CHAPTER 8

Stay Grounded in Stressful Moments

by Leah Weiss

Mindfulness should be as much a physical practice as it is a mental one. Given its name, you might think mindfulness is something you do only with your mind. In fact, lots of research, including my own, has shown that paying attention to our bodies is often an easy way into mindfulness and helps us reduce stress while it's happening.

This may seem counterintuitive because when our mind is overwhelmed, our body is often the last thing we're thinking about. If we notice our bodies at all in moments of stress, most likely it is as they interrupt our

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normal activities: carpal tunnel syndrome, back pain, breast pumping, dental appointments, sore feet, sick days, or simply the routine hunger that forces us to stop what we're doing multiple times a day and eat. Yet if we focus our attention on our bodies, they can be our anchor in what's happening right now, even if the sensations are unpleasant.

This is how anchoring works: We bring our attention into our bodies, noticing—rather than avoiding—the tension, circulation, pain, pleasure, or just neutral physical experience of, say, our right shoulder or the arch of our left foot. This practice helps us snap back to reality. In fact, our bodies are the quickest, surest way back to the present moment when our minds are lost in rehashing the past or rehearsing the future.

We cause ourselves a lot of unnecessary suffering when our minds aren't paying attention. The amygdala, located in the brain's medial temporal lobe, is the part of the brain that detects and processes fear. When our amygdala is activated by a situation that is interpreted as a potential threat, even if we are just reading an unpleasant email, it initiates physiological changes such as increased muscle tension and accelerated breathing. This association becomes so strong that we take the body's reaction as evidence of danger, just as Pavlov's dogs took the sound of the bell as evidence of dinner. As a result, a vicious cycle can develop wherein the increased muscle tension and rapid breathing caused by an activated amygdala further activates the amygdala. Thankfully, we can use anchoring to break out of it.

One of my students who was working on a startup business used to panic before meeting with potential venture capitalists. His mind would spin with fears of the worst outcomes: his pitch rejected, his business idea exposed as worthless. Once he learned to tune in to his body, to use a brief minute to anchor by taking a few breaths and feeling his feet on the ground, he calmed down and became poised to have much better conversations. Here are some simple, effective anchoring practices you can use:

- **Take a single breath.** It takes just one intentional breath to change our perspective. A single breath gives you a break from the mind's chatter and a chance for your body to regulate after amping up in response to a perceived threat. Most of the time, when you're in distress, you're in the middle of telling yourself a story and you fully believe it. A breath can take you out of the story, making you less gullible. You can follow the breath into your body, where you gain just enough distance to judge whether your head is with you (in line with your current intentions and greater purpose) or against you, and then consciously choose which way you want to go.
- **Pay attention to emotions.** Another reason to anchor in your body is that it's where you feel your emotions, which are important to acknowledge even if they may seem like a liability, especially at work. I've studied the downsides of

emotional suppression and I can assure you—it's not beneficial.[1]

It's paradoxical, but nonjudgmentally engaging with negative emotions *negatively* correlates with negative emotions and mood disorder. In other words, if you acknowledge and recognize unpleasant emotions, they have less power to cause you distress. In one study, participants wrote every day for four days about either a traumatic experience or a neutral event.[2] Those who wrote about trauma made fewer health center visits in the following six months than those who wrote about a neutral event. When you pay attention to your body, you can catch emotional information upstream, before it hijacks your whole system—once it does, it's too late to use it to your advantage.

- **Remember that your colleagues have bodies too.** Annoyed with your boss? Think you can't last another day with an impossible colleague? If you let it, your body can connect you to other people—even difficult ones—since the body is a major part of what we have in common. This sounds obvious, but the implications are profound. Our bodies and the pleasure and pain that come with them—their attendant aches and illnesses, their needs and indignities, the impossibility of choosing the one we want, the fear of losing it someday, and the ways we fight our bodies or pretend they don't exist—are shared experiences. When you ignore your body (or try to), you miss out on a

fundamental part of what we have in common. The empathy gained from this awareness helps you to have productive professional relationships, rather than suffering from ongoing frustration and pain.

- **Magnify little pleasures.** Don't underestimate the joy of taking that first sip of afternoon coffee. It's human nature to notice pain more than pleasure, but with reminders and practice you can experience joy throughout the day in the simple, reliable pleasures of having a body. It might be from sitting when you've been standing for too long, or standing up and stretching when you've been sitting; holding a new pen with a particularly cushy, ergonomic grip; laughing hard when something's funny; eating when you're hungry; the relative quiet of the office after a morning with screaming kids; slipping out of uncomfortable shoes under your desk. Every day, no matter how lousy, affords countless opportunities like these to feel good. Recently, I had a meeting at the VA hospital in Palo Alto and came across two veterans as I was walking. They were sitting in front of the building, both in wheelchairs. One man leaned over to his companion and said, "Well, it's great that we can move our hands." The other responded, "Yes, you are right. That is great!" Their perspective provides a powerful reminder that most of us can, if we choose, find within our daily routine a small joy worthy of being celebrated.

Stress is an inevitable aspect of our lives at work, but you don't need elaborate practices or escape mechanisms to engage with it. You simply need to have the wherewithal to ground yourself in a physical sensation, to anchor and come back to reality. You need only a brief moment to tap your feet on the ground and be reminded that you have a reliable and ever-present instrument to mitigate your stress. And, it just so happens, you were born with it.

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NOTES

1. Debora Cutuli, "Cognitive Reappraisal and Expressive Suppression Strategies Role in the Emotion Regulation: An Overview on Their Modulatory Effects and Neural Correlates," *Frontiers in Systems Neuroscience*, September 19, 2014; Andrea Hermann et al., "Brain Structural Basis of Cognitive Reappraisal and Expressive Suppression," *Social Cognitive and Effective Neuroscience* 9, no. 9 (September 2014): 1435–1442.; and Sally Moore et al., "Are Expressive Suppression and Cognitive Reappraisal Associated with Stress-Related Symptoms?" *Behaviour Research and Therapy* 46, no. 9 (September 2008): 993–1000

2. James J. Gross, ed., *Handbook of Emotion Regulation*, 2nd edition. New York: The Guilford Press, 2014.