

WHY ATTENTION MATTERS

Mindfulness is all about how we use attention and the state of mind we bring to the world. Dr Craig Hassed, author of *Mindful Learning* and internationally recognised expert in improving performance within health, educational and corporate settings, says mindfulness is possibly the single most valuable life skill we ever learn. He believes mindfulness is as important for anyone who teaches as it is for the students they teach.

If we are not modelling or teaching mindfulness to students then we are probably modelling or teaching unmindfulness. The cost of inattention, lack of engagement, and an inability to be present include higher stress, poor mental and physical health, poorer learning and memory, wasting time, increased errors, poor communication, lack of empathy, reduced creativity, and a superficial experience of life. If we cannot get the attention bit right, then it makes everything else more difficult.

Mindfulness, on the other hand, according to the ongoing research, is associated with a range of benefits, including improving mental health, neuroplasticity, efficiency, time management, and our sensory processing ability. It can slow the ageing process, improve our ability to communicate, make us better problem solvers, enhance our sleep and our empathy, compassion and emotional intelligence.

Rather than seeing mindfulness as merely a stress management intervention, it is best to see it as a life-skill. Mindfulness meditation is the cornerstone of the approach and needs to be practiced in order to be mindful throughout the whole of one's day.

When we are inattentive, the mind is most vulnerable to slipping into the habitual mode of rumination and worry.

This mindset is central to depression and anxiety and unnecessarily activates the fight or flight response by anticipating stressors that aren't present and reliving ones that have already come and gone. This distracted state of mind is called default mode.

As the pace of modern life accelerates the tendency to multi-task (trying to pay attention to multiple complex things at the same time) increases. Although we can do many things at once, contrary to popular belief, we can't do them well, nor can we have in-depth experiences while our attention is skimming across the surface of events. It is a myth that multitasking increases efficiency and fullness of life however multitasking needs to be distinguished from efficient and discerning attention-switching, which is useful.

Learning to engage attention is therefore central in improving performance and efficiency, deepening enjoyment of life, and protecting the mind from the cognitive processes behind poor mental health.

Craig Hassed: Mindfulness is a simple, natural and accessible technique for enhancing wellness and improving performance.



The senses are the gateway for re-engaging attention with the present moment.

Learning how to practice mindfulness oneself is essential. Then we can understand it and model it to students. To talk about the importance of paying attention when we are not doing it ourselves is not convincing. Practicing mindfulness meditation (the formal practice of mindfulness) daily and encouraging one or two minutes of mindfulness meditation at the start and finish of a teaching session helps focus attention. A mindful cognitive style – open, curious, questioning, responsive but not reactive – is important. Pacing activities and limiting input to only what is necessary can help.

Treat mindfulness as an exploration and an experiment rather than imposing it or telling students what to think. This approach helps teachers and trainers to help students to reflect on, and learn from, their experience and to manage the stress and anxiety which can diminish executive function and slow learning.

DR CRAIG HASSED
Senior Lecturer, Department of General Practice
Monash University

MINDFULNESS IN EDUCATION: RESOURCES

- Smiling Mind website and app: smilingmind.com.au
- The Dawn Foundation: thedawnfoundation.org
- Meditation Capsules: www.meditationcapsules.com
- Hassed C, Chambers R. *Mindful Learning*, Exisle, Sydney, 2014.
- McKenzie S, Hassed C. *Mindfulness for Life*, Exisle, Sydney, 2012.
- ETTY-LEAL J. *Meditation Capsules*, Melbourne, 2010.
- Hawn G, Holden W. *10 Mindful Minutes*, Pedigree, New York, 2011.