Why We Practice Mindfulness Sitting as a Leader, and How

Sitting, a simple form of meditation, as we define it, is a regular (e.g. daily) practice of silently sitting and paying attention to something like our breath.

We sit, simply, to better manage our attention. The faculty of attention, like a muscle, can be trained, and its capacity increases. Neuroscience now confirms that neural pathways are literally patterned based on what we focus our attention on. **What it is we focus on gets built/reinforced - "our energy follows our attention."** An expanded attention increases awareness and understanding (of ourselves and others), opening up a greater range of possible responses, and therefore more skillful interactions.

Trained Attention: Why

So why is managing our attention so critical? In today's hyper-connected, complex world, with endless demands one right after the other, the ability to organize, manage, and direct our attention, and the attention of others, is essential to leading a successful and fulfilling personal and professional life. Without a trained attention we are susceptible to the constant stream of daily distractions, both external and internal. Studies show that the mind spends much of its time …. talking to itself. If you stop and "listen" to your internal thoughts, you will notice a background dialogue or narrator, like the commentator of a sports event. Often, these thoughts can be overly critical and judgmental (of ourselves or others) and can "run" us unconsciously. There is a difference between conscious and skillful reflection and "talking to myself." In learning to observe and direct our internal dialogue in sitting, we develop a greater sense of awareness, which we then have access to during the hectic pace of our day and have choice in the hectic stream of our daily interactions. Sitting (mindfulness) has also been proven to lower the heart and respiratory rate, increase serotonin levels, support greater mental clarity and focus, and reduce stress.

Beginning a Daily Sitting Practice: How

Select a suitable place for your practice with minimal disturbance- a corner of your bedroom or any other quiet spot in your home or office. Arrange the environment so that it's conducive (inviting) to sitting in silence. Before you begin, remind yourself why you are sitting: building the muscle of attention to become a more influential leader, and to fulfill on your commitments and vision. Remind yourself of your commitment (important outcomes for you) - feel it infuse your body with purpose.

Select a regular time that suits your schedule and biorhythms– put it on your calendar! Begin by sitting for ten minutes at a time. Later, if you choose, you can sit longer or more frequently. Daily sitting can become like other daily practices: bathing, brushing your teeth, combing your hair, etc.

© Strozzi Institute | trec.org

Adopt a position on your chair or cushion in which you can comfortably sit with an upright posture (length). Let your body feel firmly rested on the seat (gravity), feel you feet making contact with the floor ("feet/seat"), your hands resting easily, your eyes/face soft, shoulders relaxed and down. Gently close your eyes. Notice any areas of your body that may be tense; intentionally soften those areas. Then, bring your attention to the sensation of your breathing (it's always there). Take a few deep breaths to sense where you notice the breath most easily, as coolness or tingling in the nostrils or throat, as movement of the chest and belly. Feel the sensations of your breathing slowly and intentionally, relaxing into each breath.

After a few breaths your mind will inevitably wander (that's its job). When you notice this, no matter how long or short a time you have "been away," simply bring your attention back to the next breath. If it's not additionally distracting, before you return, you can mindfully acknowledge where you have "gone" with a soft word in the back of your mind, such as "thinking", "planning", "traffic sounds", "impatient", "sore back". After softly and silently (non-judgmentally) naming to yourself where your attention has been, gently guide your attention back to the sensation of the next breath. Later on in your sitting practice you will be able to work with the places your mind wanders, but for the first 8 weeks simply acknowledge and name any thoughts and return your attention to your breath.

Over weeks and months of this practice you will gradually learn to calm and center yourself using the breath, even in stressful situations. There will be many cycles in this process - stormy days alternating with clear days - stay with it. As you practice listening and feeling more deeply in your practice, you will discover that bringing the attention back to the breath over and over will become easier, quicker, and more natural.

© Strozzi Institute | trec.org