



# Raymond A. Mason School of Business

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## EPISODE 36: BECCA MARCUS - MINDFULNESS

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### Ken White

From the College of William & Mary in Williamsburg, Virginia. This is Leadership & Business. The weekly podcast that brings you the latest and best thinking from today's business leaders from across the world. We share the strategies, tactics, and information that can make you a more effective leader, communicator, and professional. I'm your host Ken White. Thanks for listening. It has become so popular that it's been referred to as a movement. The mindfulness movement. Mindfulness is a combination of focused techniques, breathing exercises, and meditation that professionals, executives, and leaders have found helpful. For many, mindfulness has proven to be extremely effective at fighting stress. Those who practice it say it helps them relax, focus, and enjoy life. And they say it's been a positive influence on their jobs and careers. Well, many professionals who practice mindfulness say it has been transformational, and that's why a growing number of companies and organizations now offer mindfulness classes to employees and leaders. Becca Marcus teaches mindfulness at the College of William & Mary, where she works at the campus counseling center. She's a licensed clinical social worker who, through her studies, counseling, and experiences, became interested in mindfulness and now helps people learn to embrace the practice. She joins us on the podcast to discuss mindfulness, what it is, and why it might be right for you. Here's our conversation with Becca Marcus.

### Ken White

Becca, thank you for taking time. You are a busy person, and I appreciate you taking time out of your day to join us today. So thank you very much.

### Becca Marcus

Thank you, Ken. I'm happy to talk about mindfulness.

### Ken White

Who isn't talking about this? It seems like it is everywhere, but I'm not so sure people really understand what it is. How do you define it when you run into someone like me who doesn't know much about it?

Becca Marcus

It's not the easiest thing to define, but I'm going to give you a definition, and then I'll give you some examples.

Ken White

Great.

Becca Marcus

So mindfulness is being fully present in the moment with an attitude of acceptance and non-judgment.

Ken White

And why is that important for us to be there?

Becca Marcus

So we are so caught up in our minds planning, doing, hurrying, worrying, thinking about the past and the future that we barely know what's going on around us. And we miss a lot of what's going around us. But by turning to the present moment, we're able to find a moment of peace within, and we're able to ride the waves of life. It helps us tremendously, and in a few minutes, I'll tell you more about the benefits of mindfulness. But first, I want to explain a little bit more about how we do it and why we do it.

Ken White

Yeah, please. Good.

Becca Marcus

So, first of all, I just want to read my favorite quote by the Dalai Lama because I think this explains why we need mindfulness today in our society. So when asked about humanity, the Dalai Lama said man surprised me the most about humanity because he sacrifices his health in order to make many, and then he sacrifices many to recuperate his health. And then he's so anxious about the future that he does not enjoy the present. The result being that he does not live in the present or the future. He lives as if he is never going to die. And then he dies having never really lived.

Ken White

Wow.

Becca Marcus

So the point of mindfulness is to be there for our lives to experience our lives. It enriches our lives. It enhances our lives, and we learn different techniques to practice to be in the

moment. And I say practice because it's a practice that we keep on doing over and over and over again.

Ken White

Sometimes I think people get confused. In fact, when I was telling people, I was going to meet you. People said how is that similar to meditation. What are the parallels or the differences?

Becca Marcus

Okay, excellent question. Mindfulness has formal practices and informal practices. And I emphasize both of those, and the research that has been done on mindfulness is mainly done on the formal practices. The formal practice of mindfulness involves meditation, and so meditation is a very important part of mindfulness. But I want to explain. I just met a student in the hall a few minutes ago. She was reading a bulletin board about mindfulness, and she says, but I can't do it. I've tried meditation, and I can't empty my mind. And the point of mindfulness is not to empty our mind but to observe what's going on in our mind and to learn to accept it and to learn to have a different relationship instead of our thoughts controlling us. To be able to be peaceful and observe what's going on without being pulled around by it. So meditation is one part, and the other part is informal practices that we use to be more in the moment. And so I teach a course here to students, and we practice all different ways to be in the moment. But one of the ways is just to ask ourselves over and over. Where am I now? Am I right here with what I'm doing? Or am I somewhere in my head? In the future, in the past, or planning, or worrying, and what we try to do is bring ourselves back again and again to the present.

Ken White

It's interesting because so many of the members of our audience are professionals they're in business.

Becca Marcus

Yes.

Ken White

Always thinking ahead.

Becca Marcus

Exactly.

Ken White

Always thinking ahead and not focusing on the present. So how do you get? What is the teaching like? What is it? What does the student experience with you?

Becca Marcus

We start out by just noticing what we see, what we hear, what we smell, the sensations we feel in our body to know what it's like to be present, and then we learn doing daily activities being present. So each student in the training I do chooses one activity a week to be mindful for. So like, one student might take a shower mindfully instead of planning what she's going to do that day and what she needs to study during her shower. She is listening to the sound, she's feeling the temperature and the water, she's smelling the soap, she's enjoying being in that moment, and we'll talk about the benefits. The benefits are quite astounding. And so that's one way that we turn our mind to the present. Just maybe briefly.

Ken White

Yeah.

Becca Marcus

It doesn't mean it needs to take over our day. And some people say that I have so much to do. Well, it helps us be more productive.

Ken White

Sure, and of all the examples, the shower, too, right? Cause we're constantly thinking in the shower, whoever stops to actually experience that right.

Becca Marcus

Exactly.

Ken White

We'll continue our discussion with Becca Marcus on mindfulness in just a minute. Leadership & Business is brought to you by the Center for Corporate Education at the College of William & Mary's Raymond A. Mason School of Business. The Center for Corporate Education can help you and your organization by designing and delivering a customized leadership development program that specifically fits your needs. If you're interested in learning more about the opportunities at the Center for Corporate Education, check out our website at [wmleadership.com](http://wmleadership.com) That's [wmleadership.com](http://wmleadership.com). Now back to our discussion with our guest Becca Marcus on mindfulness.

Ken White

You've mentioned the benefits, and it's certainly something that I wanted to ask about. What are some of the benefits when someone and it takes time to get it? It's not going to happen overnight. Right. When they get there, or they're getting to a certain point, what do they experience?

Becca Marcus

Well, I think the first time the students come into the training, and I lead them through a little exercise, a five-minute exercise of following their breath and watching their thoughts come and go and then going back to their breath immediately, they feel a sense of peace and calm that they're very surprised by. So immediately, by doing some of these practices, we are able to center ourselves, ground ourselves, and calm ourselves. And that also helps us be less reactive. That is one way that we continue to be affected. If you want to know about there are many, many benefits, and would you want me to tell you about some of them?

Ken White

Absolutely, please.

Becca Marcus

Well, there's been a lot of research done on mindfulness, hundreds and maybe thousands of studies. I'm not really sure how many. And so I cannot cite most of what they've found.

Ken White

Sure.

Becca Marcus

But what I do know is it's been found to be extremely effective in helping people with dealing with stress, with anxiety, and even with depression. Some people say it's more effective for depression than anti-depressants. I can't tell you if that's true, but it helps us develop a sense of well-being. It also helps us with our health. It lowers our blood pressure. It helps us deal with pain better. Our immune system improves by use of mindfulness and many, many other benefits. It helps us with sleep. It helps us with life satisfaction. And there's some amazing results that MRIs shows that people who have practiced mindfulness for 30 minutes a day for eight weeks physiologically change their brain.

Ken White

Wow.

Becca Marcus

And the part of the brain that relates the stress decreases, and the part of the brain related to memory, concentration, and satisfaction it increases.

Ken White

Wow. You mentioned time, like 30 minutes a day or something. How much time do you recommend that someone spend?

Becca Marcus

I recommend that people come back to the present moment as often as they can through the day and when they're feeling stressed and we learn through doing various practices like a body scan where we learn to tune into the sensations in our body, we learn to listen to our body and we learn to be aware if we're getting stressed. Every emotion we have comes out as a sensation in our body. So we learn to read that and if we're starting to get stressed, we know we can stop. We can even just take a few breaths and calm down, slow down, so it doesn't have to be a tremendous huge thing, but if we do practice every day. Not only coming to the present moment but also doing meditation. The more we practice, the more we benefit.

Ken White

Sure. If someone finds this fascinating, and I'm sure many do. Where should they start? What's a good way to get moving?

Becca Marcus

I mean, we can find it everywhere. You can read a book about it. You can join a group. Actually, joining a group, if possible, is the best way because they find that people that are part of a group tend to stick with it longer and get less discouraged. I think people doing meditation on their own often get discouraged and think to themselves this is not for me; I'm not good at this which actually when they're in the group, they learn that's not true. They say that everyone has about 50,000 thoughts a day, and about almost 50 percent of the time, we're lost in our minds of somewhere else.

Ken White

Absolutely.

Becca Marcus

So being able to have a way to deal with this in a way to what it is it's exercise for the mind. It's training our mind.

Ken White

I would imagine it has quite an impact and effect on listening. So many executives are not great at listening, and we know from research the reason is they're not listening to the question they're forming their response.

Becca Marcus

Exactly.

Ken White

So, in other words, they're ahead instead of being present exactly like you were talking about. So you mentioned briefly your class. If we go back to that for just a second, so if I'm in the class or a listener is in the class. What's it like? Do we sit at a desk? What do we wear? Where does it all take place?

Becca Marcus

So I, right now, I'm teaching two of them and to grad and undergrad students, and I like to limit it to eight to ten or twelve, and we sit in a circle, and they come in. I ring my chime, and we learn to sit in meditation position, and I lead them through a little exercise of closing their eyes and following their breath where it comes in and out of their body and each time a thought comes into their mind. Just go back to your breath. We do that for a few minutes, and then when we finish, and then each week, we learn two or three different mindfulness practices, which we do together. I teach them breathing techniques, and I teach them meditation techniques. We learn walking mindfully, eating mindfully, listening to music mindfully. And we also learn a meditation pose, we learn all kinds of things, and then they are given homework where they are asked to practice one activity that they do daily do it mindfully and then do some of the exercises we learn do it daily, and then they're also asked to practice gratitude because gratitude is an important part of mindfulness and what we're doing is we're looking around for things in our daily life that we appreciate, and just the act of looking enhances people's enjoyment so much. It's one of the favorite aspects of practicing mindfulness. So each week they come in, we do a little breathing meditation like I told you about, then we learn a skill, we talk about how everyone's doing, they share their challenges their successes, and then we need to learn another skill, and then they go home, and they do their homework and then we report it again, and we only meet four times, and I require them to agree to attend four sessions because I think four times is enough practice that you can start using this on your own in your life.

Ken White

Yeah. And you've seen the benefits in the students, and I'm sure they report them, but you also see them as well.

## Becca Marcus

Yes. And it's transformational. I can't tell you how excited the students are. They are all writing papers about it, doing presentations, and they want everyone. I just was asked one of my students said I want everyone on campus to be exposed to it because they're very excited that they have a way now that they can deal with the ups and downs of life. And it's not just the push away the bad things. It's also to learn to accept all the challenges in our life. So it is being aware with nonjudgment and acceptance.

## Ken White

That's our conversation with Becca Marcus, and that's our podcast for this week. Leadership & Business is brought to you by the Center for Corporate Education at the College of William & Mary's Raymond A. Mason School of Business. The Center for Corporate Education can help you, and your organization get to the next level with business and leadership development programs that specifically fit your needs. If you're interested in learning more about the opportunities at the Center for Corporate Education for you or your organization, check out our website at [wmleadership.com](http://wmleadership.com). That's [wmleadership.com](http://wmleadership.com). Thanks to our guest this week, Becca Marcus, and thanks to you for joining us. I'm Ken White until next time. Have a safe, happy, and productive week.