

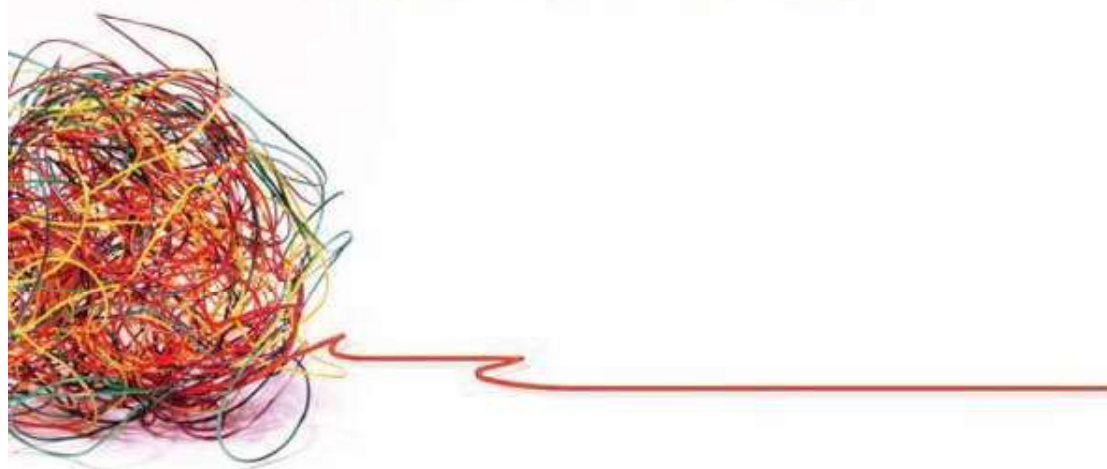
Mindfulness

AN EIGHT-WEEK PLAN FOR

Finding Peace

IN A

Frantic World



Mark Williams and
Danny Penman

FOREWORD BY JON KABAT-ZINN

Mindfulness

AN EIGHT-WEEK PLAN for
FINDING PEACE
in a FRANTIC WORLD

MARK WILLIAMS
and DANNY PENMAN

Foreword by Jon Kabat-Zinn



Contents

[Acknowledgments](#)

[Foreword by Jon Kabat-Zinn](#)

[1. Chasing Your Tail](#)

[2. Why Do We Attack Ourselves?](#)

[3. Waking Up to the Life You Have](#)

[4. Introducing the Eight-Week Mindfulness Program](#)

[5. Mindfulness Week One: Waking Up to the Autopilot](#)

[6. Mindfulness Week Two: Keeping the Body in Mind](#)

[7. Mindfulness Week Three: The Mouse in the Maze](#)

[8. Mindfulness Week Four: Moving Beyond the Rumor Mill](#)

[9. Mindfulness Week Five: Turning Toward Difficulties](#)

[10. Mindfulness Week Six: Trapped in the Past or Living in the Present?](#)

[11. Mindfulness Week Seven: When Did You Stop Dancing?](#)

[12. Mindfulness Week Eight: Your Wild and Precious Life](#)

[Notes](#)

[Resources](#)

[Index](#)

Mindfulness Week Seven: When Did You Stop Dancing?

It was eleven-thirty at night and Marissa was struggling with her Breathing Space meditation. And today, of all days, she really needed a breathing space. She was desperate to calm down so she could get a good night's sleep, but almost as soon as she'd begun her meditation, she was interrupted by the irritating buzz of a message arriving on her phone in the next room. She knew who it would be from: her boss at the unit where she worked; and she could guess what it would say: "Marissa—have you double-checked the end-of-year figures for the department's budget?—Leanne."

Marissa's manager never rested and saw no reason why anyone else should do so either. Marissa was at her wits' end dealing with Leanne. She was someone who genuinely couldn't see a distinction between her job and the rest of her life. The manager worked twelve-hour days and routinely bombarded people with texts and emails late at night. Some people had a life; Marissa's boss had a smartphone. She was a walking management textbook who spoke all of the right jargon about "empowerment," "cross-cutting strategies" and "thinking outside the box," but somehow she never managed to put any of it into practice, particularly when it came to dealing with her subordinates. To her colleagues she seemed bad-tempered, aggressive and impulsive. To cap it all, she was becoming inefficient, forgetful and devoid of creativity. Her private life—such as it was—was equally chaotic. Her second husband had recently left her, and her seventeen-year-old daughter was a "disappointment" because of her devotion to art and drama, rather than to economics and business studies. Leanne was genuinely stunned that her daughter didn't want a lucrative career on Wall Street and a life focused around designer clothes and expensive wines.

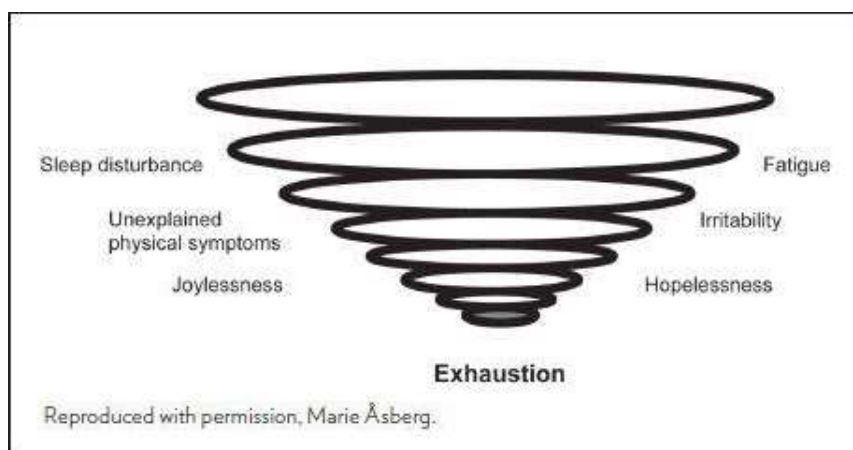
It was easy to blame Leanne, but she was, of course, also a victim, unable to step outside of a punishing work schedule and a disintegrating private life.

Ironically, Marissa had many of the same problems as Leanne until she'd discovered mindfulness two years previously. It was an epiphany. After years of unhappiness, stress and exhaustion, she'd learned to relax and had begun to live again. Mindfulness had improved her life no end, but she still had moments of high stress—usually when it came to dealing with Leanne's demands. But at least she now knew how to handle them a little more skillfully.

Marissa returned to her Breathing Space meditation. She sensed the tightness in her neck and shoulders, the pulse in her temples and her fast and shallow breathing. They were all signs that she was under intense pressure and, if she wasn't careful, she'd soon become exhausted and quite possibly depressed too. The previous few weeks had been hellishly difficult, but she was determined not to be pulled back into the dark pit of the Exhaustion Funnel.

As Marissa learned during her mindfulness classes, many of life's problems, such as unhappiness, anxiety and stress, can be likened to drifting down a funnel of exhaustion that progressively drains away your life and energy.

Exhaustion Funnel



The Exhaustion Funnel

Our colleague, Professor Marie Åsberg, from the Karolinska Institute in Stockholm, is an expert on burnout. She uses the Exhaustion Funnel to describe how this can happen to any of us.

The circle at the top represents how things are when we are living a full and balanced life. As things get busier, however, many of us tend to give things up to focus on what seems “important.” The circle narrows, illustrating the narrowing of our lives. But if the stress is still there, we give up more—and more. The circles narrow further.

Notice that very often, the very first things we give up are those that nourish us the most but seem “optional.” The result is that we are increasingly left with only work or other stressors that often deplete our resources, and nothing to replenish or nourish us—and exhaustion is the result.

Professor Åsberg suggests that those of us who continue downward furthest are likely to be those who are the most conscientious, those whose level of self-confidence is closely dependent on their performance at work, i.e., those who are often seen as the best workers, not the lazy ones. The diagram also shows the sequence of accumulating “symptoms” experienced by Marissa as she lived out her assumption that a social life was superfluous—the funnel narrowed and she became more and more exhausted.

The funnel is created as you narrow the circle of your life to focus on solving your immediate problems. As you spiral down the funnel, you progressively give up more and more of the enjoyable things in life (which you come to see as optional) to make way for the more “important” things such as work. As you slide ever further down, you give up even more of the things that nourish you, leaving yourself increasingly exhausted, indecisive and unhappy. You are eventually spat out at the bottom, a shadow of your former self.

It’s all too easy to get sucked into the Exhaustion Funnel. If you are

overworked, or otherwise have too much on your plate, it's entirely natural to make space by temporarily streamlining your life. This generally means giving up a hobby or part of your social life so that you can focus on your work; in Marissa's case, this meant abandoning her weekly choir practice. But what she didn't take into account was how nourishing the choir practice was for her soul. The weekly practice had become central to her life, but she'd bought into the idea that a social life was somehow optional, or even superfluous. In Marissa's mind, her social life could be suspended when something more "important" came along. Although it seemed like a temporary fix to free up more time for work, it soon backfired. Without the weekly respite of choir practice, she gradually became less energized, creative and efficient. She ended up accomplishing less and taking more time to do so.

To free up even more space for work, she abandoned her monthly book club, largely because she never had any spare time to read the novels she'd normally devour. This, too, soon backfired as she became still less efficient at work. So after a further few months, pressures of work once again forced her to put a little more of her life on hold. This time Marissa extended her working day by a couple of hours by enrolling her nine-year-old daughter in an after-school club. But this also had an unexpected downside. She soon started feeling guilty about seeing less and less of her daughter. The guilt often ate into her sleep and she became increasingly inefficient at work.

Leanne came up with a solution: a laptop. This allowed Marissa to work when her daughter was watching her favorite TV programs. As you'd expect, this also meant that Marissa began working later into the night, analyzing spreadsheets and banging off emails so that her bosses could see her commitment. Needless to say, after a while something had to give, and this time it was her diet.

Both Marissa and her daughter Ella loved the occasional takeout, but soon they were eating them night after night and becoming bored with the fatty, salty, low-nutrient food. But Marissa and her daughter hadn't just given up wholesome food to save time cooking; they'd also lost something that often goes unnoticed: conversation. Long chats in the kitchen with her growing daughter gave way to the occasional exchange of gossip about TV soap characters in the commercial breaks. Inch by inch, Marissa was giving up all of the things she loved and that nourished her, for the thing she'd come to dislike: work. Not only had Marissa used to love her work; now it had become a trap for her, and it was draining away her life, leaving her exhausted and increasingly unhappy.

Yet again her boss had a solution: a smartphone. Now she could even work in bed if she chose. At first, it was thrilling to be able to exchange high-powered emails and texts twenty-four hours a day. (Never mind that Leanne had once confided in Marissa that her second marriage had started to go downhill when she used her smartphone to complete and send off a report for work—on her honeymoon.) Marissa felt reinvigorated and empowered—that lasted for a few weeks. Then, it quickly became apparent that her bosses were all vying with each other by working later and later. It was clear that exchanging emails late at night made her colleagues and bosses feel important. Marissa was wiser than that, but was still unsure as to how she could escape the trap she'd been seduced into.

In the end, it was an occupational therapist at the hospital where Marissa worked who sprung her free. The therapist was running a mindfulness course as part of a clinical trial to see whether meditation could help normally mentally healthy people to reduce their levels of job stress and become happier and more relaxed. It was only when Marissa began the course that it became obvious to her—and the therapist—that she was in pretty poor mental shape. During the pre-class interview, she was handed a sheet listing the most common symptoms of stress, depression and mental exhaustion. Marissa ended up checking most of the boxes. For Marissa, they included such things as:

- becoming increasingly bad-tempered or irritable
- a narrowing of her social life, or simply “not wanting to see people”
- not wanting to deal with such normal business as opening the mail, paying the bills, or returning phone calls
- becoming easily exhausted
- giving up on exercise
- postponing or overshooting deadlines

- changes in sleeping patterns (either sleeping too much or too little)
- changes in eating habits¹

Do any of these seem familiar to you?

On the outside, Marissa had successfully maintained the façade of the busy, efficient worker, but deep inside she was crumbling under the strain. At first, she refused to believe she had a problem. She felt that all she needed was a few good nights' sleep. The meditations she learned certainly allowed her to sleep, but as all of the other benefits of mindfulness began to accrue, Marissa realized just how close she'd come to a breakdown. Her life had almost completely trickled away down the Exhaustion Funnel.