



Mindfulness Tip of the Week – One Thing at a Time
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When I first began embracing a mindfulness practice, I was working as a clinical social worker at San Francisco General Hospital. To be more specific, I worked in a double wide trailer on the grounds of the hospital with about 30 other employees including a MD, a psychiatric NP, and a psychiatrist. It was my job to divert people from the emergency room to our little trailer so they would learn to use primary care rather than emergency care when they had a need. The work was intense and the working conditions were nearly intolerable. I shared an office with two other social workers and I could not push my chair back to stand up without asking one of them to move.

I would get crisis calls and pages throughout the day with varying levels of severity. I walked the streets of the Tenderloin alone and navigated the wings of the hospital, advocating for my clients to be seen and respected. I witnessed medical emergencies and often had to manage psychiatric emergencies as I was supporting clients in finding and maintaining permanent housing.

At first, I became overwhelmed and felt ineffective at my job. I was constantly multi-tasking, a skill I had used in other jobs, but at this job, it wasn't working. My supervisor encouraged me to seek out mindfulness training. I attended a daylong seminar that ended up being one of the most influential training sessions of my career.

However, throughout the day, I was confused, angry and sardonic about the whole thing. I was offended that someone would be suggesting that my extremely stressful and important job could be influenced by learning to eat a raisin slowly and mindfully. I was edgy and agitated. I participated anyway and decided to apply some of the exercises when I returned to work.

It felt counter-intuitive to focus on one thing at a time when I had 5 to 20 crises all happening at once. I made the assumption that practicing focusing on one thing at a time would help reduce my stress and that was the goal. So I committed to changing my approach by using mindfulness techniques as often as I thought of it. What I didn't expect was that I would become more efficient and effective at my job. Significantly.

After a few months, I noticed improvements in my performance, reduction in my stress levels, and most thrilling: I enjoyed my work and my life more fully.

Research supports the notion that when we slow down and focus on one thing at a time, we get more done and we also tend to have an increase in satisfaction. In a setting like ours, it is tempting to multi-task. Some of you might believe that if you don't, you will not get your

work completed. I invite you to practice a mindfulness approach for a week to see how it changes your relationship with your busy schedule.

HOW?

Begin at home. Pick one or two tasks like taking a shower, washing the dishes, or eating and practice fully engaging in the present moment by observing the experience in all its detail.

Slow down

Be deliberate

Put space between each next task

Breathe more intently during that space

Savor the moment

While washing the dishes, notice the temperature of the water, watch the bubbles form, take a moment to smell the soap, observe the texture of the sponge.

While showering, focus on showering, not on your "to do" list.

Do nothing while eating except eat. Think about where the food came from. Slow down your bites and notice the taste of each item to its fullest. Check in frequently to notice if you are still hungry or if you are satisfied. Notice the difference between hunger pangs and cravings that are coming more from your mouth than your belly.

Once you have a sense of mindfulness presence, start to apply that approach to your tasks at work. Apply full focus to whatever is at hand. Move on to the next one and apply full focus there and so on. Engage your 5 senses as often as you think of it. Keep a smooth rock on your desk so you can hold it while you take 3 breaths. Focus on the soles of your feet while you are walking in the hallways.

Working with a computer screen and a patient in the room makes this whole --- do one thing at a time--- a challenging endeavor. You may find that if you practice mindfulness throughout the day, even when you are faced with multi-tasking, your attention is sharper and you are more relaxed.

"Smile, breathe and go slowly." - Thich Nhat Hanh, Zen Buddhist monk