

Cultivating “Mindfulness” into Your Practice

A 21st Century Formula for Practice Success

by Peter Barry, R.R.D.H.

Mindfulness provides a much needed opportunity to take back our lives from the clutter of noise and distraction that competes for space in our consciousness every moment of our busy lives — most of which are spent at work or thinking about work or recovering from the effects of work. In today’s busy world, our dental practice can be a source of daily joy and pleasure or a source of stress and frustration, based on how we allocate our mental attention while we do what we do.

In order to fully appreciate the benefits of “mindfulness” on our practice and lives, we must first understand what causes us to diffuse our focus and attention. As a society, we live in an age of dramatic distraction. With one patient on hold, we rush to serve two others who are standing in line at the front desk and quickly reply to an email in between. Or in the middle of a challenging clinical procedure, we receive a message telling us we must break away yet again for another hygiene exam. Or while turning over treatment rooms to set up for the next patient, we find ourselves being pulled into a spare room to take an impression or assess an emergency. Unfortunately, this demand for our attention does not end at the dental office. It follows us home. Technology has made it easier than ever to fracture our attention into smaller and smaller bits, thereby programming our minds to be permanently distracted. We answer a co-worker’s question from the stands at a child’s football game; we pay bills while watching TV; we order groceries while stuck in traffic. In an era where no one seems to have enough time, our busy world is driven by technology and devices, allowing us to be many places at once but unable to fully inhabit the place we need to be at any given time.



Too many of us are overscheduled, over tasked, over connected, and overstimulated by all the noise, interruptions, and complexity of our high-paced society. When I begin working with a practice, people will often complain they feel busy and rushed, often reporting they feel stressed and stretched and pulled in different directions. So what can we do about this? Is the answer more time management training or more systems for better task management? Of course these can help but they only address half the problem. They are external strategies that don’t factor in one key variable: YOU! Time management is actually self-management or **You Management**. You Management means focusing on what you think and feel while you do what you do. Growing a more mindful work environment means managing your thoughts to be more fully engaged in the moment — with whatever it is you are doing and whomever it is you are doing it with.

Cultivating **mindfulness** into your practice is an exciting opportunity that every dental professional should embrace. We are in the midst of a popular obsession with mindfulness as the secret to health, happiness, and success in any field of human endeavor. Including dentistry! A fringe movement in our busy society is now an increasingly prominent part of our cultural landscape. A growing body of evidence suggests mindfulness has clear benefits. Though meditation is considered an essential means to achieving mindfulness, the ultimate goal is simply to give your attention fully to what you are doing at any given time. One can engage in a relationship mindfully, parent mindfully, vacation mindfully, and work more mindfully. Similarly one can practice clinical dentistry more mindfully and serve health care consumers more mindfully.

Jon Kabat-Zinn, PhD, first adapted **mindfulness practice for health promotion** in 1979 at the University of Massachusetts Medical Center. His Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction program (MBSR) has been scientifically validated, accepted worldwide, and used in many disciplines, including medical and nursing education. Mindfulness is a **state of being** “that emerges through paying attention on purpose, in the present moment and nonjudgmentally, to the unfolding of experience, moment by moment,” according to Dr. Kabat-Zinn.

High achievers, great artists, top scientists, and leading medical professionals all run their days under completely different mindsets and rituals than those who get trapped in the groove of “being busy being busy.” Across industries there is an elite subculture of accomplished professionals who are discovering the power of mindfulness. They are becoming more creative, more effective, and more focused and becoming better at their jobs.

Imagine feeling calm, focused, and creative while in the midst of challenge or busyness in your practice. Some dental schools have even incorporated exposure to the concept into their curriculum. Your best clinical dentistry — that looks good, functions well, feels comfortable, and lasts a long time — is delivered in an unrushed atmosphere where you feel fully focused, undistracted, and engaged.

Tips for strengthening your “Mindfulness Muscle” and cultivating it into your practice include:

- 1** Pick a situation in which you wish to immerse yourself “more mindfully” five times per day.
- 2** Begin observing your mind by focusing fully on that interaction or activity.
- 3** Slow down, take a breath, feel engaged, calm your movements, make eye contact, be there fully.
- 4** Notice the distraction without getting caught up in it, as your mind wanders as it inevitably will.
- 5** Bring your attention back to the moment and feel the experience of giving yourself entirely to that moment.
- 6** Focus deeply on the situation and/or persons involved, while creativity emerges.
- 7** Practice silencing your internal voice to make room for others in your mind, when communicating.

- 8** Use “**deep listening**” to receive or acknowledge feelings and messages. Feel curious and empathetic.
- 9** Notice your mind wandering again as it often will; bring your attention back to the moment again.
- 10** Enjoy the full flavor/taste of what you are doing, who you’re doing it with, and the people you serve.

Energy flows where attention goes! No matter what role you play in your practice, mindfulness allows dental professionals to connect more engagingly and to communicate more inspiringly with their patients who also happen to be health care consumers. Mindfulness is the art and science of finding focus and peace in a stressed out, multitasking, workplace culture. That’s when the magic happens. It means focusing on being fully in the moment and engaged with what you are doing and who you are doing it with, savoring the richness and full flavor of every second of that experience. A more mindfully present team will stimulate an expansion in the level of fulfillment people draw from being in your practice. It will also cultivate richer, more meaningful patient experiences by engaging customers in an inherently personal way that sets you apart and brands your practice as unique.

Practicing more mindfully is a wonderful way to strengthen the positive image and impact your practice can have on the community you serve. Remember the old adage: yesterday is history, tomorrow is a mystery, today is a gift; that’s why they call it the PRESENT. Give yourself and your patients the gift of your full attention in the present moment and everyone grows, including your practice. Happy dentistry!



Peter Barry is a Practice Mastery™ Dental Success Coach who loves empowering practitioners to grow. He has helped thousands of dental professionals bring their careers, their practices, and their teams to the next levels. He provides customized group and one-on-one “Success Coaching” to dental professionals across North America.

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— **Janine Bell, Office Manager**