The U.S. Burnout Crisis and Mindfulness: How Meditation Improves Work-Life Balance

Brigham Blake

Brigham Young University, msrediting@byu.edu

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How Meditation Improves Work-Life Balance

By Brigham Blake

The U.S. Burnout Crisis and Mindfulness

Burnout

One of the most memorable Christmas mornings of my childhood was when my older brother and I got our very first gaming console—the PlayStation 2. We both drooled over the system for months and anticipated getting one from Santa Claus. Our favorite game to play together was called Burnout Revenge. It was a multiplayer racing game that featured the newest cars and modifications that left kids like us mesmerized for hours. The game was titled Burnout because racecar drivers will typically “burnout” once they have won the race. To explain, a burnout is done by keeping a vehicle stationary while simultaneously spinning the wheels to create smoke and friction. Despite the “cool factor” of a burnout, it can be dangerous and damaging to the vehicle and driver.

While I have never done a burnout in a car, I have experienced a more prevalent and pervasive form of burnout—the emotional and mental burnout induced by the stressors of the modern work environment. In today’s corporate America, employees are overworked, which has led to increased symptoms of burnout. Employee burnout and stress are highly correlated with depression, anxiety, decreased productivity, and poor physical health.1

American professionals are working more now than they ever have before. The traditional 40-hour workweek is no longer the standard.2 In demanding and competitive industries such as tech, finance, accounting, and medicine, the current standard work week is between 60 and 70 hours. In addition, with the
advent of smartphones, professionals are constantly connected and accessible. According to one study, more than half of employed American adults check work messages on the weekends, and 4 in 10 do so while on vacation.

An Unexpected Trend
In 1915, economist John Keynes predicted that by the twenty-first century, the average American would only work 15 hours a week. Many other twentieth-century thinkers like Keynes also predicted that there would be an inverse relationship between technology advancement and work expectancy. Despite the sound logic of these past thinkers, the opposite trend has occurred. As technology has become more efficient, employees are pressured to match the efficiency.

While there are endless factors that have affected this trend, modern-day professionals view their jobs and careers differently than any other body of workers ever have in human history. The modern-day workaholic phenomenon is commonly referred to as “workism.” Derek Thompson, a millennial contemporary writer, describes workism as “the belief that work is not only necessary to economic production, but also the centerpiece of one’s identity and life’s purpose; and the belief that any policy to promote human welfare must always encourage more work.”

For the first time, American professionals view their careers as a fundamental piece of their identity. Culturally, Americans care deeply about having successful, impactful, and meaningful careers. While some thrive in this modern environment and truly do believe that their purpose is to work, research suggests that most Americans are more miserable than ever. The millions of Americans who have bought into the culture of workism are infinitely more prone to burnout-like symptoms, which lead to increased risk of physical and mental fatigue.

My Personal Experience
Several months ago, I accepted a job offer at a prestigious accounting firm in Salt Lake City and agreed to work for the firm part time while I finished my accounting degree at Brigham Young University.

Three days a week, I take the 7:05 a.m. train to my job in Salt Lake City. From my apartment to the office, it takes me an average of two hours to get to work. Given that I am still a student, I try to use my time on public transit to study or do miscellaneous school assignments. I admit, I am often distracted and choose to read the news, listen to podcasts, or scroll through Instagram instead of being productive. Either way, by the time I arrive at the office around 9: a.m., I am exhausted and fatigued. Once settled in at my desk, I usually sift through at least 100 new emails from diverse clients and update my daily task log. Just catching myself up to speed every morning takes between 30 and 45 minutes. By 10:00 a.m., I feel immense pressure to get to work. Realistically, on an average workday, I am only able to achieve half of what I had planned for the day. Feeling even more exhausted and defeated, I leave the office at 5:30 p.m. to catch the 6:00 p.m. train. Despite my long day of mental exertion, I do an additional two hours of homework before arriving back at my apartment at 8:00 p.m. Understandably, it is normal for me to come home feeling exhausted and stressed. But two months ago, my schedule began to affect my physical and mental health. I felt like a shell of who I previously was and knew that I needed to make changes.

I decided to make one subtle change to my daily routine that has helped mitigate the mundane and exhausting grind of daily adult life. As cliché as it sounds, mindfulness and meditation have greatly improved my quality of life.

Habitual mindfulness practice has helped me overcome the adverse effects of burnout and workism. Scientists have concurred that engaging in daily mindfulness greatly increases one’s ability to cope with burnout and workism.

What is Mindfulness?
Mindfulness is more than a new-wave meditation practice for people looking for the next trend. The practice has gained serious traction among Silicon Valley entrepreneurs, Fortune 500 titans, and Pentagon chiefs. In 1979, a successful molecular biology student at MIT named Jon Kabat-Zinn coined the phrase “mindfulness” and developed a program to help others achieve it called mindfulness-based stress reduction. The root of this program is to increase one’s “ability to be aware of present-moment experiences and [observe] these experiences as they are instead of judging them.” But what does that mean exactly? And how is that relevant to the workplace?

Mindfulness is simply the ability to retrain ourselves on how to think and perceive the world around us. It is the choice to not be victims
in an unfair world. It is an increased awareness of who we are, and how we interpret our experience. At the very least, mindfulness gives us a way to think outside of ourselves. But even more notable is that mindfulness has been scientifically proven to be an effective strategy to cope with anxiety, depression, productivity, work-life balance, task performance, and job satisfaction.

The Scientific Benefits of Mindfulness

In January 2019, a study was published in the National Journal of Occupational Health Psychology which concluded that mindfulness programs helped professionals increase their job satisfaction and performance. Dr. Pang and Dr. Ruch concluded from their research that the individuals who regularly practiced mindfulness-based stress reduction were significantly more likely to experience satisfaction at work, improved time-management skills, and overall improved mental health. ⁹

In another study, conducted in 2017, researchers tested the correlation between mindfulness and work-life balance. Participants engaged in an eight-week mindfulness-based stress reduction program and were asked to evaluate their satisfaction regarding a variety of work- and family-related topics. When comparing the participants’ responses to those of the control group, researchers definitively concluded that mindfulness is correlated to a more favorable work-life balance. “The findings suggest that cultivating mindfulness can be a proactive tool for fostering health and subjective well-being in an aging and age-diverse workforce.”

The researchers theorized that mindfulness leads to overall better health and balance for two reasons. First, prolonged mindfulness practice causes positive neuroplasticity in the brain. Neuroplasticity refers to our brain’s ability to rewire itself. Mindfulness practice causes the brain to form new neurological connections that are associated with decreased depression and anxiety. ¹⁰ Secondly, mindfulness and positivity bias are closely related. Those that practice mindfulness are more likely to take the “glass half full” perspective. The researchers concluded that “when a person is more concerned and motivated toward present experiences and less toward future expectations, he [or] she tends to be more focused in attending to positive stimuli.”¹¹

How to Be More Mindful

Paradoxically, mindfulness instructors say that if you try too hard to be mindful, then you have missed the point. Mindfulness, more than anything, is a state of non-doing. There are two techniques that I have personally found to be most helpful in increasing mindfulness. They are 1) the wave analogy and 2) the four A’s of stress management.

The Wave Analogy

Imagine being cast out into the middle of the ocean without a boat or raft during a tumultuous storm. Due to our flight-or-fight instinct, when coping with extremely stressful situations, we metaphorically feel as if we’ve been cast out to sea. The sensation of only barely keeping our heads above water is horrible. But anytime we experience the prolonged effects of burnout and workism, we should imagine that we are floating on top of a tumultuous sea.

It may sound counterintuitive, but if you were to dive down below the tumultuous surface, the ocean would be relatively calm and still. Mindfulness is the metaphorical “dive” under the ocean’s surface. By diving underneath our “mental” wave, we take time to recuperate and view our experience objectively. Once we resurface, we are more composed and able to make rational decisions.

The Four A’s of Stress Management

In 2018, an Indian professor of philosophy named Mitashree Tripathy developed a framework known as “The Four A’s of Stress Management.” The four A’s are Avoidance, Alter the situation, Acceptance, and Adaptation.

Avoidance

Working beyond a reasonable capacity is one of the main indicators of burnout and stress in the workplace. Culturally, we are incentivized to make lasting impressions on our work peers and bosses. We strive to be seen as capable and professional. A common mistake that professionals make is volunteering and accepting more work than they are reasonably able to do. Tripathy suggests that cultivated mindfulness will help one “know [one’s] abilities and stick to them.”¹² Through mindfulness, we may learn our limits and develop constructive ways to say “no” to additional tasks at work.
Alter the Situation

Unfortunately, not all stressful situations can be avoided. The ability to manipulate one’s perception of a stress-inducing task is an essential aspect of mindfulness. Like the wave analogy, we have the mental ability to alter our perception of reality. The ability to alter stressful situations with coworkers is most often manifested by giving others the benefit of the doubt.

Acceptance

Accepting one’s environment and taking responsibility for it is a vital aspect of mindfulness. “Pain in this life is not avoidable, but the pain we create avoiding pain is avoidable.” Developing the ability to take on difficult and stressful tasks head-on is a life-changing ability. Mindfulness in these moments, however, will augment our response to such situations. Through acceptance we may even find such inevitable situations to be sacred and empowering.

Adaptation

Workplace adaptation is the ability to implement simple and minor changes in attitude and lifestyle to best cope with the concurrent struggles of the modern work environment. Positive psychology is an element of mindfulness that empowers individuals to change their circumstances. A paramount element of positive psychology is the ability to recognize and identify inaccurate negative thoughts that give rise to negative emotions and replace them with more positive coping thoughts. Through adaptation, we build on the good by replacing it with areas of ourselves that need to change.

“Wherever You Go, There You Are”

To conclude, Jon Kabat-Zinn wrote, “When it comes right down to it, wherever you go, there you are. Whatever you wind up doing, that’s what you’ve wound up doing. Whatever you are thinking right now, that’s what’s on your mind. Whatever has happened to you, it has already happened. The important question is, how are you going to handle it? In other words, Now what?”

The true beauty of mindfulness is that it can only be cultivated by one person—you. Stress, burnout, and workism are inevitable aspects of the modern working environment. Thankfully, mindfulness is a proven strategy that will help anyone become more capable of managing these negative aspects of adult life.

Notes

5 Thompson, “Workism is Making Americans Miserable.”
7 Pickert, “The Mindful Revolution.”
9 Pang and Ruch, “Fusing Character Strengths and Mindfulness Interventions.”
11 Allen et al., “Mindfulness and Meditation Practice.”
13 Tripathy, “Underlying Causes of Stress at Workplace.”

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