



Overworked and Overwhelmed

The Mindfulness Alternative

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Many professionals feel burned out due to increased responsibilities at work, a corporate downsizing or restructuring, the constant onslaught of technology, or other aspects of modern life. Leadership coach Scott Eblin shows busy executives how to develop mindfulness through awareness and intention. He created the “Life GPS” model to teach managers and professionals how to bring out their best at home, at work and in the community. He suggests routines to improve your physical, mental and spiritual health and your relationships through exercise, meditation, reading, connecting with others and thinking about the big picture. The benefits of being fully present include improved health, decreased stress and stronger relationships. *getAbstract* recommends his advice to harried people seeking better work-life balance.

Take-Aways

- Many professionals exist in a chronic fight-or-flight stressful state.
- Developing mindfulness can relieve stress, boost productivity and improve your health.
- Mindfulness equals your awareness combined with your intention.
- The “Life GPS” model helps you recognize “the characteristics and behaviors that reflect your “best version of yourself.”
- Life GPS helps you identify your peak performance at home, at work and in the community.
- Effectively managing your time eases your sense of being overwhelmed.
- Identify and pursue your life’s purpose and develop strong relationships to help you achieve it.
- Create easy-to-implement routines that nourish your physical, mental, relational and spiritual health.
- Meditate to improve your mental clarity and relieve stress.
- Stick with your routines while granting yourself permission to make occasional mistakes.

Summary

If You Feel “Overworked and Overwhelmed”

John owns a consulting business. On a recent trip to Los Angeles, he worked a 17-hour day. His activities included navigating through tough LA morning traffic, making a conference call to Denmark while driving, attending an all-day meeting, dropping off a client at the airport, participating in an evening conference call, eating dinner and preparing for the next day by reading emails before finally going to bed.

“You have permission to quit seeking that holy grail of perfect balance.”

Increasingly, managers and professionals report their lives seem out of control due to economic pressures and to ever-increasing use of technology. As downsized corporations “learned how to do more with less,” their surviving employees faced the “blessing and the curse” of “the rise of the smartphone.” Smartphones can be fun, but they make it, first, possible and, then, nearly necessary to work around the clock. A survey of executives, managers and professionals (EMPs) found that a typical smartphone-wielding EMP “is interacting with work” 72 hours of each 168-hour week, or about 43% of the time. Factor in sleeping, eating and grooming, and EMPs have only 40 hours a week – about 24% of their time – for other activities or leisure.

Cultivating Mindfulness

In 1979, Jon Kabat-Zinn of the University of Massachusetts Medical Center founded the Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) program, which combines meditation and yoga to help relieve patients’ chronic pain and anxiety. More than 200 hospitals and thousands of organizations worldwide have adopted the principles of the MBSR program. Develop awareness and act on intention to reduce stress and feel less overwhelmed.

“Instead of seeking balance, try finding a rhythm instead. By focusing on rhythm, you acknowledge there are times when your pace is going to be much more oriented to work, home, or community and...times when the counterpoints of the other aspects of your life come to the fore.”

Mindfulness combines being aware and focusing your intent; the formula is “mindfulness = awareness + intention.” Awareness includes being conscious of the internal and external stimuli that interfere with your thinking. “Mental chatter, or intrinsic interference, is a fact of the human condition. The trick is to recognize it when it’s happening.” Becoming aware of your mental chatter is the first step toward curbing it.

“Recognize what [your boundaries] need to be for you to consistently show up at your best at home, at work and in the community.”

Lack of awareness is a barrier to mindfulness, as is distraction, often the result of technology. Research from the University of California at Irvine indicates that interruptions occur every 11 minutes at work and that it takes about 25 minutes to get back to work after an interruption.

Fight, Flight, Rest and Digest

Henry Lescault spent four years as an undercover police officer in Massachusetts. Right before transferring to a new job, he survived a difficult assignment. He had broken a cardinal rule: Don't go undercover in your hometown, even to bust up a drug ring. One night when he wasn't wearing a wire, a suspicious dealer confronted him about being a cop. Lescault remained calm and denied it. His cool response saved his life.

“Once you have boundaries, let other people know what they are.”

Lescault had activated his “parasympathetic nervous system,” which regulates the body, including its “rest and digest” response. The sympathetic nervous system (the part of the “autonomic nervous system that governs the fight-or-flight response) is your accelerator and the parasympathetic nervous system is your brakes. You must balance them.

“One of the quickest ways to end up feeling overworked and overwhelmed (and burned out, resentful and depleted) is to mindlessly say yes to every request.”

Too many professionals step on the gas all the time and, thus, end up in a chronic fight-or-flight stressful state. Keeping the sympathetic nervous system constantly activated adversely affects a person's health and can lead to higher blood pressure, heart disease, anxiety, insomnia, weight gain, infections and cancer. If you learn to put yourself into a more relaxed state, you can reverse the damage wreaked by chronic stress.

“Life GPS”

Author Scott Eblin and his wife Diane created the “Life Goals Planning System” (called Life GPS) even before the popularity of directional GPS systems. Life GPS recognizes “the characteristics and behaviors that reflect how you are when you're showing up as the best version of your self.” This includes peak performance in your physical, mental, relational and spiritual health. To begin identifying and codifying your peak, write a one-page reflection on how being at your best affects your results at home, at work and in your community.

“There will always be extrinsic interference over which you have little or no control.”

Put Life GPS into action by establishing routines to promote good physical, mental, relational and spiritual health. Physical health, including your energy and stamina, provides a foundation for the other categories. Mental health means keeping your brain strong, which supports making good choices. Your relationships with family, friends and co-workers affect your mindfulness.

Spirituality keeps you focused on the bigger picture: “What am I here on Earth to really do?” A small change across one domain creates a positive ripple effect in others.

“Life is just not that linear. By the time you have enough information to solve for 100%, the variables will have changed anyway.”

The Life GPS model asks you to define how you are at your best, which routines reinforce your being your best and what results you want. Find a quiet place to contemplate the factors that help you reach your peak. Think back over the last 6 to 12 months. How did you feel when you were at your peak at home, at work and in your community? Your list will be personal and unique; don't include characteristics you think “should” be there. There are no right answers.

Handling Interference

Yoga practitioners believe that “life force” – in Sanskrit, *prana* – freely flows through your body when you're at your best. Three factors interfere with being at your best: “kinks in the hose, too much of a good thing” and “playing against your strengths.”

“People who have at least one friend at the office are, on average, seven times more engaged in their work.”

Your brain is hardwired to respond negatively to anything it perceives as a threat; this is the “negativity bias.” To handle it, “name it and claim it.” Identify when you begin a negative internal monologue. Give that process a name, any name, and when you start to berate yourself, recognize that you've embraced a negative process. Say aloud: “Oh, that's (insert name here).” This will help you recognize that the content of your monologue is secondary to your habit of indulging in it.

“Pay attention to what makes you feel good or bad in the physical, mental, relational and spiritual domains, and adjust your future actions accordingly.”

Your strengths can become weaknesses if you hoard opportunities and don't delegate. Let your team shine instead of doing everything yourself. “Working too hard to be good at stuff that you're just not wired to be good at” is the third factor that hampers being at your best. As you challenge yourself to succeed, be aware of your true strengths and weaknesses.

Setting Routines for Mind and Body

Effective time management fuels mindfulness. Investigate how you spend your time. Find your rhythm, so you can do your work when you're at your peak energy. Some executives process their most important work first and tackle emails and the like later in the day. Others set specific hours for mundane tasks. High-capacity professionals schedule time for unfiltered thinking to spark creativity, say no with ease and are clear about their boundaries.

“As they say in the military, no plan survives first contact. Life is a process of adjustments.”

A healthy body supports a healthy mind, active spirit and good relationships. Simply moving around decreases stress hormones, refreshes thinking, and makes you more productive and confident. The best movement routine is “the one you’re likely to do.” Practice your physical routine with others. Eat healthier to develop better nutrition habits.

“There are best practices and then there’s dogma. Pay attention to the best practices and ditch the dogma.”

Don’t neglect sleeping. Medical experts recommend seven to eight hours a night, but most Americans get less than seven. For improved sleep, go to bed and wake up at scheduled times, even on weekends. Limit food and drink within two or three hours of going to sleep. As bedtime nears, avoid electronic screens and don’t work out. “Keep your bedroom quiet, cool and dark.”

Building Strong Relationships

When your interactions with others suffer because you’re not fully present, your work also suffers, your health declines and “your humanity” wanes. A meta-analysis of 148 different studies examining the social habits of more than 300,000 people worldwide found that “having weak relationships is more harmful than not exercising, twice as bad as being obese, and about as bad as being an alcoholic or smoking a pack of cigarettes a day.”

“Routines of mindfulness can help keep you from getting sick...or help you greatly improve your overall well-being if you already have a health issue.”

To build deeper relationships, become a better listener. Identify your default listening style; is it “transient, transactional” or “transformational”? Transient listening occurs when you’re in chronic flight-or-fight mode, distracted or thinking about your next move. Transactional listening occurs when you listen just enough to get things done. Transformational listening occurs when you develop real connections with other people. If you are distracted or impatient, you might be a transient listener. If you accomplish your goals, you may be a transactional listener.

“Establishing a routine of responsiveness – even if it’s just to say, ‘I got your message and will get back with you later in the week,’ is a classic example of treating others the way you’d like to be treated.”

Transformational listening means observing nonverbal cues and recognizing the value of silence, which gives you time to think. To increase your engagement, build workplace friendships and set up times to be with your friends or co-workers.

Being constantly negative and self-critical will disrupt your relationships. Instead, try to see “what’s going right.” Make time for the important people in your life. One workshop participant

said that while waiting for his family's flight to take off for their vacation, his 10-year-old daughter asked, "Daddy, can I see your BlackBerry?" When he gave it to her, she put it in her bag and said, "You can have that when we get back, Daddy." Despite momentary panic, he made it through the week without checking his phone. This led to the best family vacation he'd ever had.

"Discerning Your Purpose"

Spirituality means different things to different people, but basically, it relates to exploring "your life's purpose." Your spiritual routines can be religious or not; they can incorporate different paths or perspectives, or none at all. But your purpose cuts across all aspects of your life. Develop your spiritual side using any combination of reflection and gratitude, visual focal points, reading, journaling, and regular prayer or meditation. Senior executive Kaye Foster Cheek starts her day by opening her eyes in bed, acknowledging her breathing and saying, "Phew, another day. What a gift. Thank you for this breath." If focusing on breathing itself is difficult for you, try repeating a soothing word or phrase as an alternative. Experiment with different reflection routines to see what works best for you. Finding the right fit can take years, so be patient.

Perseverance on Your Journey

Stay with your routines, but give yourself permission to make mistakes. It may take time to analyze which routines work best for your natural rhythms. When in doubt, "pick the routines that are easy to do and likely to make a difference." Schedule routines that reinforce your most important goals. Recruit your friends to help you.

Your Life GPS will offer directions once you "write your answers to the three big components – how you are at your best, the routines that reinforce that and the outcomes that you hope for." If you miss a day, or a week or more of an important routine, don't worry. Let go of your guilt and move on. Don't add too many routines at once. Scale back if necessary.

Start by creating mindfulness at home. Think about the life you want to create with the people you love. Then, realize what success at work means. True transformation will take more of your time, energy and attention. Consider how your routines affect your community at large. For example, Patrick, a financial-services executive, spends one day a year with other people from his company providing essential services for 700 homeless people. Volunteers use a local community center to set up stations for health services, including mental health support, dental and vision care, housing assistance, haircuts, a food pantry, and more. Your communities include those who share your interests, such as faith, sports, hobbies, and so forth.

Take Three Deep Breaths

Whenever you need to clear your mind, take three deep breaths. Inhale through your nose, and exhale through your mouth. Regular deep-breathing routines improve cognitive functions and reduce stress. Take a few minutes each day to focus on breathing.

About the Author

Executive coach and co-founder and director of the Eblin Group, **Scott Eblin** offers free “Habit Hack” videos on breathing, meditation, gratitude and yoga at ootma.eblingroup.com.



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