

‘An engaging and practical guide to reducing stress,  
transcending setbacks and enhancing performance at work.’  
**Arianna Huffington**, Editor-in-Chief of The Huffington Post  
and Author of *The Sleep Revolution*

# working with mindfulness



keeping  
**CALM AND FOCUSED**  
to get the  
job done

Dr Michael Sinclair  
and Josie Seydel

## Praise for *Working with Mindfulness*

‘The delightfully accessible style of this book reveals profound and transformative truths. It will guide you in direct mindfulness practices, while also skilfully addressing important areas such as ethics at work and scientific evidence for mindfulness. Michael and Josie manage to inspire without intimidating, and to teach without preaching, in their guide for waking up at work.’

**Martin Aylward, Founding Teacher,  
MindfulnessTrainingInstitute.com**

‘Practical, engaging, and fun to read, this book is a comprehensive guide to the benefits of mindfulness at work.’

**Ruth Baer, Professor of Psychology, University of Kentucky**

‘Perfectly shows how busy workers can easily use mindfulness skills, in order to improve their health and productivity. Mindfulness can sometimes seem otherworldly, but this book shows how people can easily use and apply these key skills without interrupting the demands of their daily lives.’

**Frank W. Bond, Ph.D., Professor of Psychology and Management,  
Director of the Institute of Management Studies,  
Goldsmiths, University of London**

‘*Working with Mindfulness* is a practical guide for working people about how to reduce individual stress by doing a number of simple exercises while at work. It is well written, simple to follow and can make a difference to you and your colleagues to cope with pressures of the modern workplace.’

**Professor Sir Cary Cooper, Manchester Business School,  
University of Manchester**

Hubris blinds us to an inner fear of being seen for ‘what we truly believe we are’ (read in this case: vulnerable, unlovable, not good enough) and sadly often makes most of us look and act like total prats. If you lack confidence, on the other hand (which, remember, is every one of us at some time or another), this can sometimes be expressed in ways which are judged by ourselves or others as a ‘weakness’, leaving us feeling very exposed and uncomfortable. We can feel as if, contrary to our rhino-friends, we ‘have no skin’. If this shows up for you, then the reaction is generally one of withdrawal of some kind, perhaps defensiveness, self-deprecation or just wanting to hide. We surely all have stories of our own crushing embarrassments, the inner hurts which we carry about and hope no one else will discover unless we are either very drunk or very trusting.

Underconfidence, either shown through pleasing others, arrogance or belittling yourself/others, does not inspire trust from others, certainly in the long term, and can be a cause of great stress. Let’s give some examples:

Alicia works at Coffee-Bean-Tastic in the accounts team and is about to have her annual appraisal. She has been working in the job for the past year, after completing her accountancy exams. She has worked hard, but still feels very junior when comparing herself with her more experienced co-workers. At her meeting she is actually up for a promotion, which she is not aware of. These are her possible answers to ‘how do you feel you are getting on at Coffee-Bean-Tastic?’ and the associated body language/ behaviours:

- 1 She speaks quietly, making poor eye contact. She says that she is well aware that she is not as good as the rest of her team and she is working really hard, but still feels she doesn’t know that much and she’s very sorry because she doesn’t want to be letting everyone down and taking up too much of your time. She stops talking and looks towards the door.
- 2 She is fidgeting and speaks very fast. She tells you that she has really liked working with her team and is learning loads of new things on the job and is getting very interested in the company. She then goes on to tell you that she has Googled the senior staff members and noticed that they have travelled frequently to Costa Rica and that the carbon footprint must be pretty large, and the coffee isn’t actually fair trade and she buys her coffee from Green Beans and actually she already had 17 cups of it before the appraisal and isn’t that funny?
- 3 She begins to talk, loudly, before you have finished asking the question. She tells you how passionate she is, that she will put in 110 per cent to any task given her. She is glad you are having this appraisal as she thinks she must be up for promotion after a year of, frankly, doing all the hard work. It is probably time they took on someone else to do the menial jobs and let her get on with something

more important, because frankly, with results like hers she is simply wasted in her current role and everyone knows it. She is happy to step on anyone who gets in her way to achieving success.

Having read the above examples, consider your answers to the following questions:

- ▶ Which 'Alicia' would you give the promotion to?
- ▶ Maybe you can recognise some of your own qualities and expressions of underconfidence from these examples?
- ▶ Which of these do you think seems more or less like you?
- ▶ What messages are you transmitting at work by your own behaviours, body language, etc.?
- ▶ Perhaps you are drawn to traits similar or different from yours?
- ▶ Can you recognise your aversion to or desire for a particular way of being, or combination of contradictions?

It can be helpful to know how we are drawn into our own 'self-stories' and our narratives about ourselves (with no claim on what is right/wrong/true/untrue/real/fantasy) and how this can shape our decisions and behaviours. We are then able to begin to see the influence of these limited views upon our working environment and how they continue to play out a particular 'script' we might have purposefully or accidentally set for ourselves of 'how I must be'. This is usually with some intent of controlling life's outcomes, protecting ourselves from feeling anxious, overwhelmed, ashamed or vulnerable. As we work with mindfulness further, we can begin to see that our way of being and our choices at work are not inevitable eventualities; we are actually free, at any time, to try something different and look at things afresh. The first step to this process is to make some careful observations.

## The underconfidence trap

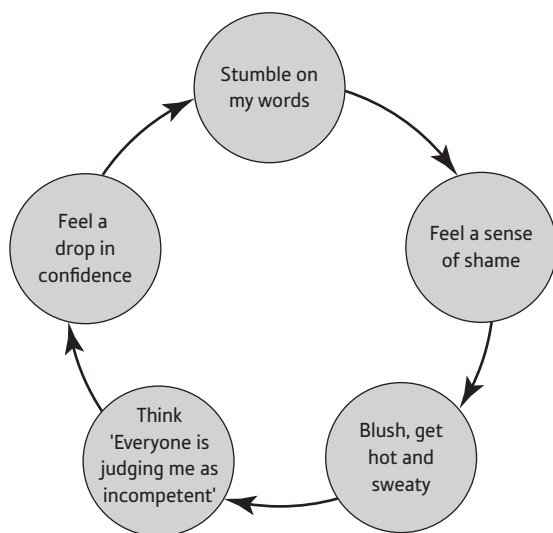
Our lack of faith, fear of disgrace and underconfidence in ourselves is transmitted and communicated to others via an array of behaviours such as:

- ▶ going blank or forgetting what we are saying;
- ▶ stuttering or stumbling over words ('um, your err, umm');
- ▶ failing to speak up for ourselves;
- ▶ blushing, sweating, shaking, etc.;
- ▶ saying 'silly', 'inappropriate' or 'unkind' things;
- ▶ talking too fast, too quietly or mumbling;

## WORKING WITH MINDFULNESS

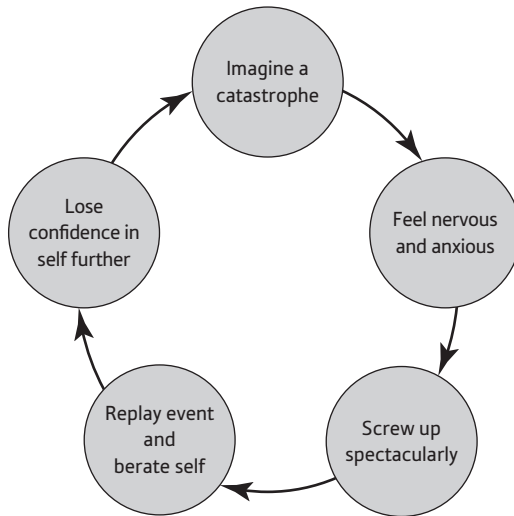
- ▶ openly denigrating or degrading ourselves/others, or letting others do this;
- ▶ participating in activities which go against our values or ethics;
- ▶ compensating for our lack of confidence by drinking, taking drugs, talking too loudly or talking over others;
- ▶ not listening properly;
- ▶ rigidly holding on to our views and having to prove that we are right;
- ▶ fiddling with things (pens, papers, hair, your...err...um);
- ▶ rushing through a task carelessly;
- ▶ checking (and re-checking) work for reassurance;
- ▶ taking on more and more work;
- ▶ showing off about ourselves;
- ▶ being overly apologetic;
- ▶ our own unique ways.

These behaviours and self-judgements tend to compound themselves into vicious cycles and may look a bit like this when they show up:



Of course, many of us also add to the joy induced by this delightful list of mishaps by imagining them all for hours/days/weeks or maybe even months beforehand, rehearsing all our potential disasters or our defining career moments (and as we know from Chapter 2 we do love a bit of drama) and totally upping the emotional ante. We have

already discussed the adrenaline addiction and its poor partnership with rational decision-making, and here we see it in action again. Then we make a ballsup somehow and spend the next hours/days/weeks or maybe even months replaying the carnage in our minds and giving ourselves a bollocking for everything we should have done differently. Which then might look something like this:



Even if this is not our own particular brand of ‘messing up’, we can surely recognise plenty of times in our work where we have felt overwhelmed by a situation and unable to function well under the pressure. If we have enough resilience, we might be able to turn the lemons into lemonade; however, sometimes we just get mindlessly reactive to a situation and end up in fight (be arrogant, complain, bully or attack) or flight (withdraw, resign or self-sabotage) mode. Take the case of Peter, for example:

### Peter

With a strong but hidden sense of vulnerability, Peter worked as a Partner in a large private equity firm. He was driven by deep fears of failure and rejection and his perfectionist ways were evident for all to see. He tended not to delegate work to his team as they were ‘just incompetent wastes of space’. His fellow partners were annoying time wasters too, who didn’t have the first clue about how to run a successful business and couldn’t tell the difference between their arses and their elbows. Peter would ruminate on the mistakes, flaws and incompetency of everyone around him. ➤

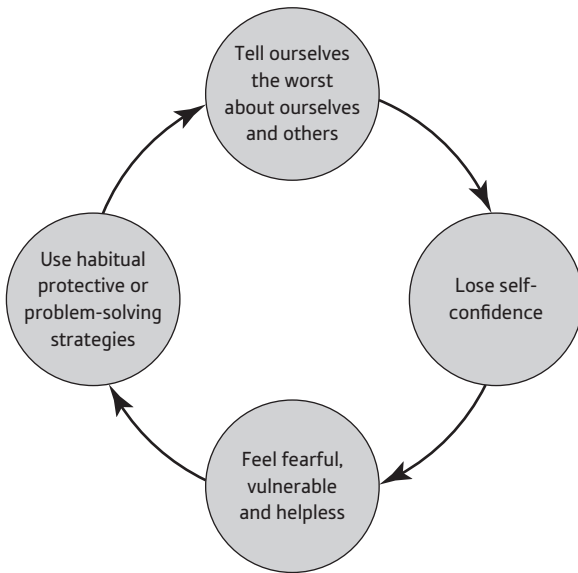
In time he found it hard to hold his frustration in and would display his upset with sarcastic comments: 'really, did you really think that was going to work?!', 'Oh right, OK then, I'll just make this work even though I have no resources and a team of absolute dimwits to do the job, wish me luck then!' Peter's sarcasm wasn't going unnoticed: a few of his team had made a complaint to senior management and Peter was increasingly being pulled up on his attitude and approach to others. Although he held firmly on to his belief that everyone around him was useless, he had begun to fear that his comments might cost him his job. He turned his critic on himself and began to berate himself for his sarcastic and angry outbursts. This didn't seem to help and he became more and more frustrated. He decided to seek some help.

## The critical defence

Berating ourselves and others for our/their failures and mishaps seems sensible on some level and may sound a bit like this: 'I need to know what I/they did wrong, remind myself/them (over and over again) what a total pillock I've/they've been, to learn a lesson/know the worst so I can prevent the worst happening, especially if I don't feel too confident to face the trauma of failing again'. Criticism in this sense can be viewed as a super-charged, problem-solving machine, activated and ready to protect our underconfident, vulnerable, gooey soft centre from any future pain (remember those cavemen/women in the previous chapter and how they needed a tool to protect themselves?). But chastising ourselves/others in this way is not always the answer, as it just continues to undermine our own self-confidence, further increasing our sense of vulnerability and helplessness, giving rise to more attempts to protect ourselves. Although some of these slights and the attacks on others might not at first appear like personal attacks on the self, they will also penetrate our own self-confidence in the most detrimental way.

Attacks towards others are in fact ultimately highly self-critical also and therefore as confidence-zapping as the most obvious and explicit self-criticisms (such as 'I'm a total loser'). Pointing the finger in blame (i.e. 'you are a total loser'), criticising everyone else (and their mothers) only actually damns yourself as lacking any useful substance and as helpless and incompetent to independently change your own reality – so: he/she/they is/are useless effectively translates into I'M USELESS! All types of criticism can therefore be seen as both the cause and effect of underconfidence. This creates a perpetual cycle; it's really not clever and leaves us stuck in an underconfidence trap (having to endure all the associated

performance-hindering anxiety and frustration to boot) which looks a bit like this:



So if you are with us on this (which really we hope you are) you'll probably agree that it's time to start letting this critic know who actually is boss around here. Enough with this *old blame game*; it's time to get wise to your critic before he/she/it batters your confidence down even further. You might like to try this next exercise to really begin to start noticing your inner critic, while lessening the negative impact that he/she/it is having on your confidence.



## Exercise 3.5: Mindful on the job

### Paper pusher – origami

This practice can actually be done with any task at all, not just one that involves folding paper. Anyway, for now go get a piece of paper and follow these instructions:

- 1 Take a square piece of paper.