

A photograph of a room with a patterned rug and cushions. The rug is blue and white with intricate floral and geometric patterns. There are two gold-colored patterned cushions on the rug. The background wall is light green with vertical stripes. The floor is made of light-colored wooden planks.

MINDFULLY AWARE

Mindfulness training is quickly becoming recognized as an international phenomenon for its potency to help practitioners reduce stress. [Julian Hwang](#) talks to Institute members to find out how this form of meditation benefits them

Photography by Anthony Tung

Amid a cosy room filled to the brim with folders, filing cabinets and various office essentials, Edward Lau finds inner peace and relaxation when he practises mindfulness meditation. “When I do standing meditation, I hold my arms out and bend them until they are roughly chest level,” says Lau, the Founder of Mindfulness in Biz. “Whether I’m standing, sitting or even walking, meditation helps me smile and promotes happiness.”

Apart from providing financial consulting and corporate strategic planning services, Lau and his non-governmental organization actively promotes the concept and integration of mindfulness to a spectrum of industries in Hong Kong such as accounting firms, investment banks and information technology firms. “Jon Kabat-Zinn, the Founder of Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction, defines mindfulness as awareness that arises when one purposefully pays attention to someone or something in the present moment and without judgment,” Lau explains.

For Institute members like Lau, practising mindfulness meditation has become an integral part of their daily routine, not just because it alleviates stress from life and work, but because it helps them become more aware of their body, mind and surrounding environment.

To Lau, staying in the present allows him to focus on an immediate issue without distraction. “Mindfulness is also about taking a neutral

Kenny Cheng,
Financial
Controller at
Ovation Toys
Company

stance when perceiving an issue,” he says. “When confronted with a mistake or problem, mindfulness allows you to consider the options available without panic or despair. Alternatively, when faced with success, you are able to avoid boasting or gloating.”

Prior to establishing Mindfulness in Biz, Lau worked in various industries including advertising, real estate and information technology. During his time as the chief financial officer of a listed information technology company in Hong Kong, Lau came to the sudden realization that many workers, regardless of industry, suffered from prolonged periods of stress and pressure. As a result, he notes, the communication between people had deteriorated to become very incentive-driven. “I noticed it was becoming a problem that affected myself, too,” recalls Lau. “My mind would be running all the time at night and getting good sleep was very difficult.”

Lau sought to learn from the different types of meditation, including Buddhism, Confucianism and Taoism, and discovered the benefits of mindfulness. “The mind and body are linked,” he says. “If your mind is always stressed out, your body will be too. It’s one of the reasons why many people are chronically tired.” Lau began

applying what he learned and found that *Baduanjin* (八段錦) in the mornings and *Nidan* meditation (內丹功法) in the evenings were to his liking. *Baduanjin* is a form of Chinese qigong attributed to maintaining health, whereas *Nidan* is a form of ancient seated meditation used to attain tranquility, and both are well-known for helping the practitioner to balance the body and mind throughout the day. “There’s no one-size-fit-all type of meditation,” he explains. “What works for one person may not work for the next, so it’s important to try out the different techniques offered by the various schools of meditation to find what works for you.”

Recharging the mind and body

When asked about how to maintain focus while meditating, Kenny Cheng says, “Find a tangible object like an apple and place it on a desk, then sit down and watch that object for a minute. Try and focus on it and do nothing else.” Exactly one minute later, she says, “You’ll notice that your mind might have wandered off or your concentration broke at some points.”

Whether it’s a subconscious reaction to stretch your fingers or the sudden sound of a bird chirping outside, these circumstances indicate that focus on the object is partially lost. But



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to Cheng, Financial Controller at Ovation Toys Company and an Institute member, mindfulness meditation is not about shutting out the world around you, but being aware of what is taking place around you in daily life.

In 2007, before Cheng took up mindfulness meditation, she discovered an uncomfortable growth in

her nose. Neither western nor Chinese doctors could clarify what the growth was, and she lived with the discomfort for more than five years. A dermatologist and her family doctor even suggested it could be cancer and recommended taking a sample. Cheng thought long about the procedure, but decided to put it off. Then one day, someone

said something that made her extremely angry. “My nose got extremely swollen afterwards,” she recalls. “I got really frustrated and went ahead with the operation.” The test results came back negative and the question remained.

“One of my friends said that the growth might have been due to stress and suggested that I try

Edward Lau,
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meditation,” she says. At the time, she was a general manager for another toy company in Hong Kong, bearing many daily responsibilities. Not having anything to lose, Cheng attended a weekend class at an NGO meditation centre during 2011’s Mid-Autumn Festival holiday. “I went in thinking meditation was just about sitting still and trying not to fall asleep, but things turned out very differently than what I imagined,” Cheng says. “I learned that meditation is something that can be accomplished anytime, anywhere, even when you are downtown, and not just when you are sitting on a cushion.”

She learned about the concept of mindfulness and awareness, and after practising meditation for a while, she began to find balance in her life – not just in workload management, but in her overall emotions as well. “I found myself happier and not so easily stressed by the loads of paperwork that I had to do, and the growth and the accompanying swelling of my nose went away too!”

A year later, Cheng left the toy company after finding a successor to replace her. With plans for retiring from work, she began to volunteer as a practising leader at the meditation centre. “But I

began to miss work after 10 months, so I also do part-time work four days a week for Ovation Toys now,” she says.

Cheng enjoys starting her mornings with mindfulness meditation together with her husband, where they sit cross-legged on a cushioned mat for approximately 30 minutes per session to relax, as well as hone and recognize their awareness. “A fresh and efficient day begins after meditation, and it’s like recharging your mobile phone,” she says. “You need to take care of your battery or else your phone’s performance will not be optimized.”



The good kind of distraction

To some people curious about, but not experienced with, mindfulness, Kabat-Zinn’s definitions can be difficult to connect with. Tony Dickel, the Country Director of the Potential Project in Hong Kong and China, expands on what Kabat-Zinn says: “It’s also to be aware, moment-by-moment of our underlying motivations, preferences, goals, strengths and other resources at the same time, so that we can make a conscious adjustment in service of our ‘true authentic goals.’”

Dickel, an associate of the Institute of Chartered Accountants in England and Wales, strives to create a more effective and compassionate world of work through mindfulness meditation programmes specifically designed for the busy workplace. “Research shows that about 50 percent of the time, our attention is distracted involuntarily from our tasks without our awareness,” he says. “Formal mindfulness meditation practices (Dickel calls this the ‘mental gymnasium’) change our brains so that we can reclaim some lost attention. The practice simply involves the person’s body and mind simultaneously taking on three qualities.” These are:

1. *Stability*, which involves the body being grounded and balanced with an upright seated posture, the back straight and the head balanced. It’s best done in a self-supporting posture, not leaning on something, with the feet flat on the floor and the hands resting comfortably on the thighs.
2. *A deep level of relaxation*, working from the head down to the toes, progressively being aware of any tension, and then back up. The process should take place naturally without any effort, where Dickel describes this as “surrendering your muscles to gravity.”
3. *Clarity*, also referred to as a posture of vigilance or alertness, relates to breathing management to maintain relaxation while preventing the mind from wandering. The in-breath is dedicated to sharpening focus, while the out-breath is where increasing relaxation occurs. The two phases transition back and forth like a “ratchet joint on a machine.”

To optimize mental effectiveness, this state of being should be applied frequently, even when outside the “mental gymnasium”, according to Dickel. During formal practice, and as much as possible during the day, take notice of any physical impulses, such as wanting to yawn or scratch an itch, but without reacting to it. By noticing these distractions and then bringing attention back to the breath, people can realize how their current state is either enabling or interfering with their “true authentic goals”, and then determine if change is necessary. Additionally, scientific research also shows that new connections are being formed or strengthened within the brain’s neural circuitry of attention, impulse control, emotional awareness and regulation. The end result allows the practitioner to follow the “two rules of mental effectiveness”: focusing on what you choose and choosing your focuses carefully.