

Out of Focus: How Being Less Focused (and More Aware) Pays Off



By Glenn Mott

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Mindfulness, like its complement *gratitude*, has been much hyped—with good reason. Our underlying mindset and conditioning are nearly invisible to most of us; by itself, the conscious mind is insufficient to get at the deeper mindset. Nonjudgmental, present-moment awareness (aka mindfulness meditation) has been shown to change attitudes, emotional responses, and habitual patterns of thought. A meditation practice, without the goal to do something more, has the effect of waking up the unconscious mind, where it becomes accessible, pliant to transformation, and insightful.

One Zen master, in a paradoxical Zen master way, described meditation as, “Think, not thinking.” In other words, notice the thought, without pursuing it. Most of the time our academic and professional training teaches us to reason using a predetermined set of tools or frameworks that guide the mind toward the professionalization of thought. To open one’s self to intuitive thought can be fearfully uncharted territory for some risk professionals. This prescription to stop thinking and meditate may sound to some ears like an ersatz Zen koan: find focus, by being less focused. To frame it another, purely pragmatic way: the brain can learn how to ignore distractions through a practice of being less focused, making you more imaginative, present, and productively focused.

Between Focus and Distraction, is Awareness

Structural transformation is a challenge for organizations, as much as for the people who run them, and usually can’t be accomplished by reason alone. Those who espouse mindfulness through a regular practice of meditation (spontaneous journaling, quiet sitting, or walking meditation—there are a range of possible mediation techniques) may find it helps quiet the mind enough to cultivate emotional intelligence, and a capacity to lead others with more compassion. This can be a beneficial and effective group practice, as well, helping individuals alleviate stress and organizations to diminish fatigue, work-related anxiety, and prevent employee or volunteer burnout.

For the nonprofit risk leader who follows methodical frameworks for problem-solving, data collection, and metrics, cultivating mindfulness may seem like an optional exercise—least of all a critical risk management practice. If so, look around the room at your next meeting or group seminar as colleagues check their feeds, text, and email. Or consider the energy put into managing the risk associated with distracted driving. Always-in-

hand devices make us all too reachable to others, and unknown to ourselves in the present. Attention deficits go beyond people with diagnosable ADHD, and have spread to the population as a whole. Linda Stone, a former Apple and Microsoft executive has called this phenomenon “continuous partial attention,” an “always-on” behavior that stokes “an artificial sense of constant crisis.”

In contrast to multitasking—shuffling between tasks that don’t require much cognitive processing—continuous partial attention is motivated by fear; namely, the desire not to miss anything. This frenzied state of consumption (encouraged by online media) compromises the mind’s ability to reflect, absorb new information, make clear decisions, and think creatively. Mindfulness, by contrast, is a critical risk management practice.

Make Your Risk Mantra Real

Adept devotees of meditation will be well-versed in the benefits of their practice, including:

- increased focus, clarity, and attention
- reduced stress and anxiety throughout the day
- relaxation, relief from fatigue, and improved sense of well being
- positive shifts in temperament and self-control
- enhanced self-awareness and compassion

If you’re skeptical, you’ve every right to be. Mindfulness-chic is a billion-dollar industry full of competing interests. Don’t let a bias prevent your team from finding legitimate resources. Your entire organization doesn’t need to sit Zazen (the preferred mode of Soto Zen practitioners) or take up Vedic meditation. Meditation can be done by anyone most anywhere.

There are any number of meditation practices and resources for education on each, from wellness nonprofits, and online or university extension courses, to the David Lynch Foundation, and local Zen Centers across the country. There are also the dozens, if not hundreds of mindfulness apps—heavy with irony, since they perpetuate screen time addictions to devices that cause the very stress and anxiety you are trying to escape. Some may find them useful for a guided pre-flight breathing exercise. None of these resources will be difficult to find with a search, and you’ll be able to choose what’s best for your particular needs.

For a quick introduction to meditation that you can practice on your own (some in as little as three minutes) stream or download the [free guided meditations](#) recorded by Diana Winston, Director of Education at UCLA’s Mindful Awareness Research Center.

For more insights on understanding the neuroscience involved in risk management practices for your nonprofit, see Melanie Lockwood Herman’s RISK eNews articles: [How Neuroscience and Risk Management Link to Fear and Memory](#); and [Distraction & Decision Fatigue are Brain Drain for Risk Champions](#).

Glenn Mott is a Senior Consultant for NRMC.

Contact the Nonprofit Risk Management Center at info@nonprofitrisk.org or 703.777.3504 to share your insights about waking up the unconscious mind or learn more about NRMC services.