

Living in the Moment

Mindfulness Meditation



"I was on a plane all the time," recalls Maria Gonzalez. "I thought: if I could find something that would help me arrive at my destination calm, that would be amazing." Amazing yes, but possible? For female executives who fly as part of their professional routine, Gonzalez's goal seems lofty at best.

Fortunately for these women, Gonzalez, President of Argonauta Strategic Alliances Consulting Inc., Toronto, ON, found the answer: Mindfulness Meditation. Rooted in eastern culture and frequently defined as the world's oldest form of meditation, this technique has no religious affiliation or underlying belief system. It is about being present in the moment, learning to create calm in one's life, and refining one's focus and concentration. "It's all about training the mind, just the way you might train the body," Gonzalez explains.

While her business initially focused on strategic alliances, it was not long before she expanded it to include Mindfulness Meditation. "People would say to me when we were negotiating deals that were pretty stressful, 'how are you able to keep your wits about you?' The response was meditation, so they wanted to learn that too, because they saw it in action," she says.

Mindfulness Meditation involves breathing, relaxing the body, and unique mental practices. The mind and body are gently, but consistently, coaxed to maintain a narrow focus on the moment or task at hand. Although our work environment or hectic personal life may require us to multi-task or juggle several items at once, Mindfulness Meditation encourages us to take each item in stride, giving it our full attention at the time, thereby becoming more efficient and effective.

Mindfulness Meditation can help individuals develop and improve concentration, time management, and heightened awareness, all of which can lead to decreased stress and increased productivity. Depending on the extent to which an individual practices, they can, as Gonzalez describes, develop the ability to create calm and concentration at will.

Mindfulness Meditation can ultimately help an individual gain mastery over her or his own mental functions such as concentration. According to 2007 research released by the Centre for Creative Leadership, the average worker is interrupted every 11 minutes on the job. While that may not be a surprise, it takes the same worker an average of 25 minutes to return to the original task! According to Gonzalez, "if you have a trained mind, it takes seconds to come back." As a result, many companies are turning to professionals like Gonzalez to help them introduce Mindfulness Meditation to their work environment. Business leaders are also taking advantage of Mindfulness Coaching to enhance their own effectiveness.

As a result of the enormous influence that this practice has had on her personal and professional life, Gonzalez is eager to share it with others. Below is a practice that she suggests for maximizing concentration and minimizing stress.

MEDITATION EXERCISE:

QUICK TIPS TO GET STARTED

Mindfulness Meditation includes two aspects: formal meditation techniques practiced daily, as well as strategies of Mindfulness implemented in daily life. With training, this enables an individual to be in a state of awareness and in the present moment, creating calm and focus. It takes practice, but it transforms lives.

- Before starting the day or before going to bed, sit or lie quietly, paying attention to the body and relaxing any areas that are tense. Stay focused on the body and when the mind wanders bring the focus back to relaxing. You may wish to do this for 10 minutes.
- Throughout the day, tune in to the senses.
- When in a meeting, really listen. Become aware of being present without allowing the mind to wander.
- When walking to a meeting or just down the street, become aware of the feet to help bring you to the present moment.
- Use the eyes to *see* the buildings or the cars, and the ears to *hear* the sounds, and stay connected to being present.

♥ Jessica Balmer

MARIA GONZALEZ

TITLE: President, Founder
COMPANY: Argonauta Strategic Alliances Consulting Inc., founded 2001
EDUCATION: B Comm., MBA, McGill University
MARITAL STATUS: Married

Maria Gonzalez has had one focus for her entire life. From her post-graduate thesis paper on strategy content and process, to her role in competitive strategy with Royal Bank, to her position with the Strategic Alliances Centre of Excellence for Bank of Montreal, to her current position as president of Argonauta Strategic Alliances Consulting Inc., Gonzalez has a penchant for strategy.

“Argonauta specializes in the area of partnerships and we define strategic alliances as partnerships,” she explains. “It’s based on the notion that in order to have a successful partnership, you have to have a meeting of the minds. Over 70 per cent of alliances continue to fail, so we created a model that actually creates success, which includes having strategic conversations, which normally never occur.” With over 75 successful partnerships in her career, this model is working.

What does she credit as the key to her success? Mindfulness Meditation (pg. 9). “It’s that whole notion of being present and really listening to your partner,” Gonzalez explains. “It’s a very different way of working.” A practitioner for more than 17 years, and now a teacher, Gonzalez implements mindfulness into everything she does and generously advocates its benefits. “What typically happens is people who practice Mindfulness Meditation feel that their lives are transformed, that they have control. As an example, the body has no choice, it functions in the present moment. Your foot hurts: it hurts in the present. The mind, however, has a choice. It can function in the past, it can function in the future, but unless it’s trained, it rarely functions in the present. Mindfulness is really a matter of aligning mind and body and constantly bringing your awareness back to the present.” she says.

In addition to mindfulness, Gonzalez names listening and learning as necessary skills for her success, “Even when I’m brought in for my expertise, I’m still always a student. It’s either the new situation or the dynamic of the people that is different, but there’s always something to learn.” And from her mentors she has learned much: “If you do what you are really good at there is no competition. It’s a little bit more than being true to oneself, it’s more than what that typically implies. It’s really finding your gift, what you are really able to contribute in this life, and if you continue to hone that, you’re unbeatable,” she says.



Gonzalez believes that mentorship is as much a privilege as it is a responsibility, but one that comes with countless benefits. “You can actually see people up close, so you have this unique opportunity to witness and be a part of, in many cases, real genius. That’s the benefit of having a mentor,” she says. “The benefit of being a mentor is that there’s tremendous joy in knowing that you have contributed to someone’s life in some very positive way and that you are not expecting anything in return. It is completely unconditional.”

The advice that she shares with her protégés reflects this: “Do not be driven by the views of others. When you do things that society thinks are impressive or important, but are not aligned with your capabilities or your interests, then you can only be second rate. If you are the best at something, if you are actually aligning your unique capability and expanding that and becoming better and better at it, you can’t fail.” To do this, “Use your own internal compass,” she says.

Meditation has helped her develop her own internal compass, her intuition, and create stillness within. In addition to her husband and mother, it is meditation that inspires her. “With mindfulness you experience joy without cause; it just wells up within you,” she says. Journaling is another source of personal development, which, like meditation, her husband engages in as well. While meditating, Gonzalez finds journaling a valuable tool for recording insights that arise from moments of absolute calm.

In line with this issue’s theme, we asked her how she ultimately defines success. “For me,” she said, “success is experiencing joy.” ♥ Jessica Balmer