

MAKE THE MOST OF LIFE BY BEING MINDFUL

The biggest threat to health, safety - and to living a fulfilled life - is the inability to be in the moment within the complex world we live in.

Familiarity and multiple demands are leading contributors to errors and incidents, but why do 'things happen' although we 'know what we are doing'?

The problem with creating muscle memory and second nature autopilots through practice is that we no longer operate in the here and now.

In principle this is not a problem if the environment is as planned and practiced.

However, once we are on autopilot our ability to respond to changes in the environment diminishes, thus our reaction time increases, and accidents or unwanted events happen when we 'take the eye off the ball'.

When we go onto autopilot we begin doing the things we need to do without any awareness of what is happening to us or around us. The danger in this is not too dissimilar to what happens when we drive in automatic mode: our surrounding become blurs, our sensory system becomes unfocused and we find ourselves less in tune with potential risk on the road as we do in life.

Just as we can miss the potential obstacles, we also miss the beautiful simple things, the smell of the crisp fall air, the sparkling sun penetrating through the window, bringing warmth without any need for turning on the heat. We begin missing what's happening around us - missing what is ultimately the most important.

In today's workplace with its increasing load and multiple performance demands, not only does autopilot get switched on but multitasking is in, enticing us to learn, think about and execute ever-increasing numbers of tasks simultaneously.

"EVERY MOMENT CAN BE AN
OPPORTUNITY TO BE MINDFUL,
TO BE PRESENT AND TO ENJOY
THE SMOOTH WORKINGS
OF OUR BODIES AND MINDS
HONED THROUGH PRACTICE
AND EXPERIENCE"

PERFORMANCE PROBLEMS

Research into our brains, however, has shown that while we can hold several chunks of information in our mind at once, we cannot perform more than one conscious process at a time.

What people tend to do is try to hold several focuses at once and switch rapidly between them. Although it is physically possible to do several mental tasks at once, accuracy and performance drop off quickly - sometimes with harsh consequences. Furthermore, when our focus is continuously split between two or more things, we experience intense and constant mental exhaustion.

The sad truth is this - multitasking does not mean that we are performing those tasks better. In fact, the reverse is true. In the article *Why the Modern World is Bad for Your Brain*, neuroscientist Daniel J. Levitin explains why we have the concept of multitasking all wrong.

He quotes Earl Miller, an MIT neuroscientist and expert on divided attention, who says that human brains are: "not wired to multitask well... When people think they're multitasking, they're actually just switching from one task to another very rapidly.

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And every time they do, there's a cognitive cost in doing so."

As with a microprocessor, the in-terruption of one task requires us to remember where we stopped, so that when we return to this task we can resume the activity. The same is true, of course, for the alternate task(s). Now, whereas microproces-sors are quite efficient at storing and retrieving these interruption points, human brains are decidedly not.

FINDING FOCUS

That leaves the question of what we can do to be focused in what we are doing and doing it safely; whether it is riding a bike, working with a digger, or looking after the children. There is an increasing research body that suggests mindfulness practice helps us get the best out of our day.

For some people the idea of mindfulness gives rise to mental pictures of sitting on a mat, legs twisted into the lotus position and being surrounded by soothing noises and smells. On a more practical level, mindfulness is any practice you do to remind yourself of the here and now, of the task at hand in the pres-ent environment.

One of the easiest ways to practice mindfulness at work is the S-T-O-P method.

While walking to a meeting, the Portaloo, the car or anywhere else, make an effort to walk slowly and then at a suitable point you

1. Stop – stand still,
 2. Take three deep breaths,
 3. Observe (and quietly list to yourself):
 - three things that you see
 - three things that you hear
 - three things that you feel (either through touch, like the socks on your legs, or any emotions you can identify)
 4. Proceed – continue walking to wards your destination.
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With this two-minute exercise you will have given your brain the chance to reset, and you will have reminded yourself about the here and now of your environment. Two minutes that will refresh your focus and increase your awareness and concentration.

Every moment can be an opportunity to be mindful, to be present and to enjoy the smooth workings of our bodies and minds honed through practice and experience.

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