

# Mindfulness or relaxation: What is more effective for work stress? Literature review

**Alexander Loziak**

Institute of Social Sciences of the Centre of Social and Psychological Sciences SAS

Psychologie a její kontexty 13 (1), 2022, 33–45  
<https://doi.org/10.15452/PsyX.2022.13.0003>



This work is licenced under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International license for non-commercial purposes.



**Abstract Objective.** Work demands for productivity and flexibility are on the rise. In the last 20 years, hourly productivity has increased by 20 % (OECD, 2020). One of the adverse consequences of increased work demands is work stress (Quick & Henderson, 2016). There has been a growing need for organizations to reduce work stress, which is why stress management interventions (SMI) are quickly gaining popularity (Kröll et al., 2017). The aim of this paper is to introduce mindfulness and relaxation as approaches used in stress management interventions (SMI) in the work environment. Mindfulness is an ability we can cultivate with training and consists of two basic skills – monitoring of present-moment experience (based on attention and awareness) and attitude of acceptance and openness towards own experience. Accepting attitude has an essential role in stress management. Relaxation causes stress reduction in two ways: by promoting beneficial physiological processes (improved breathing rate, heart rate) and by focusing on pleasant, relaxing sensations. The paper characterizes these approaches, discussing their efficacy, specificities, differences, and circumstances that support their effectiveness.

**Method.** The efficacy of the investigated approaches was evaluated through the most up-to-date meta-analyses of randomized controlled trials. Papers were searched through the Scopus database.

**Results.** The results of the meta-analyses of mindfulness SMI agreed on satisfactory efficacy, showing a medium effect size. The findings of meta-analyses of relaxation SMI also demonstrated a medium effect size and suggested yoga-based interventions might be most effective. More importantly, both approaches are characterised by certain advantages and disadvantages. The advantages of the mindfulness approach include proven effectiveness in stress reduction and also other benefits in the work environment, such

as improved creativity and problem-solving skills. However, practising mindfulness requires a lot of discipline, time and high commitment. The relaxation approach seems to offer stress reduction but no other benefits. Relaxation is also easier to learn and practice. Therefore, the mindfulness approach and the relaxation approach may be more appropriate for different groups of workers. For workers preferring straightforward instructions, easy-to-understand concepts, and less time-consuming interventions, relaxation is probably a more suitable alternative (Kaspereen, 2012). Highly motivated workers, willing to undergo more time-consuming and harder-to-understand training, may benefit more from mindfulness interventions. Mindfulness interventions may also be more appropriate for workers whose jobs involve a lot of planning and mental work and who may suffer from rumination of negative thoughts (Jain et al., 2007). Therefore, if organisations plan to reduce workers' stress, it is essential to identify workers' preferences and carefully weigh the advantages and disadvantages of each approach.

*Discussion.* Mindfulness and relaxation SMI can both be considered as options for reducing stress in the workplace in certain circumstances. The key is to identify the preferences of the workers in question and ensure that the chosen intervention is implemented well and thoroughly. The article offers a new perspective on the topic of dealing with stress in the workplace. This information is beneficial not only for researchers but also for psychologists/managers seeking solutions for their organisations. The study is limited by the fact that mindfulness and relaxation SMI in the workplace are not researched to the same extent. Future researchers should consider an experimental comparison of quality yoga and mindfulness interventions, in different work settings.

**Keywords** mindfulness, relaxation, work stress, stress management.