



Icahn
School of
Medicine at
**Mount
Sinai**

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OCCUPATIONAL

HealthWATCH

Division of **Occupational & Environmental** Medicine

Reducing Stress in the Workplace

Numerous studies show that job stress is a major type of stress for American adults and that it has escalated progressively during the past few decades. Increased levels of job stress, as assessed by the perception of having little control but a lot of demands and responsibilities, have been associated with increased rates of heart attack, hypertension, and other physical and mental disorders.¹

Understanding the interconnectedness of the mind and the body, and learning practices to support a healthier response to stress, can serve to decrease the strain on the body from stressful events – whether from work or everyday life. Offering workers the opportunity to learn practices that ultimately alter their response to stressful events can potentially improve worker satisfaction, resulting in decreased absenteeism and improved job retention.

Interventions include:

- **Mindfulness** is a state of present-centered attention and awareness. It involves observing thoughts and feelings without judgment. This is a practice being embraced by corporations, health care institutions, government agencies, schools, and sports teams to develop focus and calm amidst the stressors of daily life. Mindfulness fosters understanding, camaraderie, and respect amongst practitioners.
- **Breath Control Practices**, such as diaphragmatic or belly breathing, have been shown to invoke a relaxation response, a technique first developed in the 1970s at Harvard Medical School by cardiologist Dr. Herbert Benson. This practice can be implemented at any point when a person notices his/her stress level rising.
- **Hatha Yoga** refers to a set of gentle physical exercises (known as asanas or postures), designed to align the body and mind. This practice focuses on postures easily integrated into the workplace to reduce workplace stasis.

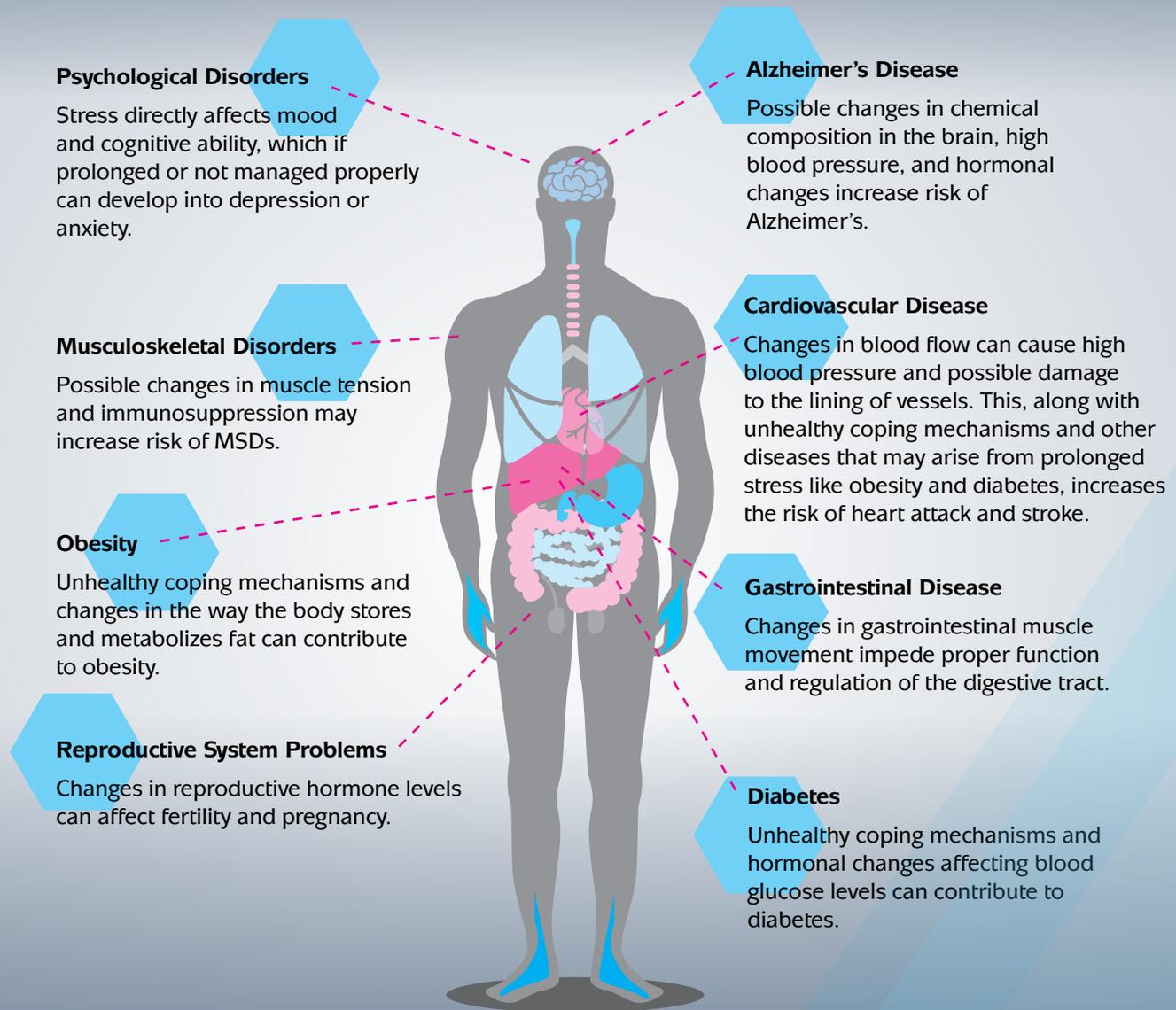


¹ American Institute of Stress

STRESS & its Effect on the Body

Short-term stress is normal, and sometimes even beneficial, in helping us achieve our goals. Health problems occur when stress is prolonged or chronic because the body cannot handle the stress response in the long term.

Stressful situations trigger parts of the brain that help the body re-adjust to the environment to better respond to the stressor. Levels of many hormones, including adrenaline and cortisol, change to activate the body's "flight or fight" response, which temporarily halts or boosts some body functions by redirecting energy.



There are several immediate indicators of stress, such as increased heart rate; increased muscle tension in back, neck or shoulders; mood and cognitive changes; digestive symptoms such as heartburn or stomach pain; and sleep difficulties. Stress also has been implicated in increasing the risk for many chronic diseases. Unhealthy coping mechanisms like smoking, drinking, unhealthy eating, and limited physical activity also contribute and increase the risk for chronic health conditions. Since chronic disease can take a long time to develop and be caused by multiple factors, it is not always clear that stress is a contributing factor.

Potential Stressors in the Workplace



Work tasks

- Whether you are a taxi driver, nurse, or corporate executive, all jobs have stressful moments. Individuals working in high-intensity situations or facing traumatic situations, such as in law enforcement and emergency services, are at particular risk.

Workload and hours

- High workloads, long hours, shift work, or constant traveling can create physical and mental stress and exhaustion if prolonged.

People issues

- Conflicts or disagreements with a supervisor or colleague create stress. Isolation, harassment, and lack of support also can create stress.

Lack of job security

- Job security can provide financial security and peace of mind. Worrying about losing your job, such as during times of restructuring, can lead to anxiety and create stress.

Work environment

- Feeling confident that you work in a healthy and safe environment is important. For example, the existence of physical hazards, too much noise, or improper lighting and ventilation, not only can imperil your physical health but also can impact your emotions.

What is Mindfulness?

Mindfulness is the practice of being in the moment, being aware of your surroundings, your thoughts, and your physical sensations with a nonjudgmental attitude. Mindfulness generally focuses on breathing, body, or sensory awareness. Mindfulness practices help individuals identify sources of stress and offer a way to respond — rather than react — to stressors. While mindfulness may not target the source of stress directly, it manages the feeling of stress in a way that is healthy for the body and helps refocus the mind to better deal with the stressor.

Mindfulness also can improve interpersonal relationships by encouraging compassion toward the self and others. Mindful leaders have been associated with greater satisfaction and more favorable job performance ratings for employees. It has been found that the more mindful the supervisor, the more likely the employee is to engage in good citizenship, such as showing concern toward co-workers and expressing opinions honestly even when others may disagree (Mathias et al, 2014).

Research on mindfulness began in the early 1980s, with exponential growth since 2000. A review of the literature published in the *Journal of Management* (Good et al, 2016) shows that research activity is also surging within organizational science and suggests that mindfulness is related to many aspects of workplace functioning. The reason for this interest is simple and compelling. Mindfulness appears to have broad positive impacts on human functioning (Brown, Ryan, & Creswell, 2007).

Research has shown mindfulness to be an effective antidote to stress and it has proven to be a therapeutic tool when dealing with stress-related medical conditions. Practicing mindfulness activates the “rest and digest” response in the body, counteracting the “fight or flight” response activated by stress. “Rest and digest” slows down the heart rate, relaxes muscles, and conserves energy, reducing the damaging effects of the body’s response to long-term stress.

Mindfulness can help you achieve balance and see situations more clearly. Most of all, mindfulness has been correlated with stress reduction.

IN THE WORKPLACE

Practicing mindfulness at work can help manage and alleviate feelings of stress. It can reduce mental exhaustion and increase job satisfaction, empathy, creativity, and focus.

Leadership abilities, like problem solving and decision making, can be supported by mindfulness practices by increasing clarity of situations.

TECHNIQUES

Mindfulness skills generally fall into three categories:

Breathing Awareness • Body Awareness • Sensory Awareness

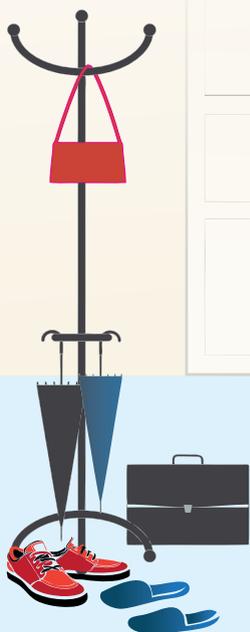
Individual or group mindfulness sessions offered in the workplace can increase productivity and decrease sick days.

Tips For Being Mindful

THROUGHOUT THE DAY

- When you wake up, notice your breath for a few quiet moments and affirm that you are choosing to go to work today.
- Tune into your sensory experience as you prepare to go to work — smelling and tasting the first sip of coffee or feeling the water on your skin in the shower.
- When you leave and return to your home, be “in the moment” when you greet or say good-bye to others, doing so with intentionality.
- During your commute to and from work, be aware of your body — breathe and try to smile. While walking throughout the day, walk mindfully. Don't rush unless you have to.
- Take a moment while you are at work to monitor your body and let go of any tension. Stop for one minute every hour and be aware of your breathing to regroup and recoup.
- Try doing one thing at a time and give it your full attention.
- Take frequent breaks if you can and use them to relax and renew. Step outside, stretch, or sit quietly and follow your breathing.
- Change your environment during lunchtime. Try to spend breaks and lunch with people you are comfortable with, or silently, focusing on the taste of your food.
- Be mindful of your communications with people during the workday and think about how you may improve your interactions.

- At the end of the workday, review what you have accomplished and make a list of what needs to be done tomorrow.
- Think of three positive things that happened during the day and continue to bring them to mind throughout the evening.
- When you return home at the end of your day, immediately remove your shoes and change your clothes as a signal to transition from work to home.



Mindfulness Programs

Mindful Leadership

Successful organizations have leaders at every level, and effective leadership requires clarity, creativity, and balance. Mount Sinai's Mindful Leadership Program helps individuals cultivate these skills and develop self-awareness and resilience — essential traits for optimal decision-making. Trained facilitators lead sessions that teach individuals practical skills that can be applied at work and home. Mindful leadership can change the morale and culture of an organization, instilling values for positive engagement and collaboration.

Program

- Group or individual sessions
- 30-60 minute weekly or monthly sessions
- Flexible scheduling at your preferred location

Curriculum Topics

- Physiology of Stress
- Resistance, Reacting, and Responding as a Leader
- Mindful Listening
- Self-Compassion and Compassion in the Workplace
- Nutrition and Stress
- Mindful Movement
- Equanimity and Balance



8-Week Workshop for Employees

An 8-week program designed to help individuals incorporate mindfulness into their workplace and daily life.

Mindfulness Group Sessions

Mount Sinai Community. A group of experienced mindfulness teachers provides a self-care opportunity for all members of the Mount Sinai community to learn and practice simple mindfulness meditation techniques. Drop-in Sessions: Friday, 12:30-1:30 p.m.

WTC Health Program. Mindfulness meetings are open to 9/11 responders who receive their care at Mount Sinai. First Wednesday of each month, 6:30-8:30 p.m.

To learn more or register, contact mickie.brown@mssm.edu



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Work Environment Evaluations

Occupational health specialists at Mount Sinai can assist employers with identifying aspects of the work environment and organization that may be sources of stress and help prioritize interventions.

888.702.0630

**For more information about these programs,
contact the Mount Sinai Selikoff Centers for Occupational Health.**

Message from the Director



Roberto Lucchini, MD

Director
Division of Occupational and
Environmental Medicine

Professor
Department of Environmental Medicine
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Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai

At Mount Sinai, we believe that our emotional well-being is deeply connected to our physical health. We know that we cannot get rid of all the stressors in our lives, but we can better manage stressful situations by understanding how the mind and body are interconnected and have ready the necessary tools to reduce stress, improve our outlook, and protect our whole well-being.

Mindfulness at Mount Sinai is our approach. Under the leadership of Mickie Brown, RN, HN-BC, Clinical Manager for Education, Mindfulness, and Patient Well-Being at the Selikoff Centers for Occupational Health, we have developed programs for Sinai faculty and leadership teams, as well as our patients in the World Trade Center Health Program, many of whom have suffered from anxiety, PTSD, and other mental health disorders.

In this newsletter, we introduce the concept of mindfulness and explore how it can be incorporated into daily life. We invite interested individuals to reach out to us to discuss bringing the curriculum into their workplace for an introductory workshop or more structured curriculum. Drop-in sessions are also available at Mount Sinai's Upper East Side campus in Manhattan.

Meet Our Mindfulness Educator



Mickie Brown, RN, HN-BC

Clinical Manager for Education,
Mindfulness, and Patient Well-Being
Mount Sinai Selikoff Centers
for Occupational Health

Mickie Brown, RN, HN-BC, is Clinical Manager for Education, Mindfulness, and Patient Well-Being at the Manhattan clinical center for the Mount Sinai Selikoff Centers for Occupational Health, a World Trade Center Health Program Clinical Center of Excellence. She has provided care to 9/11 workers and volunteers since she joined Mount Sinai in 2005, and is dedicated to improving the health and well-being of her patients through health education and innovative direct patient care. In addition to her clinical work, Ms. Brown participates in research initiatives at the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai,

including as principal investigator of a 2008 study to improve health outcomes of asthmatic World Trade Center Health Program patients using stress reduction strategies.

Ms. Brown currently teaches mindfulness to World Trade Center responders at the World Trade Center Clinical Center of Excellence at Mount Sinai, as well as at Mount Sinai Corporate Headquarters and to employees at The Mount Sinai Hospital. In addition, Ms. Brown has designed and implemented programs for Internal Medicine interns and Hematology-Oncology Fellows at Mount Sinai Hospital.

She is a holistic nurse and qualified MBSR facilitator by The Center for Mindfulness at University of Massachusetts Medical School and a certified facilitator in mind-body skills by the Center for Mind-Body Medicine, as well as trained in Mindful Leadership at the Institute for Mindful Leadership.

Ms. Brown is also a member of the American Holistic Nurses Association and holds a nursing degree from the Edmonton General Hospital School of Nursing in Alberta, Canada.



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