

# MINDFULNESS AND RESILIENCE

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## USING MINDFULNESS TO BUILD RESILIENCE

- *The ability of mindfulness practices to build individual resilience and organisational level WE-silience remains underestimated.*
- *Mindfulness can help individuals work on themselves at the behavioural, psychological, and neurophysiological levels.*
- *At Awaris, we use mindfulness to teach people how to better shift their emotional and physiological states, as well as building a more stable focus at work.*

## THE BUILDING BLOCKS OF WE-SILIENCE

In our previous blog post, we outlined some of the key steps needed to move from individual resilience to organisation-wide resilience, or WE-silience as we call it. It's worth restating them here, before looking at the role mindfulness can play in building resilience.

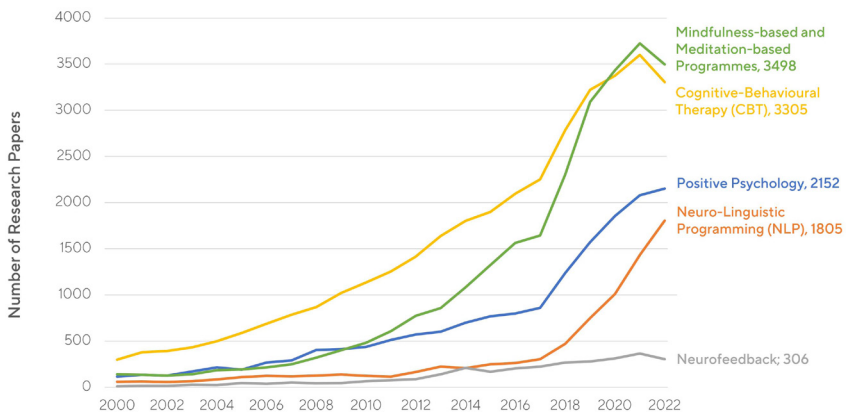
- Resilience should be seen as a set of **skills that can be trained**, not a state of being.
- Resilience skills **must impact core physiological and neurophysiological systems** in the body, otherwise they're unlikely to be effective.
- Resilience can be trained at the **behavioural, psychological, and neurophysiological levels**. The latter level can lead to the most long-lasting trait changes.
- Resilience at the individual, team, and organisational levels requires **anchoring habits into the fabric of work and life**. Most resilience initiatives don't have the intended outcomes because there's insufficient focus on individuals' daily or organisations keystone habits.

Clearly, there's a thread running through the above. Self-awareness. Skill building. The ability to shift our physiology and neurophysiology. Anchoring new habits. And gaining an accurate perception of our own inner states. **All of these traits are significantly strengthened by one key practice: mindfulness.**

## THE EVIDENCE FOR MINDFULNESS IN THE WORKPLACE

Many people are vaguely aware of the evidence base for the effectiveness of mindfulness. But they perhaps aren't aware of just how strong and expansive this evidence base is. Annually, more than 3,000 research papers on mindfulness are published in journals. This outstrips most other psychological interventions, including positive psychology and neurofeedback. It recently surpassed cognitive behavioural therapy too (Figure 1).

**Number of published research articles on mindfulness and other wellbeing interventions**



**There is also strong evidence for the effectiveness of mindfulness in the workplace.**

A recent meta review by the National Institute of Health and Care Excellence in the UK looked at more than 150 research studies. The authors concluded that “yoga, mindfulness, and meditation **were most effective overall in reducing job stress and mental health symptoms** and having a positive effect on employee mental wellbeing.”<sup>1</sup> This is a far-reaching statement. Especially given that mindfulness was compared with the impact of leadership mental health training, mental health first aiders, targeted cognitive behavioural therapy, stress management training, and other well-known interventions.

# UNDERSTANDING THE MECHANISMS OF MINDFULNESS

At Awaris, we weren't surprised by these results. All of our staff and trainers are mindfulness practitioners. But it's important to explain here why mindfulness is so effective. Normally, mindfulness is generally communicated in neuro-centric language. Discussions relate to the brain, but less so in terms of its connection to our bodies and physiology. But as we've seen in our previous article, resilience skills impact more than the brain. They help us work on ourselves at three levels:

1. **Behaviourally** – By helping us notice our typically unconscious and automatic behaviours, and consciously practicing new ones.
2. **Psychologically** – By allowing us to notice our thinking processes and fixed mindsets. This enables us to let go of these thoughts or cultivate more purposeful forms of thinking.
3. **Neurophysiologically** – By regulating our core internal systems. Through our posture, breathing, and the heightened focus we bring to what's happening in our bodies.

A lot has been written about the role of mindfulness at the first two levels; changing visible behaviours and psychological processes. But the role of mindfulness at the third level – direct neurophysiological regulation – is less well known. **Mindfulness can have a profound impact on our bodies, physiological regulation, and neurophysiology.** The importance of this can't be understated.

## NEUROPHYSIOLOGICAL INTELLIGENCE

The science of physiology is well established. It encompasses a variety of processes through which the body is able to detect, respond to, and counter changes in internal variables, in order to sustain life. Our physiology functions to regulate our health, functioning, and wellbeing. Most of the time, this happens automatically.

**We can also impact our physiology by the behaviours we engage in.** Many people are familiar with this, at least notionally, by engaging in behavioural routines which impact our physiological processes. These can include movement and exercise, hydration and nutrition, sleep, and breathing.

An even deeper form of regulating our body exists, **through mind-body exercises like**

**mindfulness, visualisation, and concentration practices.** Many high-performance athletes have learned to regulate their physiology directly in this way. This deeper form of physiological intelligence is opened to us through mindfulness practices. Just as emotional intelligence requires an awareness and ability to regulate our emotional states, **so physiological intelligence encompasses an awareness and ability to regulate our physiological states.** Some of Awaris's training programmes use mindfulness to help participants learn the skills to do this.

## MINDFULNESS AND PHYSIOLOGICAL REGULATION

Many view mindfulness as a practice of relaxation. But this is only a small part of it. Fundamentally, it's a practice of examining our inner states, to strengthen the mind-body connection. In many modern societies, we're trained to think and function through cognition. While this is important, it can result in people 'overthinking' or getting 'lost in thought'. The average person has a poor understanding of their internal processes, and especially physiological ones.

This awareness can be trained and learnt. A useful analogy here is of listening to an unfamiliar genre of music. Imagine attending a classical concert with someone well-versed in the genre. They might recognise so many aspects of the music that would be lost to novice listeners. The mood. The subtle changes in pitch and volume. Which parts of the song the conductor was emphasising. It's only when we listen to classical music more that we start to recognise patterns. We start noticing subtle shifts and moods in the music. It's the same with the body. At first, when many people start to practice mindfulness, they don't sense subtle changes in the body. They can think that nothing is happening. **As we practice mindfulness over time, we learn to first notice and then regulate our inner states.**

## THE IMPORTANCE OF BREATHING

In mindfulness practice, we usually work with the breath. Given how essential breathing is, it's surprising how poorly understood it is. Our breathing crucially impacts many of our physiological processes. It's the first step into deeper physiological regulation. Lower tissues in the lung have more blood flow. **And so there's better transfer of oxygen to the blood when we breathe deeply.** Breathing deeply and with a good posture also increases the volume of air taken in. Taken together, deeper breathing allows the breath to slow gradually.

In addition, the lengthening of the outbreath in relation to the inbreath leads to a switch from sympathetic arousal to parasympathetic recovery in the nervous system. **Overall, the rate of breathing is deeply interconnected to our nervous system and our state of mind.** At Awaris, we recognise that the breath is a key tool needed to boost individual resilience and wider organisational WE-silience.

## REGULATING OUR NERVOUS SYSTEM

Using mindfulness practices, we can learn to directly regulate the state of our nervous system via the breath<sup>2</sup>. Not only can we down-regulate it consciously – shifting from sympathetic to parasympathetic activity – we can consciously up-regulate it. And they can do this not only when practicing mindfulness, but throughout the day. This allows them to spend more time in recovery mode. As well as to shift quickly away from stress modes when needed. It isn't hard to see how this could be useful in a workplace setting.

## REGULATING OUR EMOTIONAL STATE

In addition to the nervous system, we have 'approach' or 'avoid' states in our hormonal systems. Approach is connected to expected reward, avoid to an expected threat. These expectations can lead to shifts in our hormone levels, like cortisol, dopamine, and adrenaline. So we can be positively stressed, looking forward to a pleasant event. Or also stressed in a negative way (something most people will feel more familiar with).

Many sportspeople visualise success (positive stress), meticulously going through the stages of a race in their minds to increase their confidence. In a similar way, mindfulness practitioners can downregulate strong emotional states. Shifting from a negative to a positive one. These are both important levels of inner physiological regulation.

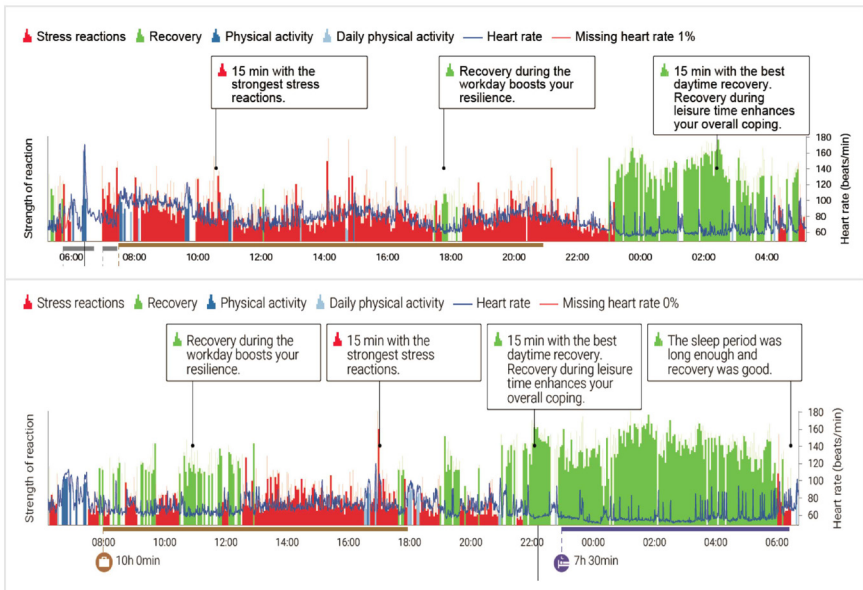
## MAINTAINING FOCUS

Our ability to focus can be trained. Many assume strong focus comes with tension. But when we strengthen our ability to focus, **we're able to place our minds on an object with lower effort and higher stability.** This means that working with focus strains us less, and we're more easily able to enter flow states. This ability is highly beneficial for deep work. Work.

# USING HEART RATE VARIABILITY AS A WINDOW TO PHYSIOLOGICAL REGULATION

We use heart rate variability (HRV) measurements from our partner Firstbeat to train people to work with their physiology. Many of us spend too much time in sympathetic activation. Whether it's because we're stressed, sleep too little, consume too much media, or simply can't relax. **We often spend more than 60-70% of our day in sympathetic activation.** While sympathetic activation (the stress response of our body) is in and of itself not bad, too much activation has a negative impact on our body resources and health. This is easily visible in our HRV assessments (Figure 2). Here, we can both see the amount of time someone spends in sympathetic activation and the related decline in their body resources.

## Balancing activation and recovery: HRV assessments can help us understand how we can regulate our inner states



**We've worked with thousands of people with HRV devices,** helping them learn to separate their inner state from outside influences. In particular, learning to work with their

breath and posture. Relaxing their nervous systems. Downregulating strong emotions. And cultivating stable attention and deep work. These have a strong and quick impact on our energy management and vitality, **and are helpful in our high intensity working world**. The example below comes from previous courses we have run. It shows two people working on their computers. One is primarily stressed and requires high tension to work (and thus consumes a lot of energy). The other is able to work with relaxed focus. They lower their stress levels over three hours and switch into high recovery while focusing. Overall stress levels and energy consumption are very different for these two people in a three-hour period. **You could imagine how this would add up to a tremendous difference in stress and exhaustion over weeks and indeed months.**

**Effect of computer work on people with differing abilities to regulate their attention**



Person two points to a deeper level of resilience. Having the ability to shift internal states while working. Independent of external factors like time pressure, information overload, and interruptions. But learning to do this isn't rocket science. You can try this for yourself:

- Take three minutes.
- Sit with straight back, somewhere quiet. It's fine to do this behind your screen.
- Notice your breathing? How is it? Deep, shallow, smooth, or constricted?
- Slowly allow the outbreath to lengthen. Don't force it. But see if you can gently allow the outbreath to be 50% or **even twice as long as the inbreath**. You can for example count to seven or eight on the outbreath, and count to three or four on the inbreath.

- Do this for two minutes.
- Notice how you feel and what happens to your nervous system when you breathe this way.

Small skills like this can help to build individual resilience. And if mindfulness is taught at an organisation-wide level, along with a deep focus on work habits and skills, it could set the scene for a business becoming more WE-silient as a whole.

In our next blog posts we will write about resilience typologies.

#### **Previous and upcoming blogs:**

**Blog 1** – From Resilience to We-Silience: a multi-level view of resilience

**Blog 2** – How to build individual resilience: the 12 key resilience skills

**Blog 3** – How to build We-silience: building team and organisational habits

**Blog 4** – Leading with We-silience: building leaders' resilience intelligence

**Blog 5** – Discuss the role of mindfulness in building resilience.

**Blog 6** – Resilience profiles

## Sources

1 NICE Guideline 2022 (National Institute of Health and Care Excellence):

[Mental wellbeing at work, p. 50](#)

2 Tang et al., 2009:

[Central and autonomic nervous system interaction is altered by short-term meditation](#)