

How to stop waking at 3am thinking about work

By Theresa Baw,¹ 19 June 2018

Meditation and mindfulness are now widely recognised as important for professionals to practice. Practising mindfulness has been shown to improve focus, clarity, and creative problem solving, while reducing stress and anxiety. Mindfulness is cultivated through meditation. It is no wonder that an increasing number of organisations such as Google, Accenture, Goldman Sachs, the UK Parliament; the US military; and numerous chambers at the UK Bar are providing mindfulness meditation courses for their members and employees. In October 2017, the UK hosted the first summit on mindfulness, with politicians from 15 countries meditating in the House of Commons.

The effectiveness of meditation has been known for millennia. Mindfulness meditation³ originates from Buddhist teachings 2,600 years ago, which have been secularised in the west in the last 40 years by figures such as Jon Kabat-Zinn at the University of Massachusetts Medical School,⁴ and researchers at top universities including Harvard, Stanford, Oxford & Cambridge. Meditation and mindfulness are not predicated on any religious path, and are practised by people of all faiths. Their benefits are now supported by scientific evidence.

Michelle Yu, a Reader at the NSW Bar who began a mindfulness meditation practice earlier this year, said that she has found meditation has helped her – instead of dwelling on a bad day in Court and ruminating over what happened, she can more easily accept it, acknowledge that it is in the past, and shift her attention to what needs to be done now.

What is mindfulness meditation?

The term “monkey mind” is often used to describe how our busy minds distract us from the immediate experience; we are usually too absorbed in our thoughts to be truly present. Especially in this digital-age of smartphones and social media, we are overwhelmed by stimuli. It takes effort for our mind to settle into stillness for even the briefest of time. Many of our partners will comment that we are not ‘listening’, which in truth means we are present but our mind is elsewhere, often churning through what went wrong that day, or what is to come tomorrow.



“The faculty of bringing back a wandering attention over and over again is the very root of judgment, character and will. ... an education which should improve this faculty would be the education par excellence.”

William James² in Principles of Psychology published in 1890.

‘Mindfulness changes the brain, and it does so in ways that anyone working in today’s business environment, and certainly every leader, should know about.’

Harvard Business Review, 2015

Mindfulness meditation is easy to explain but often people doubt whether they are doing it properly due to the tendency of the mind to wander while meditating. Put simply, there are two parts to mindfulness meditation. Firstly, it is consciously focussing on the breath. Whenever your mind wanders off you bring your attention back again to the breath. Secondly, as your mind becomes more settled and your attention is drawn to different sensations in the body, or external sounds, or images or thoughts that arise in the mind, you observe that experience and then return your focus to the breath.

By following your breath you are also tracking your attention. Each time you bring your attention back to the breath, you bring your

mind back to the present moment instead of all the thoughts that are otherwise trying to crowd into your mind.

Each time you catch your mind being lost in thoughts or feelings and bring it back to the breath, you have stopped being carried away by the content of your thoughts or feelings and come back to the direct experience.

Nick Poynder, a barrister at the NSW Bar for more than 20 years, does a weekday meditation practice of at least 10 minutes each morning. He says that meditation literally takes the weight off his mind and gives it a rest.

Why do meditation?

Neuroplasticity is the lifelong capacity of the brain to create new connections and cells in response to our behaviours and environment. So it is no surprise that there has been scientific evidence that practising various forms of meditation consistently over time has the power to transform us not only in the moment, but in more profound, lasting ways.

a) Meditation Increases Focus and Concentration

In this digital world, the phenomenon of multi-tasking has become a catch phrase. But research shows that the brain does not “multi-task” but rather switches rapidly from one task to the other. Following every switch, when our attention returns to the original task, its strength has been diminished and it takes several minutes to ramp up again to full concentration. Since mindfulness meditation is a practice of attention training, it is no surprise that it has been shown to increase focus and concentration. Studies have shown that mindfulness strengthens the brain’s ability to focus on one thing and ignore distractions, and to sustain that attention over time.⁵

b) Meditation Enhances our Alertness and Clarity

Meditation has also been shown to help combat habituation—the tendency to stop paying attention to new information in our

environment. By noticing the details of the experience, the sights, sounds, tastes and sensations that we would otherwise habituate, mindfulness transforms the familiar into the fresh and intriguing. We notice small or rapid shifts in what we experience.⁶ As we become more alert we enhance our creativity and problem-solving ability.

c) *Meditation Improves our Resiliency to Stress*

According to neuroscience the amygdala, the more primitive part of our brain, triggers the freeze-fight-or-flight response, while the prefrontal cortex, a relatively recent part of our brain, manages our emotional reactivity. Neuroscientists know that the stronger the connectivity between the amygdala and the prefrontal cortex in the brain, the less a person will be hijacked by emotional downs and ups.⁷

Meditation helps us to be less reactive to stressors and to recover better from stress when we experience it. The more hours of practice, the more quickly the amygdala recovers from the distress.⁸ It means that resilience can be learned and strengthened. In our profession this can be particularly useful when vicarious trauma can be a cumulatively significant but a hidden source of stress.

Nick Poynder acknowledges that a profound benefit of meditation for him is to develop and increase resilience. By focussing on returning to the present moment, he says that it allows him to take his mind off the stressor even if it is for just a split second. Often that's just enough time to stop being spun off into a neurotic chain reaction.

d) *Meditation Helps us to Respond rather than Automatically React*

When we are paying attention to the present moment, and cultivating a self-awareness, it is an opportunity to change how we perceive the world. Meditation gives you the tools to train your mind to reduce negative habits or perceptions, and frees up your mind to respond with equanimity towards yourself and in relation to the world around you.

For example, if you are driving to work and someone cuts you off. What is your first reaction? Do you experience anger? Do you end up mulling over the event and your reaction for the rest of the day? That single event can have a long-term effect on how you react the next time you are stressed, and every time after that.⁹

With meditation, you have the opportunity to become aware of this pattern and

condition yourself to respond differently rather than react on autopilot. You can catch yourself in the heat of the moment or even before you flip off the other driver. You learn to let go of negative thoughts and feelings. Mindfulness enables you to respond to circumstances skilfully without judgment or reactivity, even when someone cuts you off while driving.

In my own experience, I have caught myself appearing in Court as my emotions rise, my heart is pounding, my mind is racing at a hundred miles an hour, and I am about to say something that I will later regret. At that point, I have paused and realised that I seem to be over-reacting and there may be a better way to deal with the situation.



How and Where do you Meditate?

Mindfulness meditation is not a panacea, it is one of the many tools to wellbeing. It cannot guarantee that you will stop waking up at 3am thinking about your next day in Court, but incorporating mindfulness meditation, just like getting enough sleep, eating healthy, and doing regular exercise, can bring balance into your life.

Mindfulness is completely experiential. It is not effective if you only theoretically know it, read about it or hear about it. It is through the practice of *doing* mindfulness meditation that the mind can be trained.

The beauty and simplicity of meditation is that you do not need any equipment. All that is required is a quiet space and a few minutes each day. You do not need to sit cross-legged on the floor - sit however you feel most comfortable, preferably in a quiet place where you will not be interrupted. You can start with 10 minutes or even commit to 5 minutes a day. Consistency is the key at the beginning, and preferably at a regular time and space. That way you can establish a habit, just like brushing your teeth. Also important is to practise over a decent period of time as the benefits are usually incremental, so give yourself a reasonable chance. You will find that at first you might

only last 20 seconds before you realise your mind has wandered off and you need to bring your focus back to the present. Slowly, with practice, you will increase the amount of time you are free of the busy thoughts that otherwise occupy your day. The longer you maintain that focus the calmer you will feel, both immediately after the session and throughout the day.

These days there are many apps on mindfulness meditation that provide guided meditations and enable you to do it in your own time, including: *The Mindfulness App*; *Headspace*; *Calm*; *Insight Timer*; *10% Happier*; and *Smiling Mind*. Ingmar Taylor SC uses a device that monitors the effectiveness of his meditation, called Inner Balance by HeartMath. He finds that his sessions are more effective when he has done high intensity exercise the day before.

Chris O'Donnell SC, who has started mindfulness meditation this year says that in his experience, learning from a meditation teacher has enabled him to develop a proper technique and helped him to stick to the practice. In the past, he had tried to meditate on his own but it felt like he was trying to learn to drive a car on his own. Now, in addition to his daily individual practice, he benefits from attending a

weekly group guided meditation.

You are welcome to join other meditating barristers at a weekly guided group session on *Wednesdays from 1.15pm to 2pm at Frederick Jordan Chambers*. They are free drop-in mindfulness meditation classes led by the writer. Or if you would like more information or have any questions on mindfulness meditation, you can email the writer at tbaw@ffc.net.au.

END NOTES

- 1 The writer was called to the Bar more than ten years ago and has been practising mindfulness meditation since 2001.
- 2 William James was an American philosopher and psychologist, and the first educator to offer a psychology course in the United States.
- 3 also called insight meditation or vipassana meditation.
- 4 Founder of Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction, a program that incorporates mindfulness to assist people with pain and a range of conditions in a hospital setting.
- 5 Daniel Goleman and Richard Davidson, *Altered Traits: Science Reveals How Meditation Changes Your Mind, Brain and Body*, Avery 2017.
- 6 Daniel Goleman and Richard Davidson, *Altered Traits: Science Reveals How Meditation Changes Your Mind, Brain and Body*, Avery 2017.
- 7 Daniel Goleman and Richard Davidson, *Altered Traits: Science Reveals How Meditation Changes Your Mind, Brain and Body*, Avery 2017.
- 8 Daniel Goleman and Richard Davidson, *Altered Traits: Science Reveals How Meditation Changes Your Mind, Brain and Body*, Avery 2017.
- 9 David R. Vago Ph.D., 'The Brain's Response to Meditation', *Psychology Today*, posted 15 July 2015.