

## The Mindful Revolution

The raisins sitting in my sweaty palm are getting stickier by the minute. They don't look particularly appealing, but when instructed by my teacher, I take one in my fingers and examine it. I notice that the raisin's skin glistens. Looking closer, I see a small indentation where it once hung from the vine. Eventually, I place the raisin in my mouth and roll the wrinkly little shape over and over with my tongue, feeling its texture. After a while, I push it up against my teeth and slice it open. Then, finally, I chew--very slowly.

I'm eating a raisin. But for the first time in my life, I'm doing it differently. I'm doing it mindfully. This whole experience might seem silly, but we're in the midst of a popular obsession with mindfulness as the secret to health and happiness--and a growing body of evidence suggests it has clear benefits. The class I'm taking is part of a curriculum called Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) developed in 1979 by Jon Kabat-Zinn, an MIT-educated scientist. There are nearly 1,000 certified MBSR instructors teaching mindfulness techniques (including meditation), and they are in nearly every state and more than 30 countries. The raisin exercise reminds us how hard it has become to think about just one thing at a time. **Technology has made it easier than ever to fracture attention into smaller and smaller bits.** We answer a colleague's questions from the stands at a child's soccer game; we pay the bills while watching TV; we order groceries while stuck in traffic. In a time when no one seems to have enough time, our devices allow us to be many places at once--**but at the cost of being unable to fully inhabit the place where we actually want to be.**

**Mindfulness says we can do better. At one level, the techniques associated with the philosophy are intended to help practitioners quiet a busy mind, becoming more aware of the present moment and less caught up in what happened earlier or what's to come. Many cognitive therapists commend it to patients as a way to help cope with anxiety and depression. More broadly, it's seen as a means to deal with stress.**

But to view mindfulness simply as the latest self-help fad underplays its potency and misses the point of why it is gaining acceptance with those who might otherwise dismiss mental training techniques closely tied to meditation--Silicon Valley entrepreneurs, FORTUNE 500 titans, Pentagon chiefs and more. If distraction is the pre-eminent condition of our age, then mindfulness, in the eyes of its enthusiasts, is the most logical response. Its strength lies in its universality. **Though meditation is considered an essential means to achieving mindfulness, the ultimate goal is simply to give your attention fully to what you're doing.** One can work mindfully, parent mindfully and learn mindfully. One can exercise and even eat mindfully. The banking giant Chase now advises customers on how to spend mindfully.

There are no signs that the forces splitting our attention into ever smaller slices will abate. To the contrary, they're getting stronger. Already, many devotees see mindfulness as an indispensable tool for coping--both emotionally and practically--with the daily onslaught. The ability to focus for a few minutes on a single raisin isn't silly if **the skills it requires are the keys to surviving and succeeding in the 21st century.**

A related and potentially more powerful factor in winning over skeptics is what science is learning about **our brains' ability to adapt and rewire. This phenomenon, known as neuroplasticity, suggests there are concrete and provable benefits to exercising the brain.**

Researchers have found that **multitasking leads to lower overall productivity**. Students and workers who constantly and rapidly switch between tasks have less ability to filter out irrelevant information, and they make more mistakes.

It might seem paradoxical, then, that Silicon Valley has become a hotbed of mindfulness classes and conferences. Wisdom 2.0, an annual mindfulness gathering for tech leaders, started in 2009 with 325 attendees, and organizers expect more than 2,000 at this year's event, where participants will hear from Kabat-Zinn, along with executives from Twitter, Instagram and Facebook. Google, meanwhile, has an in-house mindfulness program called Search Inside Yourself. The seven-week course was started by a Google engineer and is offered four times a year on the company's Mountain View, Calif., campus. Through the course, thousands of Googlers have learned **attention-focusing techniques, including meditation, meant to help them free up mental space for creativity and big thinking**.

It makes sense in a way. Engineers who write code often talk about "**being in the zone**" the same way a successful athlete can be, which mindfulness teachers say is the epitome of being present and paying attention. (Apple co-founder Steve Jobs said his meditation practice was directly responsible for his ability to concentrate and ignore distractions.) Of course, much of that world-class engineering continues to go into gadgets and software that will only ratchet up our distraction level.

But lately there's been some progress in tapping technology for solutions too. There are hundreds of mindfulness and meditation apps available from iTunes, including one called Headspace, offered by a company of the same name led by Andy Puddicombe, a former Buddhist monk. "There's nothing bad or harmful about the smartphone if we have the awareness of how to use it in the right way," says Puddicombe. "It's unplugging by plugging in."

## **THE SCIENCE OF DESTRESSING**

Scientists have been able to prove that **meditation and rigorous mindfulness training can lower cortisol levels and blood pressure, increase immune response and possibly even affect gene expression**. Scientific study is also showing that meditation can have an impact on the structure of the brain itself. Building on the discovery that brains can change based on experiences and are not, as previously believed, static masses that are set by the time a person reaches adulthood, a growing field of neuroscientists are now studying whether meditation--and the mindfulness that results from it--can counteract what happens to our minds because of stress, trauma and constant distraction. The research has fueled the rapid growth of MBSR and other mindfulness programs inside corporations and public institutions.

Educators are turning to mindfulness with increasing frequency--perhaps a good thing, considering how digital technology is splitting kids' attention spans too. (The average American teen sends and receives more than 3,000 text messages a month.) A Bay Area--based program called Mindful Schools offers online mindfulness training to teachers, instructing them in how to equip children to concentrate in classrooms and deal with stress.

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