

A Mindful Approach to Time Management by Heleo Editors

Laura Vanderkam is the bestselling author of multiple books on productivity and time management, including *I Know How She Does It*, *168 Hours*, and *What the Most Successful People Do Before Breakfast*. She recently joined Leah Weiss, a professor at Stanford Graduate School of Business, writer, and consultant who specializes in the application of mindfulness to workplace environments, for a Heleo Conversation on incorporating mindfulness into our day-to-day lives.

This conversation has been edited and condensed.

Laura: Could you talk a little bit about what you mean by mindfulness and purpose?

Leah: Mindfulness is a term that is being thrown around in a lot of different contexts. My favorite definition is a combination of intention—setting intention for your attention—with an attitude of curiosity or non-judgment. If you use this definition, then the intention maps onto purpose really nicely. When people start practicing, it brings them back to what their purpose is in a really direct way.

Laura: People's attention is all over the place these days. We have a tendency to get distracted. What is the upside of bringing more intention to our attention? What does that do for us?

Leah: When we are clear about what we're intending to pay attention to, then we're able to have our actions map onto our larger purpose. For a lot of us, there's a challenge between what we want our life to look like—and what it actually looks like, in the day to day. When we get this clarity in, "What do I want from my career? What do I want from my home life?" then we are able to think about, "Well, what am I actually doing?"

Laura: You're absolutely right: many of our intentions for attention don't really exist, and we spend time quite mindlessly. I always ask people to try keeping track of their time, ideally for a week. If people haven't done this before, they're often amazed to see that the stories they're telling about their lives, and the things they think matter to them, often [involve] a very small percentage of their time. We spend vast amounts of time on things that are neither enjoyable nor meaningful to ourselves or the people we care about.

"Mindfulness about how we spend our time is so important, because how we spend our hours is how we spend our lives."

Mindfulness about how we spend our time is so important, because how we spend our hours is how we spend our lives. I could think of myself as a writer, but if I don't spend any time writing, I'm not much of a writer. That may be harsh, but that is also true.

But that said, we hear all the time about how mindfulness is important these days, but I suspect that a lot of very busy people have a picture in their heads that being mindful and connecting with their purpose means they need to go sit in a silent retreat in the ashram, the Tibetan retreat. Which I think you have done.

Leah: Guilty.

Laura: Maybe you could speak a little bit about that, but also assure us that we don't personally need to go to Tibet in order to tap into this.

Leah: That's such an important point. I spent a lot of my twenties doing long, 100-day, six-month silent meditation retreats, and trying to delve into the nuances of attention and understand what happens underneath the noise. When I was done, I came out and knew I wanted to have a family and work. I was trying to figure out "How do I bring these practices into the grind of the day-to-day we're all experiencing," and it's not going to work to wake up two hours earlier or add something on at the end of the day.

One of the really interesting conversations I had at that time was with a Franciscan priest, who I went to for spiritual direction. He made the strong point: think of things as a rhythm rather than a balance. Rather than thinking that we have to keep everything going at one time or we have to prioritize quiet, [we should] think of our days as a rhythm that's moving us in the direction of what we want. Around that time, I read the Rule of Benedictine, an almost 2000-year-old Christian text for monastics, on what to do if you want to live a good life. It wasn't just sit and pray all the time, and it wasn't work all the time. It was look at your days and move through the activities of work and service and prayer and community and cleaning and all the obligations.

In the tradition that I practice out of, Tibetan Buddhism, there's a strong emphasis on meditation in action. Mindfulness was never meant to be about closing our eyes and moving away from the world; it was meant to be about bringing our intentions strongly into the work that we were doing. That is the focus in the mindfulness and leadership training that I've been doing—helping people find where their heart is, and to notice how their time moves away from it. It does require training to bring our attention back.

Laura: And anything you're doing can be done with more presentness and intention. You're making your kids waffles, you can make waffles in a way that is more mindful, and that could be a meditation in its own way.

Leah: Exactly. That's one of the great opportunities with our relationships—people know when we are there with them or when our attention is elsewhere. Use those interactions as an opportunity to practice being with what we're actually doing.

Laura: If my mind wanders away from the waffles, what should I do to bring it back?

Leah: Our bodies are a great help with this. Sensation only happens in the present moment. The smells, the feelings, hearing our children in the background, all of those momentary sensations—we can pick one of them and really be there with the process of cooking and putting our full self into that.

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Laura: I vote for smelling the waffles. That's the one that's going to stick with me.

You also have written about setting prompts during the day that can help you tap into mindfulness, that give you a pause to reset. Can you describe those prompts?

Leah: One of the women in my class at the business school was experimenting with an assignment where I gave everyone an opportunity to pick a prompt in their life. She was one of those "always cell phone in hand" type of people. She set her password on her phone to "breathe", and that was a reminder for her to bring her attention to, "Do I want to be checking my phone? Do I need to be checking my email?" She quickly uncovered that underneath that impulse to check there was actually anxiety, and if she could just sit and feel that anxiety, it wasn't the end of her. It didn't destroy her. It was fine, it was just sensation. She was able to stop constantly being on her phone and found a lot of value from that.

Laura: We've talked a little bit before about this idea of purpose. What does that mean in a way that we can relate to?

Leah: Purpose is bigger than self-orientation. There's "capital-P" Purpose, our big goal for our life, and then there's the purpose in any given moment of what our priority is, what we are attending to. One of the really interesting things about purpose is that we're learning from research that it actually maps onto our genome. When we are people who are high in purpose, and whether that's a grand scope purpose or experience our work as purposeful, literally at the genetic level we have less inflammation. We have greater antiviral response. We live longer. We're healthier. It impacts our glycemic index, our waist-to-hip ratio. It's amazing. There's basically nothing purpose doesn't map onto in our bodies.

Laura: [So] there's the big Purpose—what I want on my tombstone—and that's something we could spend years figuring out. But in a more micro-context, I could also say, "What is my purpose here? Like, why are we talking? If I put a phone call on my calendar, what is my purpose here? If I'm trying to write an article, what is my purpose here?"

Because none of these, necessarily individually, is going to go on the tombstone. Probably 99% of the things I've written will not. But it keeps you hooked into the why, and the why helps you make better decisions about how you spend your time. I'm not saying that you won't ever spend your time on things that don't have a particularly good why, or that the why needs to be profound. "What is my purpose here? Why am I doing this?" could be just, "I've always done this. I've done this three times a week for the past 10 years." That's fine. In that small-key concern of the universe, there's no wrong reason for keeping up a tradition. But if it's not something that you care about, then that could be a cue to rethink.

Leah: What do you find helpful for keeping on your "why" as you're moving through your day?

Laura: The interesting thing about time is that it passes whether we think about how we are spending it or not. You're swimming in a moving stream; it's very hard to get your bearings while you're in it. Ideally, you will have looked at your destination before you leap in.

A good way to do this is to think through your weeks before you are actually in that week.

There are certain times that are less spoken for. For many people who work Monday through Friday schedules, Friday afternoon tends to be a slow time.

Time is kind of paused, and [in that moment] you can think about what you would like to do the next week. I recommend people make a very short, three-category priority list for the next week: Career, Relationships, Self. Put just a couple items in each, see where these things can fit. It doesn't 100% mean they will happen, but by having that list, you know that these are things that you want to do.

The beauty of the three-category list, too, is it's very difficult to put nothing in one of those categories. That can guarantee you a more balanced life.

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Leah: One of the things that I've struggled with is when culture gets in the way. I think back to when I had my first child, and my husband had every intention of being there and co-parenting. He was working in an architecture firm where one of the colleagues also had just had their first baby and was literally sending selfies in the labor and delivery room of himself with all his architectural drawings laid out.

This was setting the norm. A month later, my father passed away, and I really needed my husband, but he felt there wasn't the opportunity to not be working around the clock. In architecture, like some professions, the time expectations are huge and unending. What do you do to push back when the culture of your organization is not allowing you to have the [time]?

Laura: There are a couple things you can do. The first is to remind yourself that time is a choice. I'm not saying all the choices are great or that there won't be consequences, but it is still a choice. Making sure that you are still in charge of your time and how you choose to spend it is a key mindset, because it's very easy to fall into victimization.

What I tell people is, "Don't say you don't have time for something." Say, "It's not a priority." I don't have time really means it's not a priority.

That's fine. We can own that truth. At some point, work is going to be a higher priority than spending time with your children or a spouse. We all have to pay the bills, and that's okay, but we should at least acknowledge that.

Also, there are many ways that people can work, even survive that sort of culture, without having to work around the clock. One is building up your own work capital within a firm, because the more expertise you have and the more people need you for that, the more stuff is going to happen when you want it to happen. They won't set a phone call at a time that's inconvenient for you because you have to be on it. That's capital you can cash in when you need it.

You can also just not call attention to what you're doing. In many offices, you could be out visiting a client, trying to drum up work from people, traveling between clients. Nobody really knows what you're doing at any given moment, so if you are, for instance, visiting your child's preschool class, you don't necessarily need to call attention to that fact. You can just do what you want and figure that you will ask for forgiveness rather than permission.

Often we get so hung up on, “Oh, no one else is doing this, I need to ask permission, I need to go on an official part-time schedule in order to get away with this.” No, just work the way you want. If people are unhappy, they’ll fire you, or they’ll bring it to your attention. But the worst is to ponder leaving anyway because you’re not being able to work how you want. Just work how you want and see what happens. Maybe there will be consequences, but maybe not.

Leah: Some occupations have the flexibility where you’re moving in and out of the office, but other jobs, like doctors and nurses and janitors and administrative people who need to be at their desk, they don’t have that flexibility. Then what do we do? How do you amplify your sense of purpose if you’re not going to be able to put in more time during the workweek with your kids? Well you can do things like get more clear about why you’re doing what you’re doing. It might be, like you said, to pay the bills.

One of my favorite studies looks at how people construct their ideas about their work. [During] interviews with janitors at hospitals, for the same job, people can frame it so differently. For one person, it’s menial, it’s meaningless, and for another person, they see themselves as an instrumental part of the healing process. Their keeping it clean is going to save lives. It’s the same job, they both have to be there the same 40 hours a week, but physiologically it’s a different experience.

Laura: We can seek out meaning in any job. Even if you’re just making and destroying widgets, you can smile at your colleagues. You can make their days by being pleasant to be around.

Additionally, if you are in a job where you have zero flexibility, it helps to know just how much time there is outside of work. That’s one reason I ask people to think of life in terms of weeks, because any given day, you could be working long hours, you feel like there wasn’t that much time outside of work, but in the week as a whole, there is.

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There are 168 hours in a week. If you work 40 hours a week, sleep eight hours a night, that leaves 72 hours for other things. If you’re working more than that, 50 hours, that leaves 62 hours for other things. Working 60 hours, that leaves 52 hours for other things, and so on. It’s still a fair amount of time, even if we’re talking pretty excessive work hours.

Knowing that that time is there can help us be more mindful about where it goes. There’s still all this other time that we can choose to spend on things that deserve our attention, and having that mindset can help you feel more purposeful about life in general.

Leah: It seems implicit in what you’re saying that one has to make peace with the different roles that we have. One of the things that I’ve been reflecting on is the implications of perfectionistic parenting, the ongoing striving to be the perfect parent and create the perfect situations that are resulting in helicoptering and unhelpful ways of working with our kids.

The tyranny of the clean house—the ongoing need to organize and have the right products and have everything be perfect—that is mapping onto how we talk about parenting. And it becomes never enough. Even people I know who are with their kids all the time as a primary caregiver, they’re beating up on themselves that they’re not doing

it perfectly enough.

If you can't deal with [the actual vs.] what you see as the ideal, then it's never going to be enough, professionally and personally. But if you can make that shift back to "good enough" parenting—"I'm doing a good enough job. My kids are getting what they need, and that doesn't mean their life is going to be perfect."—that might be a game-changer.

Laura: The good thing, in my case, about having four children, is that you have to let go of any notion of perfectionism, because it's just not going to happen. When [people] have one kid, they're very much like, "Well, I've got to be there at every soccer game, I've got to be there at all my kid's performances." I miss stuff all the time. I have more than one kid and they'll be scheduled at the exact same time. There's no way I could be at both the swim meet and the wrestling meet.

We often have this discussion about working parents—in particular, this idea of, "I missed the softball game because my flight was late, I must examine my whole life and change everything." Well, I missed the softball game, too. It's because I have four kids, but no one ever tells me to get rid of the other children. We all just have to do the best we can, and make the most of the moments we can.

Leah: I love that. One of the things we've learned from our third child is he's actually thriving with the benign neglect. He's doing great. He's so resilient. He goes and gets whatever he needs. It's a very different framework, and it has a lot of upsides to it, that shows what's possible when worrying less about doing things right.

Laura: I think that's the way to go through life. We want to have high standards for ourselves, and we want to do the things that are meaningful to us, but nobody is perfect. Nothing is ever perfect. Better to just embrace life as it goes and enjoy what we can of it, and we'll be a lot happier with how we spend our time, and probably be a lot more mindful too.