

[Skip to main content](#)

Search

[About Us](#) [Advertise](#) [Subscribe Now](#)

Follow us! [Facebook](#) [Book](#) [Flickr](#) [Twitter](#) [Google Plus](#) [Pinterest](#) [Instagram](#)



Menu

- [Articles](#)
 - [Ethics](#)
 - [Field Placement](#)
 - [Tech](#)
 - [Practice](#)
 - [Careers](#)
 - [Education & Credentials](#)
 - [Reviews & Commentary](#)
 - [News](#)
 - [Linda's Agenda](#)
 - [Real World Clinical](#)
 - [Self Care](#)
- [Extras](#)
 - [Video](#)
 - [Audio](#)
 - [Book Club](#)
 - [Creative Work](#)
 - [Self-Care Summer](#)
 - [Social Work Month Project 2017](#)
 - [Social Work Month Project 2018](#)
- [Magazine](#)
 - [Digital Edition](#)

- [Print Edition](#)
- [Subscribe](#)
- [Jobs](#)
- [Grad School](#)
- [Products](#)
 - [Social Work Books](#)
 - [Nonprofit Books](#)
 - [Catalog](#)
- [Events](#)
- [Nonprofit](#)
 - [Nonprofit Ethics](#)
 - [Nonprofit Management](#)

- [Ethics](#)
- [Field Placement](#)
- [Tech](#)
- [Practice](#)
- [Careers](#)
- [Education & Credentials](#)
- [Reviews & Commentary](#)
- [News](#)
- [Linda's Agenda](#)
- [Real World Clinical](#)
- [Self Care](#)

[Achieving Racial Equity Through Social Work: Networking To Build a Network That Works](#)

[Reverse Culture Shock: Did You Have Fun on Your Vacation?](#)

Mindfulness: 10 Lessons in Self-Care for Social Workers

 13K people like this. [Sign Up](#) to see what your friends like.

Share the love!

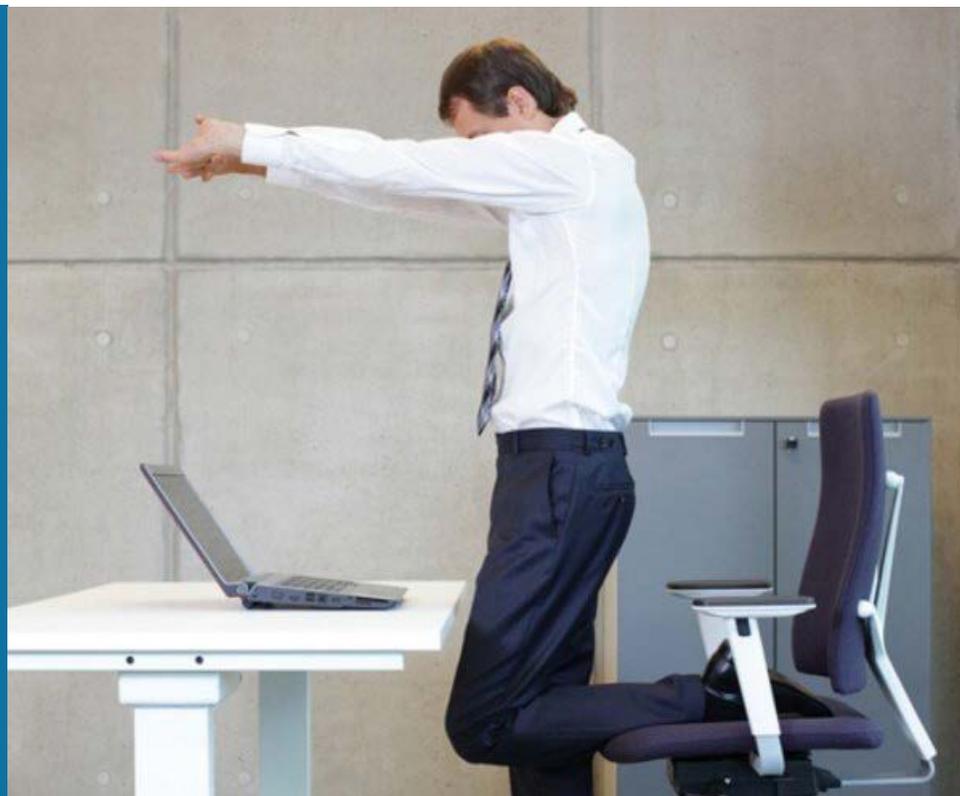


 [RSS](#)

[Print](#)

×

[Expand](#)



Mindfulness at Work

by Deborah Lisansky Beck, MSW, LICSW

The rewards of being a social worker are numerous, powerful, and life affirming. Whether we are helping individuals or promoting social change, our profession provides opportunities for intellectual stimulation, emotional gratification, and the development of competence. Although the benefits continue to expand over a lifetime, there are also challenges social workers face that can create stress, disillusionment, “compassion fatigue,” and even burnout (Adams, Boscarino, & Figley, 2006; Lammert, 2013; Newell & MacNeil, 2010; Smullens, 2012; & Wharton, 2008). These obstacles take many forms and can present problems for beginning workers and experienced practitioners alike.

This was my own experience after being a social worker for almost 20 years. With the best of intentions, I accepted a job that turned out to be a very poor fit for me, and it took a toll on my health and well-being. After leaving this position and moving on to a much more suitable job, I was left with a residue of symptoms that would not dissipate on their own. These included anxiety, difficulty sleeping, irritability, restlessness, and a general sense of hypervigilance and physical tension. The support of colleagues, family, friends, and a wonderful therapist helped tremendously, but this was not enough. I needed something more. In particular, I needed to learn a way to calm down, relax, and soothe myself more effectively.

What I found was a program focused on reducing stress and fostering relaxation, healing, and resilience based on the practice of mindfulness

(Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction Program [MBSR], Center for Mindfulness in Medicine, Healthcare, and Society, U. MA Medical Center, Shrewsbury, MA). The lessons I learned from this experience have subsequently influenced every aspect of my career as a social work practitioner and educator, as well as my personal life. It has been my greatest privilege to share what I have learned with fellow social workers, students, and clients alike. Here's hoping that these lessons will also be meaningful to you.

Mindfulness is the practice of paying close attention to what we are experiencing in the present, both inside our bodies and minds and in the external world (Kabat-Zinn, 1990, 1994, 2012; Nhat Hanh, 1975; Rosenberg, 1998; Santorelli, 1999). It is a conscious effort to be with whatever is going on right now, without judging or criticizing what we find. In each moment, mindfulness invites us to be awake, aware, and accepting of ourselves. It also allows us to slow down the hectic pace we often keep and to attend to our lives more fully.

The practice of mindfulness is integral to our efforts to reduce stress and to increase our capacity to cope (Kabat-Zinn, 1990). Although mindfulness is best learned and reinforced through sustained and regular practice, many mindfulness-based strategies can be incorporated into daily life activities at any time (Boyce, 2012; Burdick, 2013; Fralich, 2013; Stahl & Goldstein, 2010). Practicing these techniques will not prevent stress completely or take it away when it occurs, but doing them with care and attention on a regular basis can help us manage more effectively. Here are several to consider.

1. Mindful moments

Self-care is not something to do just in your spare time or on vacation. It is a disposition, attitude, or ongoing state of body and mind (Cox & Steiner, 2013). In practicing mindfulness, take time each day to shift from a mode of doing and action to one of pausing and being with whatever is happening right now. As you sit, stand, or move, notice your feelings, thoughts, and bodily sensations as they come and go. Greet whatever you find with an attitude of openness, curiosity, and compassion. Rather than signifying time to “tune or veg out,” these are moments to “tune in” more closely to your experience and to respond to life with more clarity and wisdom. Taking time to be with yourself in this way on a regular basis is at the heart of what is known as mindfulness meditation (Nhat Hanh, 1975). It is often practiced together with the next technique: awareness of the breath.

2. Awareness of breathing

Focus your attention on your breathing. Notice your breath as you inhale and as you exhale. Take time to observe your breath and just breathe without forcing it to change in any way. See if you can become aware of your breathing in your abdomen. Place your hand on your belly and notice how it rises and falls. Continue to focus on your breathing as you breathe in and out. Put aside time each day to breathe in this way. When you find your mind wandering, which it definitely will do, just bring it back gently to your focus on the breath. By practicing in this way, the breath becomes an anchor that can help you maintain your focus on the present (Rosenberg, 1999).

3. Body awareness

Notice whether your body is tense or relaxed. If any parts are tight or constricted, observe the tension and then see if you can soften it or gently let it go. Try tensing this part of your body even more for a second, notice the sensation, and then release it. Become familiar with those parts of your body that are usually tense when you are stressed. Give them a frequent tension check and soften them when possible. Set aside time each day to sit or lie quietly and slowly scan your whole body, noting how you feel from head to toe. Don't try to force the tension out or push it away. Bringing gentle awareness and acceptance to the way your body is, without resistance or struggle, can help to reduce the tension that you find. Become aware of your

body when you are standing, walking, or engaged in physical exercise (another important item on the stress reduction menu). When in motion, be mindful of how your body feels and see if you can focus again on the natural rhythm of your breath.

4. Awareness of thoughts

Take a moment to see where your thoughts are. Are they focused on what you are doing right now, or are they somewhere else? If they are far away—back in the past or ahead in the future—notice them and bring them back to what you are doing in the present. This exercise in mindfulness may help you concentrate more effectively.

Apply the same curious observation to the content of your thinking itself. Watch your thoughts as they come and go, without holding on to some or pushing away others. Although the strength of certain thoughts may have previously caused you pain or anxiety, over time you may learn that your thoughts are just thoughts—nothing more. Instead of actively changing your thoughts, mindful attention may enable you to change your relationship to them. In this way, you may be able to loosen and free yourself from powerful, repetitive, or negative thought patterns and open the door to new ideas.

5. Single-focus tasking

Multi-tasking may have become the norm in today's world, but it is probably a better practice for computers than it is for human beings. See what happens when you bring your attention fully to one experience or activity at a time. As you do with mindful breathing, come back to the task at hand if your mind wanders in different directions. You may actually accomplish more in this way than you would trying to complete several tasks at once, and you will make fewer mistakes, as well.

6. Social support

The relationships you have with family, friends, and colleagues are a vital source of nurturance and comfort. On a practical level, they provide concrete assistance, valuable information, and companionship. On an emotional level, they foster a sense of belonging and shared commonality on one hand, and acknowledgment and validation for your uniqueness on the other. In studies of resiliency and of recovery from illness, those individuals who survive and go on to succeed and thrive in life in the face of tremendous odds are people who have received significant doses of social support along the way and have learned how to ask for and initiate it when needed (Fraser, 2003; Greene, 2012).

Herein lies the key and the connection to mindfulness. As social workers, we are used to being caretakers for others, but many of us are reluctant to allow others to take care of us. Examine your willingness to be on the receiving end of social support, pay attention to your need for help when it occurs, and learn how to build interactions that foster support into your day.

7. Altruism

Find small ways to give to others. Whether it's a warm smile to a stranger, attentive listening to a family member or friend, or planned volunteer activity for a social cause, mindfulness in the form of active compassion helps to transform the stress of both the giver and the receiver alike (Hafen, Karren, Frandsen, & Smith, 1996). Be creative, and find opportunities for mindful giving that are available and enriching to you. For a true change of

pace, choose activities that are different from your social work placement or job, and steer away from those that will only add a new layer of stress.

8. Attention to the small wonders of life

Every day will be enhanced if you take a moment to slow down, stop, and pay attention to something of wonder around you. The way the sun hits the trees, a cool breeze coming through the window on a hot day, the sound of laughter, a child playing nearby, or two people holding hands as they walk—each day is full of rich examples. Take a moment to find them in your world. When you do, pause to honor what you have observed, and let yourself become aware of whatever feelings surface within. If you take the time to let the small wonders of life into your daily routine, you may find yourself better able to deal with the stressors you face along the way.

9. Mindfulness at work

At a recent department meeting, I asked colleagues to share how they brought mindfulness into their world at work (Gregoire, 2013; Mindfulness at Work, 2014). Here are a few tips they shared. Be sure to take breaks as needed to stretch, go to the bathroom, and hydrate. Stand up and move around every hour, and turn off all electronic devices for a while when you can. Take time to eat lunch, either with colleagues or on your own; and practice mindful eating when possible. Walk outside to get some air and see your surroundings, or walk around inside your building and greet others on your way. Whether you have a dedicated office space or not, take items to work that can help you engage in mindful moments—such as photos of family, friends, or pets; passages, pictures, or cartoons that make you laugh; favorite poems or prayers; music; chocolate or herbal tea; flowers or plants; or little mementoes or items that are cheerful or soothing.

Suggest to your instructors, supervisors, or agency administrators that they incorporate “mindfulness at work” or “wellness,” as it is sometimes called, into the larger routine of classes, department meetings, and other school or agency activities. Share your own strategies with colleagues, and take the lead in spreading mindfulness around.

10. Acceptance, flexibility, and non-judgmentalism

Mindfulness is not a test of your skills, nor is it a competition. There are no final exams or papers to write. Relate to yourself with a sense of caring, curiosity, open-mindedness, and acceptance. One size does not fit all in clothes or stress reduction strategies. Be wary of any set of instructions that demands absolute rigid adherence.

Instead, be creative and flexible, giving yourself permission to adapt and shape your efforts to your own needs. Similarly, try not to judge yourself or to be critical of your efforts. You cannot fail. Any attempt you take to enhance your health and well-being is important. Be accepting of any setbacks or disruptions that occur. Instead of scolding yourself or giving up, regroup, refocus, and start over.

It has been more than 25 years since my brush with burnout and my initial journey to find ways to care for myself so that I could continue to practice and be gratified by the profession I love. Mindfulness has been the best vehicle for me. Many other social workers have found it helpful, as well (Birnbaum, 2008; Brenner, 2009; Cox & Steiner, 2013; Hick, 2009; McGarrigle & Walsh, 2011).

Now is the perfect moment for you to be mindful, too.

Take good care!

References

- Adams, R., Boscarino, J., & Figley, C. (2006). Compassion fatigue and psychological distress among social workers: A validation study. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 76 (1), 103-108.
- Birnbaum, L. (2008). The use of mindfulness training to create an “accompanying place” for social work students. *Social Work Education*, 27 (8), 837-852.
- Boyce, B. (Ed). (2012-present). *Mindful* (magazine). Washington, DC: The Foundation for a Mindful Society.
- Brenner, M. (2009). Zen practice: A training method to enhance the skills of clinical social workers. *Social Work in Health Care*, 48, 462- 470.
- Burdick, D. (2013). *Mindfulness skills workbook for clinicians and clients: 111 tools, techniques, activities & worksheets*. Eau Claire, WI: PESI Publishing & Media.
- Cox, K. & Steiner, S. (2013). *Self-care in social work: A guide for practitioners, supervisors, and administrators*. Washington, DC. NASW Press.
- Fralich, T. (2013). *The five core skills of mindfulness. A direct path to more confidence, joy, and love*. Eau Claire, WI: PESI Publishing & Media.
- Fraser, M. (Ed.). (2003). *Risk and resilience in childhood: An ecological perspective* (2nd ed.). Washington, DC. NASW Press
- Greene, R. (2012). *Resiliency: An integrated approach to practice, policy, and research* (2nd ed.). Washington, DC. NASW Press.
- Gregoire, C. (2013). *Mindfulness at work: 5 tricks for a healthier, less stressful work day*. The Huffington Post, Retrieved from http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/06/24/mindfulness-at-work_n_3475045.html
- Hafen, B., Karren, K., Frandsen, K., & Smith, N. (1996). *Mind / body health: The effects of attitudes, emotions, and relationships*. Boston, MA: Allyn and Bacon.
- Hick, S. (Ed.). (2009). *Mindfulness and social work*. Chicago, IL: Lyceum Books.
- Kabat-Zinn, J. (1990, Revised ed. 2013). *Full catastrophe living: Using the wisdom of your body and mind to face stress, pain, and illness*. New York, NY: Delacorte Press.
- Kabat-Zinn, J. (1994). *Wherever you go, there you are: Mindfulness meditation in everyday life*. New York, NY: Hyperion.
- Kabat-Zinn, J. (2012). *Mindfulness for beginners: Reclaiming the present moment – and your life*. Boulder, CO: Sounds True.

Laferriere, M. (2014). Taking care of business and a few other things along the way. The New Social Worker website. Retrieved from <http://www.socialworker.com/feature-articles/practice/taking-care-of-business-and-a-few-other-things-along-the-way/>.

Lammert, M. (2013, Fall). Building strength and resilience: Tools for early-career social workers. The New Social Worker, 20 (4), 10-12.

McGarrigle, T., & Walsh, C. (2011). Mindfulness, self-care, and wellness in social work: Effects of contemplative training. Journal of Religion & Spirituality in Social Work: Social Thought, 30, 212-233.

Mindfulness At Work. (2014). Retrieved from <http://www.mindfulnessatwork.com>.

Newell, J. M., & MacNeil, G. (2010). Professional burnout, secondary traumatic stress, and compassion fatigue: A review of theoretical terms, risk factors, and preventive methods for clinicians. Best Practices in Mental Health: An International Journal, 6 (2), 57-68.

Nhat Hanh, T. (1975). The miracle of mindfulness. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.

Rosenberg, L. (1998). Breath by breath: The liberating practice of insight liberation. Boston, MA: Shambhala Publications.

Santorelli, S. (1999). Heal thyself: Lessons on mindfulness in medicine. New York: Random House.

Smullens, S. (2012, Fall). What I wish I had known: Burnout and self-care in our social work profession. The New Social Worker, 19 (4), 6-9.

Stahl, B., & Goldstein, E. (2010). A mindfulness-based stress reduction workbook. Oakland, CA: New Harbinger.

Wharton, T. (2008, Winter). Compassion fatigue: Being an ethical social worker. The New Social Worker, 15 (1), 4-7.

A faculty member at Wheelock College in Boston, MA, since 1991, Deborah Lisansky Beck, MSW, LICSW, has taught primarily in the BSW program of the social work department. As a social work educator, she has taught a wide range of courses and has been an academic advisor and agency field liaison. For the past five years, she has also served as the Chair of the BSW program. Her main area of expertise is in stress reduction, burnout prevention, and mindfulness-based self-care. Her publications include articles on counseling services for social work students, interviewing skills, and the role of educators in community service. One of her most cherished accomplishments is to have been the 1997 recipient of Wheelock's Cynthia Longfellow Award for teaching.

[Prev](#)

1. [1](#)

2. [2](#)

3. [3](#)

[Next](#)

Tags

Winter 2016 Mindfulness



13K people like this. [Sign Up](#) to see what your friends like.

Share the love!



[Print](#)

Comments (4)

[Comment Feed](#)

Beyond self-care

All of these are beautiful suggestions and regular practice can greatly decrease suffering. But, as a long term social worker, yoga therapist and mindfulness meditation instructor, I have found that the majority of stress and burnout experienced by social workers, especially those newer to the field, goes way beyond their individual self-care. Low pay, meager benefits, secondary trauma, compassion fatigue and systemic issues greatly affect the social worker as well. I feel there is a need to overhaul the expectations of the social work workplace structure and environment - allowing more flexibility in schedule, ample "mental health" days, pay grades that match other master-level positions and more realistic caseloads and performance expectations. We need to move away from placing responsibility on the individual social worker and looking more systemically for solutions. Lastly, I would remove altruism from the list -- social workers usually have the opposite problem and need to practice accepting help and care from others!

AL more than 1 year ago | [reply](#)

Organizational accountability

Thank you very much for your thoughtful comment. I believe both are necessary -- individual self-care and systemic change. I hope you'll read this post on organizational accountability and self-care: <http://swkr.co/2gFCeGU>

SocialWorker.com more than 1 year ago | [reply](#)

I agree

I have also practiced as a social worker for over 25 years and I agree that the issue of stress and burnout is best resolved by addressing some of the systemic problems with the occupation.

Caroline Miede more than 1 year ago | [reply](#)

Thank You

I really appreciate the reminder of the benefits of mindfulness. It was well written.

Deslynne Roberts more than 2 years ago | [reply](#)

Sign Up for Our Free Publications

Email

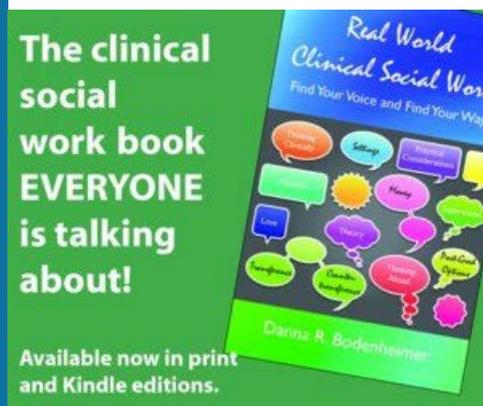
First Name

Select your interests:

Social Work E-News

The New Social
Worker
Magazine

Special
Announcements
for Social Work



Readers React

- I have lived in the West End of Louisville, KY for many years. I see the crime, abandoned homes, li
Tiffany Thompson, MSW, CSW | [Beyond “Fixing” It: Finding Strength in Your Limits as a Social Worker](#)
- Dear New Social Worker readers, Stan is my husband, as you may have guessed, and we saw this film t
SaraKay Smullens | [Film Review: Our “Phantom Threads” Hold the Secrets to Survival](#)
- For the new or seasoned social worker, this article is a very insightful reminder of why we are in
Donna Tessitore | [Beyond “Fixing” It: Finding Strength in Your Limits as a Social Worker](#)
- Loved this
Blaine Kalb | [Beyond “Fixing” It: Finding Strength in Your Limits as a Social Worker](#)

Featured Jobs at SocialWorkJobBank

Featured Jobs

GO

Licensed Clinical Social Worker
Hyndman, PA - **Nulton Diagnostic and Treatment Center**
Licensed Clinical Social Worker Nulton Diagnostic ...

Coordinator, Permanency Services

New York, NY - **Spence-Chapin Services to Families and Children**

I. Primary PurposeThe Coordinator, Permanency Serv...

Coordinator, Domestic & Special Needs

New York, NY - **Spence-Chapin Services to Families and Children**

Reports to: Associate Director, Domestic & Spe...

Bilingual Clinician/ Social Worker (Spanish)

Richmond, CA - **Familias Unidas**

Job Description The Clinical Social Worker aka Par...

Post a Job

More jobs

Powered by

yourmembership

Great gift book for social work graduates!

Beginnings, Middles, & Ends:...

By Ogden W. Rogers (Paperback - Oct 15, 2013)



\$19.95

Rated 5 out of 5

Buy Now

On Clinical Social Work:...

By Danna R. Bodenheimer (Hardcover - Jun 6, 2017)



\$26.93 ~~\$29.95~~

Rated 5 out of 5

Buy Now

Articles

- o [Ethics](#)
- o [Field Placement](#)
- o [Tech](#)
- o [Practice](#)
- o [Careers](#)
- o [Education & Credentials](#)
- o [Reviews & Commentary](#)
- o [News](#)
- o [Linda's Agenda](#)
- o [Real World Clinical](#)

- [Self Care](#)
- [Extras](#)
 - [Video](#)
 - [Audio](#)
 - [Book Club](#)
 - [Creative Work](#)
 - [Self-Care Summer](#)
 - [Social Work Month Project 2017](#)
 - [Social Work Month Project 2018](#)
- [Magazine](#)
 - [Digital Edition](#)
 - [Print Edition](#)
 - [Subscribe](#)
- [Jobs](#)
- [Grad School](#)
- [Products](#)
 - [Social Work Books](#)
 - [Nonprofit Books](#)
 - [Catalog](#)
- [Events](#)
- [Nonprofit](#)
 - [Nonprofit Ethics](#)
 - [Nonprofit Management](#)

- [Ethics](#)
- [Field Placement](#)
- [Tech](#)
- [Practice](#)
- [Careers](#)
- [Education & Credentials](#)
- [Reviews & Commentary](#)
- [News](#)
- [Linda's Agenda](#)
- [Real World Clinical](#)
- [Self Care](#)

- [About Us](#)
- [Advertise](#)
- [Writers' Guidelines](#)
- [Contact Us](#)
- [Terms of Use](#)
- [Privacy Policy](#)

Copyright 2018 White Hat Communications. All rights reserved. Please contact the publisher for permission to reproduce or reprint any materials on this site.

Built with [Metro Publisher™](#)

