

Stressed out Americans seek mindful peace

April 7 2014, by Fabienne Faur



A collective meditation in Sri Lanka. Image: Wikipedia.

"Make yourself comfortable, eyes closed, take a few full breaths," a woman's voice says softly. "If you find that your mind has wandered, this is good news."

Twelve professionals have gathered in a conference room much like any other in downtown Washington. But this is no ordinary meeting.

This is "[mindfulness](#)," a form of meditation that is growing fast in the Western world, including in the United States, and has been hailed for its benefits in reducing anxiety and depression.

In January, the *Journal of the American Medical Association* published a study that said in some cases mindfulness could be as effective as taking

anti-depressant medication.

"Mindfulness is the friendly awareness of the [present moment](#)," Klia Bassing, 38, an instructor since 2004, tells AFP.

"Usually our mind goes into default mode, thinks about anything other than the present moment, usually leaning forward into the future about what could happen, worrying, planning or ruminating about something in the past that's already happened.

"With mindfulness, we come into the present moment and sense what's actually happening right now. The breath is only in the present moment."

Tangible benefits

Bassing is founder of Visit Yourself at Work, bringing mindfulness to the workplace—and there have been plenty of takers, from the World Bank in the US capital to the offices of law firms and insurance companies.

She has a dozen people on their lunch breaks seated around a conference table at the American Psychological Association (APA).

Her voice quiet but firm, Bassing instructs them to sit comfortably and breathe in deeply several times.

"Feel the place where your body makes contact with the chair, the back on the seat, on the seat of the chair, where your back makes contact with the back of the chair, where your back doesn't make contact with the back of the chair..."

Patti Delande, 42, an application interface designer, says she has felt tangible benefits since starting to practise mindfulness with Bassing four

years ago.

"I had a lot of racing thoughts right before bed and it was very difficult to fall asleep, but I can't remember the last time I've had that, so I think that is the direct result of just over the years trying to be more mindful, more aware of what's going on in my head."

Laura Labedz, a technical information analyst, 29, uses the technique in her work.

"If I catch myself getting annoyed by something, I can name it as being annoyed, which helps distance myself from it," she says.

"I can take deep breaths, and I have also learned that emotions don't last forever—good ones and bad ones—so if you take the time to acknowledge your feelings in a certain way, you can get over the emotions faster."

Although meditation is associated with Buddhism, Bassing stresses that you do not need to be religious to do mindfulness exercise.

Jon Kabat-Zinn, a professor of medicine and widely hailed as a mindfulness master, founded a mindfulness stress reduction program at the University of Massachusetts Medical School in 1979.

'More engaged'

Susanna Galle, a neuropsychologist, explains that mindfulness modifies the activity of the amygdala, an area of the brain involved in emotions.

"There is a shift in the paradigm of medicine towards more acknowledgement that the body and the mind are connected," she says.

"People are going to their doctors and saying, 'I'm taking this mindfulness course and I'm feeling so much better.' The Buddhist and the yogi knew that a long time ago."

Holly Siprelle, assistant executive director, staff initiatives, at the APA, has witnessed first hand the benefits of providing mindfulness, yoga, massage and other "alternative" techniques for workers.

"The employees are happier at work, they are more engaged, we have a lot of longevity of employees here because the work is compelling," she says.

"But if we make it a healthy place to work, they will work better, they will be happier at work and they will be less likely to go elsewhere.

"More and more companies are beginning to understand that they too have a role in helping their employees be healthy, to help them to be more engaged."

Bassing says that, contrary to the popular misconception that meditation involves sitting on the floor, legs crossed, mindfulness can be deployed "at any time—and the more often, the better."

"We can be mindful when walking down the hall at work, just being aware of the soles of the feet as they touch the floor or bringing the awareness to the breath," she says.

"When having a difficult conversation with a colleague, just think, still breathing. Even as we pay attention to the breath, we can still hear what the other person is saying, in fact we are even more present for the conversation."

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