

## Brain food

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**Has meditation got a place in social housing? Dawn Foster finds out**



Source: [Istock](#)

In a smart community centre with a chic coffee shop in the lobby, a dozen staff members from all sections of the 5,000-home landlord Poplar Harca turn up for something unusual: a meditation workshop.

Why meditation and not, say, a repairs and maintenance workshop, or a debt advice training session?

'I started doing it three years ago. It worked for me,' Andrea Baker, director of housing, who first tabled the idea explains. 'We pitch ideas to staff like Groupons: if we get enough interest, we run it. We've already got ukulele courses, fitness, running and boot camp clubs – a lot of our ideas come from staff as well.'

Staff who express an interest attend a 90-minute taster session to learn a little about mindfulness, try out some techniques and have a go at some meditation exercises.

Today, *Inside Housing* is attending one of the taster sessions at Poplar Harca's St Paul's Way Centre, in Mile End, east London.

## **Keep calm**

# Mindfulness is a cross between meditation and cognitive behavioural therapy, and has risen in prominence and popularity in the last two years

The scent of coffee fills the ground floor, art by a local Bengali women's group hangs on the walls, and today, a dozen Poplar Harca staff members wait tentatively in an upstairs room.

Those assembled in the room have come from various parts of Poplar Harca's business. Some work in administration, some in repairs and maintenance, some in strategy: the invitation to take part goes out to all staff, whatever their role in the company.

After introductions, some of the science and reasoning behind mindfulness training is explained by Michele Grant, one of the executive directors of Rising Minds, the consultancy delivering this training for Poplar Harca. Mindfulness is a cross between meditation and cognitive behavioural therapy, and has risen in prominence and popularity in the last two years after several research trials led to the practice being recommended by the NHS.

Then an exercise. Everyone visibly becomes a little nervous. We're split into groups of three, and told to help ourselves to a buffet of sandwiches and jugs of water and juice, then return to our group. 'Eat half your food,' Ms Grant instructs. 'while telling the other people in your groups about your to do list.'

After a few minutes, the next instruction: 'Now, eat the other half in silence.' It's awkward, and the reserve in the room hasn't faded yet. There's nothing to occupy our attention but the sound of self-conscious masticating. When we're asked what we noticed, staff mention that they noticed a little more about the flavours and textures, appreciated the food a little more, or ate more slowly, rather than between slices of conversation.

We are instructed to close our eyes and focus first on our breathing, then our body: the contact made between our back and the chair, then between the floor and our feet.

It's not for everyone – most people in the room felt more relaxed and calmer after spending several minutes with closed eyes, in silence focusing on being aware of our breathing. But one attendee with a chronic injury mentioned he'd become more aware of how much his back hurt.

Poplar Harca also offers one-on-one sessions for staff members they think will benefit from very tailored courses. One staff member who mentions in the group that he has been struggling with bereavement and increased personal responsibilities is taken aside and offered individual sessions after the workshop ends.

'It's early days, but we're really seeing both individual and corporate benefits,' Ms Baker says of the experience so far.

### **Brilliant benefits**

Mindfulness training has become more popular and garnered more attention in the media in the last two years, as a way of handling stress. Rising Minds, the local social business which is proving the training today, points out that housing staff are part of the wider community, so their well-being and emotional reactions affect residents as well as immediate colleagues.

Mindfulness teaches that stress can be a trigger for conflict and anti-social behaviour, so the benefits seem obvious to the housing sector. Poplar Harca is considering offering bespoke sessions for residents if the pilot for housing staff continues to go well.

One of the reason for bringing in Rising Minds to create a bespoke programme for Harca staff is less relaxing. The landlord is currently undergoing a restructure, and as a result, many staff are stressed about the future and potential uncertainty over their professional fate.



Transport for London, another organisation facing significant restructuring and possible redundancies, experimented with mindfulness back in 2004, and found that days off due to stress,

depression and anxiety fell by more than 70% in three years, with absences for other health conditions halved.

Some other landlords offer extra-curricular activities to promote team-building and help staff de-stress, though *Inside Housing* were unable to find any offering mindfulness classes. Gentoo run a number of activities including golf lessons, football tournaments, staff choir and family activities including dry-slope skiing, ice-skating and canoeing.

An all-party parliamentary group for well-being economics was this year convened and produced a report advocating mindfulness, especially in education and health, though the report notes: 'Behavioural interventions like mindfulness are not a substitute for addressing the root causes of poor health and low wellbeing, including the structure of the economy.' The report argues 'austerity makes a focus on wellbeing more essential, not less... [it] can not only help target public spending more effectively at improving people's lives, but in many cases has the potential to deliver significant long-term savings by reducing demand on public services'. The mindfulness course costs Poplar Harca £400 for 10 people, and so far 40 staff members have completed the course during work hours, with more signing up.

The rationale behind providing meditation, as well as extracurricular sports and enjoyable activities seems obvious: giving staff the opportunity to let off steam, as well as feel more valued, keeps morale a little higher, sickness rates down, and turnaround low. And realistically, shouldn't employees see themselves as more than just cogs in machines?

Housing, more than any other industry, is at the heart of the community after all. Why not reflect that in the workplace?

## Benefits of mindfulness

The reported benefits of mindfulness training include:

- 'Decoupling' negative emotional reactions from behavior
- Increased attention, concentration, decision-making and problem-solving skills at times of high pressure
- Higher levels of care and concern in managers
- an ability to hold a wider perspective and greater ability to understand emotions and work with them more effectively.

Source: *Rising Minds*