfulness, I decided to explore this topic for its relevance in our work lives.

Mindfulness is a purposeful activity that involves being acutely aware of what is happening now as opposed to thinking about the past or worrying about the future. Jon Kabat-Zinn, PhD, developer of the practice called mindfulness-based stress reduction, phrases it this way: “Mindfulness is awareness, cultivated by paying attention in a sustained and particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally.”³ It is *being* rather than *becoming*; it is *noticing* internal experiences and external events rather than *reacting*; and it is *intentional*, not *accidental*.

Mindfulness practices include meditation, yoga, and tai chi. Buddhist monks listen to bells chime, Sufis spin by putting one foot in front of the other, and fly fishermen watch the ripples in the river. My son, a jazz musician, gets into the zone playing his bass and even senses color changes while completely losing track of time and space. I enjoy walking with my camera, looking intently for little things in the right light that will make interesting photographs. Then, I work on the right framing for that view before I take the photograph. The process keeps me in the moment, visually appreciating what I see, with no room for anxiety about my long must-do list.

Is mindfulness relevant to our work lives? The *Boston Globe* highlighted how mindfulness has become mainstream, reporting that major companies including Google, Aetna, the Huffington Post, Eileen Fisher, and the Massachusetts General Hospital build in opportunities during the work day for an employee to utilize practices that promote mindfulness.⁴ In the corporate setting, the stated objective is to contribute to the well-being of the employee, but the major motivation by the company is to reduce stress, which is one of the most costly employee health issues for absenteeism, turnover, and diminished creativity and productivity.

The medical literature supports the worth of mindfulness practices. A study of Brazilian primary

From the Department of Dermatology, Lahey Hospital & Medical Center, Burlington, Massachusetts.

The author reports no conflict of interest.

Correspondence: Suzanne M. Olbricht, MD, Lahey Clinic, 41 Burlington Mall Rd, Burlington, MA 01805 (suzanne.m.olbricht@lahey.org).

care professionals showed a strong negative correlation between mindfulness and perceived stress.⁵ Irving et al⁶ showed that an 8-week formal mindfulness program reduced stress in health care professionals and produced remarkable evidence of better physical and mental health. In Australia, where medical students have much higher levels of depression and anxiety compared to the general adult population, medical students with higher levels of mindfulness traits, especially the nonjudgmental subscale, had lower levels of distress.⁷ Shapiro et al⁸ found notable decreases in distress for medical students who participated in a mindfulness program.

And mindfulness matters to patient care. A multicenter observational study of 45 clinicians caring for patients with human immunodeficiency virus found that clinicians with the highest mindfulness scores displayed a more positive emotional tone with patients and their patients reported higher ratings on clinician communication. The researchers hypothesized that these better clinical interactions may have a profound effect on quality, safety, and efficacy of the patient's care.⁹

How can we incorporate mindfulness in our daily work lives? For some it is a cognitive style that regularly facilitates nonjudgmental awareness, but there are regular practices that induce mindfulness as temporary states and help build it as a persistent style. A common exercise is to take a raisin, hold it in your hand and appreciate its color and shape, roll it in between your fingers for a tactile sensation that you describe in words to yourself, then put it on your tongue to feel its sensation there, and finally chew it noticing the texture and the taste. Another practice has been highlighted by respected Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh who reminds us to concentrate on our breath, observing what happens as we breathe in and out.¹⁰ Kabat-Zinn³ challenges us to "hear what is here to be heard. . . . letting sounds arrive at our door, letting them come to us." He points out it is relatively easy to be intently aware of the external and physical world, but the real difficulty is being aware and examining our thoughts and internal experiences without being drawn into judging them,

which then leads us to be carried away on an emotional path.³

When I am preoccupied or distracted at work, I find it helpful to stop at the door I am about to enter, hold the knob, and take a deep breath, concentrating on the next single task in front of me. Then I open the door and see a patient or deal with an administrative issue. My mindfulness in action at the workplace, helping me have a good and productive day. Yes, mindfulness is relevant to our work lives.

REFERENCES

1. Olbricht SM. Embracing change: is it possible? *Cutis*. 2015;95:299-300.
2. Olbricht SM. Burnout: the new epidemic. Presented at: 58th Annual Meeting of the Noah Worcester Dermatological Society; April 6-10, 2016; Marana, AZ.
3. Kabat-Zinn J. *Mindfulness for Beginners*. Boulder, CO: Sounds True; 2012:1.
4. English B. Mindful movement makes its way into the office. *Boston Globe*. August 7, 2015. <https://www.bostonglobe.com/metro/2015/08/06/mindfulness-takes-hold-corporate-setting/3Kxojy6XFt6oW4h9nLq7kN/story.html>. Accessed July 12, 2016.
5. Antanes AC, Andreoni S, Hirayama MS, et al. Mindfulness, perceived stress, and subjective well-being: a correlational study in primary care health professionals. *BMC Complement Altern Med*. 2015;15:303.
6. Irving JA, Dobkin PL, Park J. Cultivating mindfulness in health care professionals: a review of empirical studies of mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR). *Complement Ther Clin Pract*. 2009;15:61-66.
7. Slonim J, Kienhuis M, Di Benedetto M, et al. The relationships among self-care, dispositional mindfulness, and psychological distress in medical students. *Med Educ Online*. 2015;20:27924.
8. Shapiro SL, Schwartz GE, Bonner G. Effects of mindfulness-based stress reduction on medical and pre-medical students. *J Behav Med*. 1998;21:581-599.
9. Beach MC, Roter D, Korthuis PT, et al. A multicenter study of physician mindfulness and health care quality. *Ann Fam Med*. 2013;11:421-428.
10. Hanh TH. *Peace Is Every Breath: A Practice for Our Busy Lives*. New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers; 2012.