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CONTINUING EDUCATION



The mindful leadership seminar begins with an eight-minute meditation session. (Photos: Courtesy)



Instructor Dana Zelicha in action: "You need to give the brain a break sometimes and create clarity in the "balagan."

The benefits of being mindful

• By NOA AMOUYAL

When a class opens with barely any words spoken by its teacher, what could a student possibly have to learn?

Quite a lot, actually, at least, when it comes to teaching mindful leadership.

"Breathe in, focus on your breathing, observe your thoughts," Dana Zelicha says in a muted whisper to her students at the Interdisciplinary Center Herzliya.

The class, the first of its kind offered at the school, teaches how to measure and manage life by paying attention to the present moment.

It's an easy concept to adopt in theory but incredibly complex in practice.

What began as a niche hobby by those heavily influenced by Buddhism has blossomed into a full-blown movement adopted by multinational corporations and governments worldwide. Google, Microsoft and even the British Parliament have adopted mindfulness practices into their organizational structures.

The discipline combines elements of Buddhism with neurological scientific studies, which demonstrate that the brain – like any other muscle – can be conditioned and trained to respond positively to certain exercises.

The ability to "be in the present moment and understand when your mind wanders, and increasing moment-to-moment awareness in a nonjudgmental way" is the goal of mindfulness training, according to Zelicha.

What the UCLA Mindful Awareness Research Center has called an "excellent antidote to the stresses of modern times" has been a life-changer for her.

A former marketing executive at both Red Bull and Philip Morris, Zelicha was living the high life – and not enjoying a moment of it.

"I was living a frantic lifestyle – lots of stress, living on autopilot, not really listening to my gut feelings," she recalls.

But when Zelicha relocated to Switzerland while working for Philip Morris, she experienced a turning point of sorts where she realized that she had to make a dramatic change in her life.

"I was able to look at my life and look at the organizational world from a different perspective. I had clarity," she explains. "The minute I realized I'm in the wrong place, I managed to overcome my fears and say to myself and my surroundings, 'Okay, this is not for me.'"

Her meeting there with a well-being manager convinced her that she could use her newly discovered love of mindfulness to spread the gospel in the business world.

"I met many unhappy people who are not doing what they're supposed to do all day long, using Facebook, very disengaged... I felt that was creating a toxic environment, because when you see disengaged employees, you feel you can do it as well," she says.

Since that fateful meeting in 2011, Zelicha has traveled the world to teach established corporate employees and would-be entrepreneurs the value of mindfulness.

Each of her seminars begins with an eight-minute meditation session, which enables students to check all the external stresses from everyday life at the door.

"I think it really expands your emotions and understanding of them. It changes my mentality. Starting each class with meditation is the smartest thing you can do. It calms us down, and prepares you for an hour-and-a-half class," Sam Kahn, one of Zelicha's students, details after class.

Zelicha, who wrote a thesis on mindfulness at the

London School of Economics, claims that after eight weeks of engaging in daily mindfulness exercises, parts of the brain related to creativity, intuition and curiosity are strengthened.

Mindfulness also refutes the "old dog, new tricks" adage, because studies demonstrate subjects are able to change brain patterns even at 80 years of age.

Skeptics may easily dismiss the practice as hippie-dippy mumbo jumbo, but it does have practical implications for everyday life.

"Usually, when I practice yoga at my gym, I never fully appreciate it, because I can always hear background noise emanating from the thin walls," one of her students asserts in class when asked how the course has altered her life thus far. "Now, I've learned to tune out noises and thoughts that are irrelevant and simply enjoy the current moment."

Mindfulness training can even be useful when sitting at your desk and contending with the myriad distractions and everyday annoyances – a loud co-worker, the shrill ring of a cellphone, the ding of a Facebook message – that take you away from the task at hand.

"There's too many stimulations for our brain," Zelicha says. "Whether it's the phone, the email, the conversations, the meetings, the security situation for the Israelis living here. You need to give the brain a break sometimes and to create some clarity in the noise – clarity in the *balagan* [mess]."

"This is what I want to help our students with. I want to help them understand who they really are and what makes them feel good and what are their special contributions and talents, and eliminating unneeded fears," she says.

"It doesn't take too long to make an impact. Any training is helpful. Even a small change can alter your perspective."

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