

Mindfulness is a powerful tool to reduce workplace stress, study finds

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In the fast-paced corporate world where stress can be an unwelcome

colleague for many employees, SFU researchers have found that mindfulness can reduce workplace stress by helping to narrow employees' views of work tasks as threats.

Research looking at the role of mindfulness in the workplace conducted by SFU Beedie School of Business professor Lieke ten Brummelhuis and Ph.D. student Mariana Toniolo-Barrios is published in the journal [*Personality and Individual Differences*](#).

In the U.S. alone, 83 percent of workers grapple with [work-related stress](#). Stress-induced woes such as accidents, absenteeism, high [employee](#) turnover, decreased productivity, and insurance costs can cost businesses up to a staggering \$300 billion annually.

Mindfulness, defined in the study as non-judgmental awareness of, and attention to, what is occurring in the [present moment](#)—including thoughts, emotions, and surroundings—has been gaining traction as a remedy for work [stress](#).

Companies like Google, Target, and General Mills have championed mindfulness programs for their [employees](#), betting on the idea that a more relaxed workforce can translate into improved profits. Studies have also consistently shown the effectiveness of mindfulness interventions in reducing stress.

But while we know that mindfulness can reduce stress, exactly how it does so has remained somewhat mysterious. Surprisingly, there has been limited research into the mechanisms by which mindfulness successfully reduces stress. This [knowledge gap](#) has prevented researchers and practitioners from fully harnessing the potential of mindfulness as a stress-reducing tool.

To bridge this gap, the researchers explored in two studies (a two-wave

study and a seven-day diary study) whether mindfulness could influence how employees view the core aspect of their jobs: their work tasks. Do employees with higher levels of mindfulness perceive their tasks as less threatening, or perhaps even as more challenging?

The answer, it turns out, is a resounding "yes" to both. Mindfulness makes people view their tasks as less threatening and more challenging. Viewing tasks as less threatening, in turn, reduces stress. Thus, mindfulness is associated with a more favorable outlook toward work tasks, leading to reduced threat appraisal. This more positive appraisal of work tasks, in turn, explains why employees experience less stress when they cultivate mindfulness.

"It is possible to have different outlooks on work tasks," says ten Brummelhuis. "A task can feel like a threat, a difficult hurdle that you are reluctant to take on. Or you can view it as a challenge—something that might be difficult, but not impossible, to tackle and offers an opportunity to perform well. Whereas the first causes anxiety and stress, the latter triggers motivation and drive. We were interested in knowing if mindfulness would affect these two outlooks on work tasks."

The study suggests that mindfulness can make a big difference during the workday by changing how employees engage with tasks. Since work can be a major source of stress for many people, this finding suggests a new way to approach the problem: instead of dealing with stress after it happens, they can try to stop it from building up in the first place.

The study shows that mindfulness can benefit employees during [work hours](#), making it a valuable tool to prevent stress from accumulating throughout the day. Employers and mindfulness coaches can teach specific exercises that can reduce anxiety and help employees see their tasks in a less threatening way, which can create a healthier workplace.

Managers can also contribute by framing job tasks in a more positive light, emphasizing the [positive outcomes](#), and creating a culture where mistakes are seen as opportunities to learn and grow.

According to ten Brummelhuis, organizations need not rely solely on formal mindfulness interventions—just encouraging and supporting employees in practicing mindfulness in their own way can also bring benefits to both individuals and the organization as a whole.

"The insights from our study also help employees using mindfulness in a more targeted way," she says. "We found that mindfulness diminished threat appraisals, suggesting that it could help to do a short mindfulness exercise before you engage in a [task](#) you feel anxious about. If your goal is to reduce stress, using [mindfulness](#) to cope with tasks you feel reluctant about seems most effective."

More information: Mariana Toniolo-Barrios et al, How does mindfulness reduce stress at work? A two-study examination using a stress appraisal perspective, *Personality and Individual Differences* (2023). [DOI: 10.1016/j.paid.2023.112392](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2023.112392)

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