Alive at Work!

Reduce Stress
Increase Enjoyment
Boost Effectiveness

by Shakya Kumara,
Brief Mindfulness founder
Ed was facing a $24,000 deadline, and feeling stressed, exhausted and scared.

Alicia’s projects were facing extreme and unnecessary delays. She could barely contain her anger in meetings, and was functioning badly as a result.

Keith had been called to a bank robbery.

I’m Shakya Kumara, founder of Brief Mindfulness. In these pages I’m going to show you how you can reduce stress, increase enjoyment and boost your effectiveness.

I’ll tell you how Brief Mindfulness helped Ed, Alicia and Keith handle the $24,000 deadline, the red tape and the bank robbery.

And I’ll give you 3 simple techniques you can use immediately, in 60 seconds or less, without closing your eyes or changing your posture.

From Fear to Joy in Minutes

When I met Ed on Skype, he was facing a deadline for his PhD Dissertation Proposal. He kept missing the deadlines he’d been setting himself – slipping further and further behind schedule. The stakes were high – he’d borrowed $24,000 and invested years of his life.

He was feeling stressed, exhausted and scared. His breathing was tight and fast, almost hyperventilating.

But after a short Brief-Mindfulness process he was amazed to find himself experiencing excitement, enthusiasm and joy – in his “happy space” as he put it. “My work is a gift,” he said, “something I’m giving to the world. You’ve put me back in touch with my original career path – helping poor people in Brazil – and that feeds my soul.”

Later that day, Ed walked into an organization meeting with a “much improved self-image.” He physically stood taller, and received comments on his “sunny disposition.”

Vicious Circle of Stress

Ed’s story vividly illustrates how stress can be a vicious circle: he had a tight deadline that he was struggling to reach, so naturally he felt stressed. But stress was consuming his energy and keeping awake at night. That was exhausting him and making him less effective, so he was falling further and further behind schedule – which in turn created more stress.

There are different ways out of this cycle – going on holiday is a popular one, for example. But in this case, Brief Mindfulness helped Ed find a way out of his vicious circle of stress that was much more immediate: connecting with his purpose.
Clarity of Purpose
In the midst of the pressures of work and life, we can easily forget our deeper purpose. Life can become flat and we end up watching kittens on YouTube.

But a clear sense of purpose really sharpens the sword. Cutting through distraction and uncertainty, we get an effortless, laser-like focus on what matters most. That’s energising, productive and deeply satisfying.

That’s what Ed tapped into. Deep down he knew what he was trying to do. When he connected the mundane challenges with his deeper purpose, it was electrifying. He was also able to connect more positively with others, which further fuelled his efforts in a wonderful virtuous circle.

How did Ed tap into his sense of purpose so quickly? The secret at the heart of Brief Mindfulness is to engage with different aspects of mindfulness in a precise and progressive sequence. Once you’re in touch with your senses, your body, your emotions and so on, it’s much easier to access your sense of purpose.

Purpose is Discovered more than Designed
Not everyone has such a “big” sense of purpose as Ed. Many of us have a real purpose in life that’s much simpler and closer to home – loving our children, or the satisfaction of a job well done, for example.

Sometimes our sense of purpose takes time to emerge and clarify. That can feel uncomfortable, as it feels like we don’t really know what we’re doing, but with gentle, repeated attention, clarity gradually emerges. Each small step forward brings you closer to the calm confidence of a mind aligned with its purpose in life.

This clarity also helps you work more smoothly, quickly and effectively. You prioritise better and make better decisions. So your work and life becomes easier to manage, which also makes it easier to be mindful – another virtuous circle.

Got a Minute?
Even if you can only spare 60 seconds, it’s worth engaging with your sense of purpose (the resulting boost in energy, clarity and focus will very quickly make up for the time invested).

Here’s one way: try asking yourself the following 3 questions, and see what answers come. Don’t worry about the quality of the answers – the main value is in engaging your mind with the question of purpose. You may find answers come from your work or from the rest of life – that’s fine, purpose and meaning don’t respect such boundaries!

Here are the questions:
1. Out of everything you’ve contributed in the last year, what are you most pleased with?
2. If you could only contribute one thing in the next year, what would it be?
3. If you could only do one thing in the next week, what would it be?
Alicia: Overcoming Frustrations with the Facilities Department

Conflict drains energy. That’s really obvious when it’s two people arguing – but it’s true within individuals too. So when you’ve got inner conflict about something, you can’t function at your best.

As an operational manager, Alicia was struggling with the bureaucracy imposed by the Facilities Department. Projects were taking two or three times longer than they needed to.

In meetings, Alicia was really struggling to control her anger. She’d tried counting to 10 before speaking, which worked up to a point, but still her sense of extreme frustration was still leaking out and disrupting the tone of the meetings. (She also found her emotions were also getting in the way of thinking clearly, and that wasn’t helping either).

In a coaching session I guided her through a short Brief-Mindfulness process designed to promote inner alignment. She noticed the effects immediately, describing herself as calmer and more focused. Instead of generating fault-finding thoughts of anger and frustration, she became curious about the process and interested in her colleagues’ point of view. Her mind naturally started looking for a collaborative way forward.

Over the coming days, she talked with key people about where they were coming from, and had frank conversations about vision and about working well together. She realised that some of her views and reservations had been misplaced, and that, as she put it, “We’re all trying to do the right thing - we just have different views about how to go about it.”

She came out of these conversations with a broad agreement about working together more collaboratively, and with one particular project starting immediately instead of three weeks later.

Alignment
Alicia was suffering from 2 levels of conflict. Firstly, there was the obvious conflict with Facilities. Secondly, she was conflicted about how best to respond: an angry part of her just wanted to rant and rage, while a more mature part wanted a sustainable and collaborative working relationship.

Mindfulness brought the two parts of herself into alignment. The experience was both calming and energising, and left her mind free to think more clearly about the objective situation.

Armed with this inner alignment, she was in a great place to deal with the outer conflict, “with a clear head and a good attitude (how can we make this better?)” as she put it.

Emotional Intelligence
Mindfulness helps with Emotional Intelligence by increasing your awareness of your emotions and your ability to choose whether to express them or not.

Alicia made a good start with this – she knew intellectually that expressing her anger “as-is” wasn’t going to help the situation. But her emotions didn’t seem to understand that!

The Brief Mindfulness process that I coached her through converted the intellectual understanding into an emotional understanding – so her emotions were in line with what she knew was for the best. With regular mindfulness practice, this becomes something you can do for yourself.
Appreciative Awareness
Mindfulness and emotional intelligence enabled Alicia to move out of a blaming frame of mind – she stopped being a victim to circumstance and started taking effective initiative instead. As she moved out of the paralysing “blame-frame,” she became curious and interested in other peoples’ points of view. This illustrates another characteristic of Mindfulness: appreciative awareness. When you’re mindful you notice things just as they are (without being judgemental or blaming), and you’re particularly on the lookout for things to appreciate.

Happiness
This turns out to be a key factor in happiness. We all want to be happy, but it’s surprisingly elusive: if you try and grasp hold of happiness, it tends to just evaporate – it’s a by-product of acting well, rather than something you can aim for directly.

There’s been some very interesting science around happiness. We each have a “happiness set-point.” Like a thermostat controlling your heating and keeping rooms at a pre-determined temperature, there’s a mechanism in your brain that takes your happiness back to your particular set-point. Your happiness levels go up or down according to events, but over time will naturally revert to the set-point.

This is dramatically illustrated by surveys amongst two groups: lottery winners and people who’d been paralysed in accidents and become quadriplegic. Of course the lottery winners became happier at first, and the quadriplegic people became less happy. But within a year, there was no difference between the two groups: they were both back to their set-points.

The set-point is determined by 3 factors: 50% of it is genetic and 10% is due to external circumstance (education level, income, marital status etc.). But 40% is derived from your day-to-day behaviour and the way in which you think about yourself and others. This is where mindfulness comes in – and appreciative awareness is a great starting point.

Got a Minute?
One of the best-researched and well-proven ways to increase happiness is incredibly simple:

- Write down 3 ways you’ve benefitted from others

One experiment found that when people did this every day for three weeks, they became happier people – and stayed that way.

A few tips to make the most of this:

1. Don’t write the same things day after day – it needs to be 3 new things
2. To help you remember, it works really well to share this exercise with someone else. I know couples who make this part of their ritual in the evening. Other people do it by exchanging daily emails.
3. You can get extra benefit from this by expressing your appreciation, especially to the people to whom you’re grateful. They’ll be pleased and it’ll improve your relationship, so you’ll be working together more effectively and enjoying each other’s company more.
Keith: Cool Under Pressure

How is it possible to retain a clear mind, even under extreme pressure?

Keith Beale is a Police Officer in Cincinnati, Ohio. Called to a bank robbery, his stress response was understandably high. But then he tried a mindfulness technique he’d been practising. That created a space of calm and clarity in his mind.

In that space, he remembered previous bank robberies, how he’d rushed to the scene of the crime, only to find the criminals departed!

So this time, instead of heading to the bank, he made a guess about the get-away route, and headed that way. Sure enough, that put him in the right place at the right time to be part of securing the arrest.

Presence of Mind

I particularly like Keith’s story because it illustrates so vividly how mindfulness isn’t reserved for monks high in the Himalayas. Mindfulness is about having clear purpose and presence of mind in any situation, especially the most challenging.

What was the technique Keith used to generate calm and clarity of mind under such pressure?

He briefly focused on the texture of the steering wheel.

Sounds crazy, doesn’t it? How does that work?

The first thing to notice is that Keith wasn’t in immediate physical danger. There was a very real threat, but at that moment it was something his brain had to construct. It was like a movie in his mind, “Bank Robbers on 47th Street.”

Now there’s a fact about the brain. It has two modes: narrative and direct experience.

When Keith had “Bank Robbers on 47th Street” going on in his head, he was in narrative mode. But when he switched to the texture of the steering wheel, he shifted his brain into direct-experience mode. That took “Bank Robbers on 47th Street” off-screen for a moment, giving him the presence of mind to act skilfully and divert to a much more effective course of action.

---

1 These modes correspond to two different physical circuits in the brain, the “default network” and the “direct-experience network.” For more on this, I recommend David Rock’s “Your Brain at Work” as a practical and readable introduction.
Got a Minute?

You may not be facing a bank robbery, but you might like some of Keith’s presence of mind under pressure. The trick is to practice when you’re not under pressure, so you’ve got the skill when you need it. You could start with this:

1. Pause for a moment
2. Look around and notice three things you can see
3. Listen carefully and notice three things you can hear
4. Notice three things you can feel in contact with your body (for example, your feet on the floor, your back against the chair, the temperature of the air on your hands, etc)

How’s that? Many people find their mind quietens a little after doing this short exercise.

Conclusion

We’ve met Ed, and heard how a clear sense of purpose helped him shift from fear to joy in minutes. We’ve met Alicia, and heard how Mindfulness helped her align her emotions with her purpose, enabling her to resolve her conflict with colleagues. We’ve met Keith, whose presence of mind helped him intercept bank robbers.

I’ve also shown you three Brief Mindfulness exercises, to give you a taste of Mindfulness and start enhancing your sense of purpose, emotional intelligence and presence of mind.

What next?

Tips by Email

If you were sent this by a colleague, friend or family member, there’s something similar you might also like. I send out regular tips by email to help you reduce stress, boost effectiveness and find more enjoyment in whatever you do. I keep the emails short enough to digest in the midst of a busy day – yet substantial enough to make a difference. You can sign up for them at http://www.briefmindfulness.com/start#tips.

Coaching for Rapid Stress Reduction

If you want rapid stress reduction, similar to that experienced by Ed and Alicia, I offer 30 minute coaching sessions. These are usually by telephone or skype, so they can be scheduled at a time convenient for you, anywhere in the world. Contact shakya@briefmindfulness.com for more details.

Training in Brief Mindfulness skills

If you want to learn mindfulness skills and integrate mindfulness into your work and life, the best place to start is with a Mindfulness QuickStart programme. That’ll help you reduce stress and boost focus in just 2 minutes per day. More details at briefmindfulness.com/quickstart.
About Shakya Kumara

Shakya trains leaders and managers in organisations such as Bupa, Sheffield University, the NHS, the National Australia Bank and other clients around the UK and Europe.

He created the “Brief Mindfulness” approach on the basis of 25 years of Mindfulness practice, including 20 years of specific workplace practice with others. He is also the creator of the “iFLOW” model of Time Management, the “MAGIC” model of Negotiation, and “Approach Mode” coaching culture.

Outside of work he’s keen landscape photographer – you’ll often find him enjoying the peace and beauty of nature.

His approach is very interactive – so feel free to get in touch with comments or questions on shakya@briefmindfulness.com.

“Immensely helpful: with more “real time” awareness, I can focus more creatively on the impact I’m seeking to achieve.”
Paul Zollinger-Read, Chief Medical Officer, BUPA

“Shakya is incredibly skilled, articulate and engaging - right up there with the best coaches I’ve worked with in America and the UK.” Vicki, Clinical Director, USA

“Nothing less than life changing.” – Steve Millen, European Marketing Manager, Genomic Health

“Fun stimulating activities, promoting immediate and effective actual change” Hanne Beirens, Consultancy Manager, ICF GHK Consulting, Belgium

“High energy and enthusiasm that is infectious and phenomenally productive. I thoroughly recommend for any organisation or individual.” Steve Batson, Service Manager, NHS