

SUPER-TASKING IN A VUCA WORLD: A MINDFULNESS-BASED APPROACH

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Introduction

The world is changing faster than at any time in human history. For example, human knowledge increases at an incredible rate. It was estimated that by 1950 human knowledge doubled every 25 years but now our knowledge is almost doubling every day and soon it will be every 12 hours(1). The rapidly changing world has brought a new set of challenges to the humankind as Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity and Ambiguity becoming more prominent. Thus, we live in a VUCA world.

VUCA is an acronym first developed by the American military during the Afghan and Iraqi invasion, where the situation was Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, and Ambiguous. The acronym describes the countless unpredictable variables and factors that affect the corporate sector which has demanded more productive disruptions to continue to establish a positive result into the future(2).

In a recent article in Forbes, Jeroen Kraaijenbrink has made an attempt to define the four key elements in relation to the corporate sector(3).

Accordingly, *Volatility* refers to the speed of change in an industry, market or the world in general. It is associated with fluctuations in demand, turbulence and short time to markets and it is well-documented in the literature on industry dynamism. The more volatile the world is, the more and faster things change.

Uncertainty refers to the extent to which we can confidently predict the future. Part of uncertainty is perceived and associated with people's inability to understand what is going on. Uncertainty, though, is also a more objective characteristic of an environment. Truly uncertain environments are those that don't allow any prediction, also not on a statistical basis. The more uncertain the world is, the harder it is to predict.

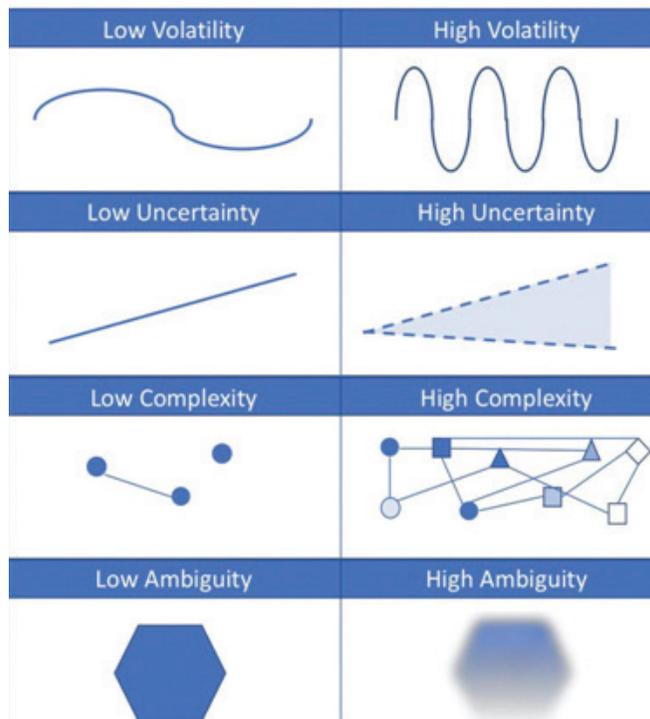
Complexity refers to the number of factors that we need to consider, their variety and the relationships between them. The more factors, the greater their variety and the more they are

interconnected, the more complex an environment is. Under high complexity, it is impossible to fully analyze the environment and come to rational conclusions. The more complex the world is, the harder it is to analyze.

Ambiguity refers to a lack of clarity about how to interpret something. A situation is ambiguous, for example, when information is incomplete, contradicting or too inaccurate to draw clear conclusions. More generally it refers to fuzziness and vagueness in ideas and terminology. The more ambiguous the world is, the harder it is to interpret.

Furthermore, Jeroen Kraaijenbrink is of the view that the four terms are related and make our environment - the world, a market, an industry which is harder to grasp and control. He has made an attempt to visualize the four elements which is given below.

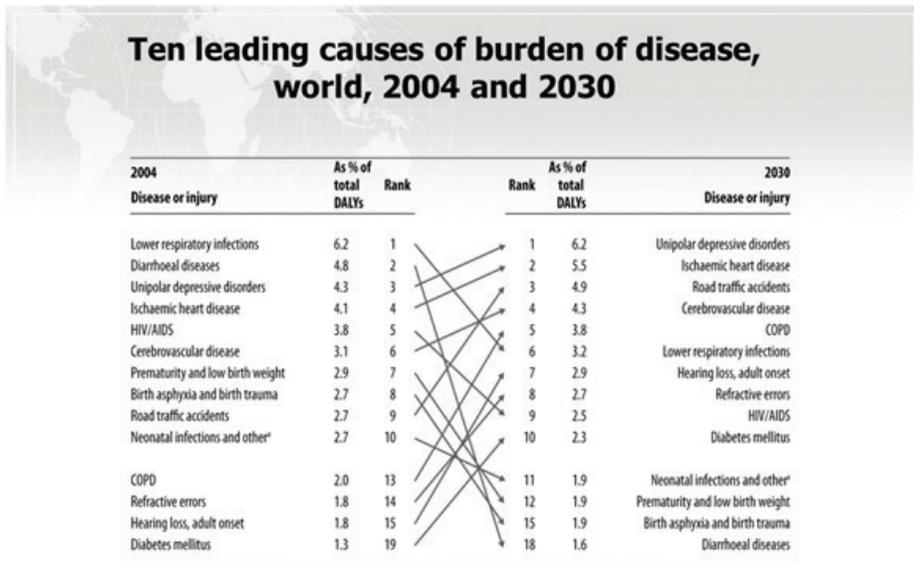
Visual depiction of VUCA world adopted from Forbes Dec 19, 2018



This has led to a situation where we are seeing large changes in a less predictable future with exponential more options to choose from. This pressures us to make faster decisions, at the same time as processing more information. Hence, leading in our VUCA world is difficult and the humankind is now becoming a highly vulnerable group to the emerging lifestyle challengers.

For example, let us look at the ten leading causes of burden of disease particularly future projections(4). According to the World Health Organization (WHO) lower respiratory tract infections are the leading cause of diseases in 2004. However, unipolar depressive disorders to take the number one position in 2030. According to the same projection, the number two would be ischemic heart diseases. This is a clear sign of deterioration of mental health and physical health.

Illustration of ten leading causes of burden of disease, 2004 and 2030 (Adopted from world Health Organization).



It is estimated that one in four people in the world will be affected by mental or neurological disorders at some point in their lives(5). This impacts our day to day life and future potential in addition to the economic impact which is estimated to be USD 16 trillion between 2010 and 2030(6).

Thus there is a greater need for specific life skills to cope with the ever increasing mental and physical demands as well as to cultivate exceptional skills such as super tasking to be more productive. In this context Mindfulness is a promising skill that one can cultivate. Forbes human resource council reported that an employee who practiced mindfulness actually gained 62 minutes of productivity each week, to go along with less stress, less pain and better sleep. Furthermore, Organizations such as Google, Aetna, Mayo Clinic, and the U.S. Army use

mindfulness training to improve workplace functioning and nearly 13% of U.S. workers report engaging in mindfulness-enhancing practices. It is reported that mindfulness training programs incubated at companies like Google, Ford and American Express helped grow their revenue to a significant extent.

The reason for this interest is simple and compelling as mindfulness appears to have broadly positive impacts on human functioning. Research in such disciplines as psychology, neuroscience, and medicine provides a wealth of evidence that mindfulness affects attention, cognition, emotions, behaviour, and physiology in positive ways. It is also suggested that mindfulness is linked to better workplace functioning.

Mindfulness allows the recognition of one's own internal bodily reactions by increasing interoceptive awareness and, at the same time, promotes experiencing without judgment and the development of non-reactivity to internal experience. The effects of mindfulness on mental and physical health may be mediated through increased resilience to stress(7).

The concept of mindfulness, emerged from Buddhist philosophy and is difficult to describe. However, in simple terms mindfulness can be defined as a "receptive attention to and awareness of present events and experience". Therefore, it is a status of the mind one can experience.

This can be further realized by understanding unmindfulness which is a closer experience to most of us.

Imagine that it is Sunday. You just started the day. You are bored. No plan in your mind as it is a free day. As a random act, you come to the living room, seated in a couch and humming your favourite tune.

Initially you pay close attention to your act. But the sound of humming gradually fades away as you started feeling bored. Suddenly you notice your notebook on the table which reminds you what you need to do tomorrow at the office.



You begin to think about office work that you need to attend next week. The assignments you need to accomplish. Meetings you need to attend. The presentations you need to deliver.

Then in a fraction of a second, you go back to the last week, where your presentation went wrong. It was a misery. You started regenerating the incident experiencing the pain. This rumination happens for a while before you jump into the future. You started feeling that your future presentation is also likely to go wrong. You started seeing your failure. The pain that you will be going through.



Suddenly you hear the doorbell and you are back. You

look at the clock and found you have caught yourself mind wandering more than an hour.

We spend a significant number of our awakening hours mind wandering. Not only when we are bored, but also when we perform tasks that we are used to doing, compared with when we perform novel and challenging tasks. Most of the time, **our mind accidentally wanders off without us noticing.**



“Mind wandering is a period of time when an individual is thinking of something that is unrelated to the task he/she is performing”.

The end result is a huge inner chatter or a mental noise. Sometimes the mind loves to occupy itself with this mental chatter, dragging the individual down and never seems to stop.

Getting rid of the inner chatter makes the mind more clear, attentive making the individual more productive, creative and empowered.

However, it takes time with regular practice and proper guidance to cultivate mindfulness to a significant extent so that mindfulness becomes a way of living. Considering existing knowledge together with the experience of practice of mindfulness, an eight-week module was developed that takes an individual through a journey of mindfulness. The module comprises of 8 steps from simple concepts to mindful living. We implemented this module in a corporate setting and each employee had to practice mindfulness one hour a week with the guidance of a mindfulness practitioner. As a measure of the process, a few psychological markers were measured before and after the program. They are as follows:

1. Psychological well-being

Measured by the scale developed by Carol Ryff(8) (Annex I)

- The scale comprises six factors which contribute to an individual’s psychological well-being
 1. Self-acceptance
 2. Personal growth
 3. Purpose in life
 4. Environmental mastery
 5. Autonomy
 6. Positive relations with others
- The psychological wellbeing is attained by achieving a state of balance affected by both challenging and rewarding life events

2. Perceived stress

Measured by the Perceived Stress Scale (PSS)(9) (Annex II)

- This theory was developed to measure the degree to which situations in one's life are appraised as stressful.
- It was developed by Sheldon Cohen and his colleagues in 1983.
- PSS is one of the most widely used psychological instruments for measuring nonspecific perceived stress.
- It has been used in studies assessing: the stressfulness of situations, the effectiveness of stress-reducing interventions, and the extent to which there are associations between psychological stress and psychiatric and physical disorders.

3. Mindfulness Attention Awareness

Measured by the Mindfulness Attention Awareness Scale (MAAS) (10). (Annex III)

- This is the most popular scale for measuring mindfulness in positive psychology.
- This theory was developed by Kirk Warren Brown and Richard M. Ryan in 2003.
- It treats mindfulness as a trait that involves two components of consciousness: awareness and attention.
- The MAAS measures an individual's tendency to enter a state of mindfulness through the individual's frequency of having certain experiences related to mindfulness and mindlessness.

Results of above tests were very promising and given below is a summary of findings illustrated in respective graphs.

1. Perceived stress before and after the programme

Stress reduced by 28 %. This reduction is highly significant at $p < 0.00$.

2. Mindfulness Attention Awareness before and after the programme

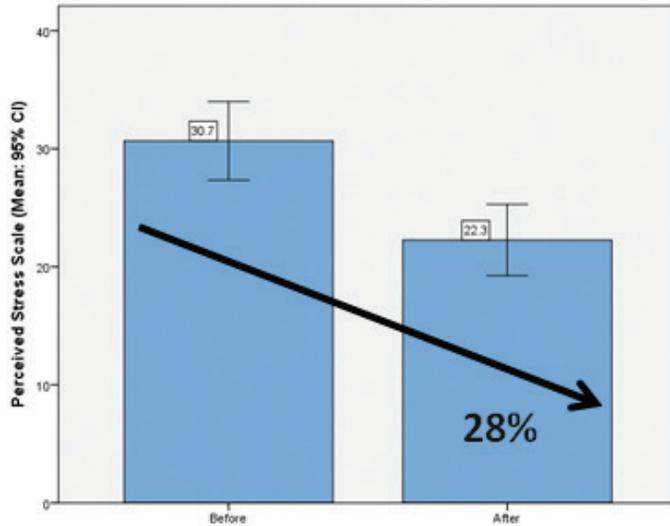
Mindfulness attention is increased by 35%. This increase is highly significant at $p < 0.001$.

3. Psychological well-being before and after the programme

Psychological well-being improved by 10%. This improvement is highly significant at $p < 0.001$.

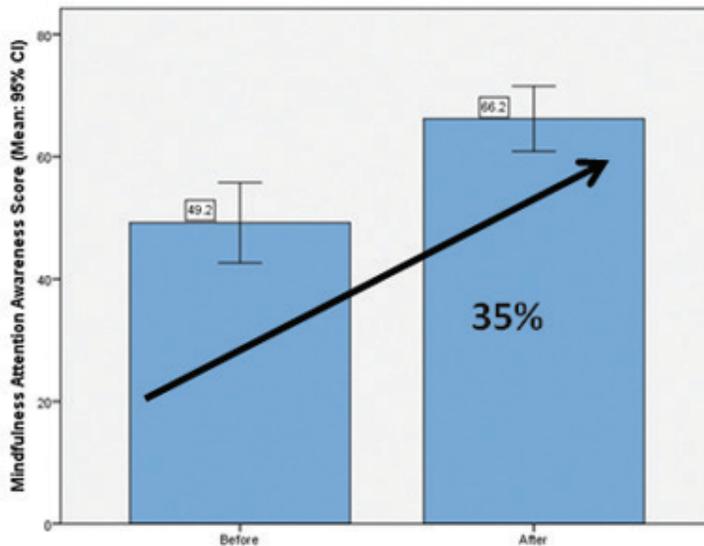
The respective graphs are given below.

1. Perceived stress before and after the programme



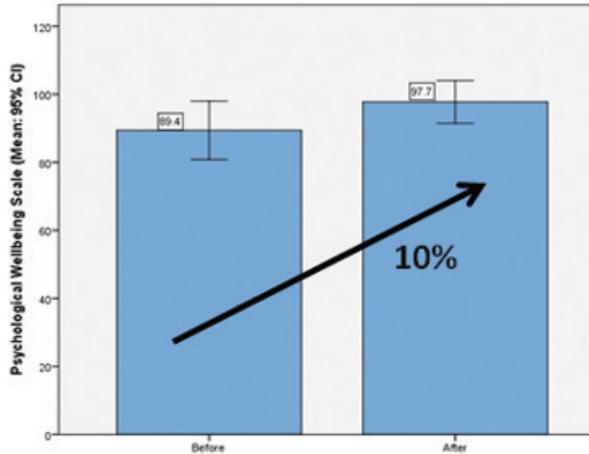
Stress reduced by 28 %. This reduction is highly significant at the $p < 0.00$.

2. Mindfulness Attention Awareness before and after the programme



Mindfulness attention is increased by 35%. This increase is highly significant at $p < 0.001$.

3. Psychological well-being before and after the programme

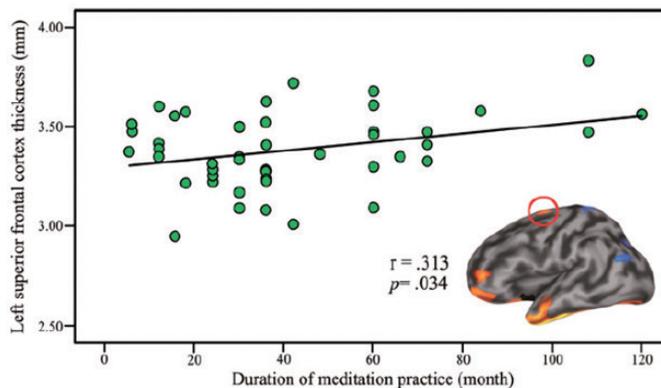


Psychological well-being improved by 10%. This progress is highly significant at $p < 0.001$. It is important to consider scientific aspect of these results.

In a scientific article of comprehensive meta-analysis of MRI studies it is concluded that meditation practice induces functional and structural brain modifications, especially in areas involved in attention, executive functions and memory formation(11).

The graph below illustrates the impact of mindfulness on the thickness of the left superior frontal cortex of the brain. Accordingly, with the increase of the duration of the practice, the thickness has improved. This theory is now known as Neuro Plasticity and indicates specific actions of neurons. The higher activity of the frontal cortex explains the changes occur in psychological markers as the mindfulness practice progress as explained earlier.

The effect of meditation on brain structure: Cortical thickness mapping and diffusion tensor imaging (Adopted from the Journal of Social Cognitive and Affective Neuroscience 2013)



Based on these findings practice of mindfulness is gaining recognition as a life skill, as it empowers the practitioner by being more resilience. Furthermore, the individual can experience himself the efficiency improvement by gaining a super skill which I defined as super tasking.

Conclusion

Despite many external challenges faced by the banking sector due to external factors, there is growing body of evidence to suggest that stress in the banking workplace is now at critical levels, and that it can have deleterious psychological effects on workers, and on their physical health, and that organizations, too, are affected. Most studies showed that mental health problems had increased in the banking sector, and that they were stress-related. Examples began with anxiety and depression, carried on through maladaptive behaviors, and ended in job burnout. In this context mindfulness based approaches seem a promising catalyst to make the working environment a better place facilitating individuals to reach their fullest potential.

Acknowledgement

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Appendices

- Annexure I: Scale to measure Psychological well-being
- Annexure II: Scale to measure Perceived Stress (PSS)
- Annexure III: Scale to measure Mindfulness Attention Awareness (MAAS)

Annexure I: Scale to measure Psychological well-being

18- Item Psychological Wellbeing Scale

Instructions: Circle one response below each statement to indicate how much you agree or disagree.

1. "I like most parts of my personality."

1 Strongly agree	2 Somewhat agree	3 A little agree	4 Neither agree nor disagree	5 A little disagree	6 Somewhat disagree	7 Strongly disagree
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2. "When I look at the story of my life, I am pleased with how things have turned out so far."

1 Strongly agree	2 Somewhat agree	3 A little agree	4 Neither agree nor disagree	5 A little disagree	6 Somewhat disagree	7 Strongly disagree
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3. "Some people wander aimlessly through life, but I am not one of them."

1 Strongly agree	2 Somewhat agree	3 A little agree	4 Neither agree nor disagree	5 A little disagree	6 Somewhat disagree	7 Strongly disagree
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4. "The demands of everyday life often get me down."

1 Strongly agree	2 Somewhat agree	3 A little agree	4 Neither agree nor disagree	5 A little disagree	6 Somewhat disagree	7 Strongly disagree
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5. "In many ways I feel disappointed about my achievements in life."

1 Strongly agree	2 Somewhat agree	3 A little agree	4 Neither agree nor disagree	5 A little disagree	6 Somewhat disagree	7 Strongly disagree
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6. "Maintaining close relationships has been difficult and frustrating for me."

1 Strongly agree	2 Somewhat agree	3 A little agree	4 Neither agree nor disagree	5 A little disagree	6 Somewhat disagree	7 Strongly disagree
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7. "I live life one day at a time and don't really think about the future."

1 Strongly agree	2 Somewhat agree	3 A little agree	4 Neither agree nor disagree	5 A little disagree	6 Somewhat disagree	7 Strongly disagree
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8. "In general, I feel I am in charge of the situation in which I live."

1 Strongly agree	2 Somewhat agree	3 A little agree	4 Neither agree nor disagree	5 A little disagree	6 Somewhat disagree	7 Strongly disagree
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9. "I am good at managing the responsibilities of daily life."

1 Strongly agree	2 Somewhat agree	3 A little agree	4 Neither agree nor disagree	5 A little disagree	6 Somewhat disagree	7 Strongly disagree
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10. "I sometimes feel as if I've done all there is to do in life."

1 Strongly agree	2 Somewhat agree	3 A little agree	4 Neither agree nor disagree	5 A little disagree	6 Somewhat disagree	7 Strongly disagree
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11. "For me, life has been a continuous process of learning, changing, and growth."

1 Strongly agree	2 Somewhat agree	3 A little agree	4 Neither agree nor disagree	5 A little disagree	6 Somewhat disagree	7 Strongly disagree
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12. "I think it is important to have new experiences that challenge how I think about myself and the world."

1 Strongly agree	2 Somewhat agree	3 A little agree	4 Neither agree nor disagree	5 A little disagree	6 Somewhat disagree	7 Strongly disagree
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13. "People would describe me as a giving person, willing to share my time with others."

1 Strongly agree	2 Somewhat agree	3 A little agree	4 Neither agree nor disagree	5 A little disagree	6 Somewhat disagree	7 Strongly disagree
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14. "I gave up trying to make big improvements or changes in my life a long time ago"

1 Strongly agree	2 Somewhat agree	3 A little agree	4 Neither agree nor disagree	5 A little disagree	6 Somewhat disagree	7 Strongly disagree
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15. "I tend to be influenced by people with strong opinions"

1 Strongly agree	2 Somewhat agree	3 A little agree	4 Neither agree nor disagree	5 A little disagree	6 Somewhat disagree	7 Strongly disagree
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16. "I have not experienced many warm and trusting relationships with others."

1 Strongly agree	2 Somewhat agree	3 A little agree	4 Neither agree nor disagree	5 A little disagree	6 Somewhat disagree	7 Strongly disagree
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17. "I have confidence in my own opinions, even if they are different from the way most other people think."

1 Strongly agree	2 Somewhat agree	3 A little agree	4 Neither agree nor disagree	5 A little disagree	6 Somewhat disagree	7 Strongly disagree
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18. "I judge myself by what I think is important, not by the values of what others think is important."

1 Strongly agree	2 Somewhat agree	3 A little agree	4 Neither agree nor disagree	5 A little disagree	6 Somewhat disagree	7 Strongly disagree
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Annexure II: Scale to measure Perceived Stress (PSS)

Perceived Stress Scale

These questions ask you about your feelings and thoughts during the last month. In each case, you will be asked to indicate how often you feel or thought certain way. Although some questions are similar, there are differences between them and you should treat each one as a separate question.

The best approach to answer each question fairly quickly. That is, do not try to count up the number of times you felt a particular way, but rather indicate the alternative that seems like a reasonable estimate.

Please tick an appropriate box.

1. In the last month, how often have been upset because of something that happened Unexpectedly?

0 Never	1 Almost never	2 Sometimes	3 Fairly often	4 Very often
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2. In the last month, how often have you felt that you were unable to control the important things in your life?

0 Never	1 Almost never	2 Sometimes	3 Fairly often	4 Very often
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3. In the last month, how often have you felt nervous and stressed?

0 Never	1 Almost never	2 Sometimes	3 Fairly often	4 Very often
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4. In the last month, how often have you dealt successfully with irritating life hassles?

4 Never	3 Almost never	2 Sometimes	1 Fairly often	0 Very often
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5. In the last month, how often have you felt that you were effectively coping with important changes that were occurring in your life?

4 Never	3 Almost never	2 Sometimes	1 Fairly often	0 Very often
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6. In the last month, how often have you felt confident about your ability to handle your personal problems?

4 Never	3 Almost never	2 Sometimes	1 Fairly often	0 Very often
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7. In the last month, how often have you felt that things were going your way?

4 Never	3 Almost never	2 Sometimes	1 Fairly often	0 Very often
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8. In the last month, how often have you found that you could not cope with all the things that you had to do?

0 Never	1 Almost never	2 Sometimes	3 Fairly often	4 Very often
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9. In the last month, how often have you been able to control irritations in your life?

4 Never	3 Almost never	2 Sometimes	1 Fairly often	0 Very often
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10. In the last month, how often have you felt that you were on top of things?

4 Never	3 Almost never	2 Sometimes	1 Fairly often	0 Very often
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11. In the last month, how often have you been angered because of things that happened that were outside of your control?

0 Never	1 Almost never	2 Sometimes	3 Fairly often	4 Very often
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12. In the last month, how often have you found yourself thinking about things that you have to accomplish?

0 Never	1 Almost never	2 Sometimes	3 Fairly often	4 Very often
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13. In the last month, how often have been able to control the way you spend time?

4 Never	3 Almost never	2 Sometimes	1 Fairly often	0 Very often
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14. In the last month, how often have you felt difficulties were piling up so high that you could not overcome them?

0 Never	1 Almost never	2 Sometimes	3 Fairly often	4 Very often
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Annexure III: Scale to measure Mindfulness Attention Awareness (MAAS)

Mindfulness Attention Awareness Score

Below is a collection of statements about your everyday experience. Using the 1-6 scale given, please indicate how frequently or infrequently you currently have each experience. Please answer according to what really reflects your experience rather than what you think your experience should be.

1. I could be experiencing some emotion and not be conscious of it until sometime later.

1 Almost always	2 Very frequently	3 Somewhat frequently	4 Somewhat infrequently	5 Very infrequently	6 Almost never
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2. I break or spill things because of carelessness, not paying attention, or thinking of something else.

1 Almost always	2 Very frequently	3 Somewhat frequently	4 Somewhat infrequently	5 Very infrequently	6 Almost never
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3. I find it difficult to stay focused on what's happening in the present

1 Almost always	2 Very frequently	3 Somewhat frequently	4 Somewhat infrequently	5 Very infrequently	6 Almost never
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4. I tend to walk quickly to get where I'm going without paying attention to what I experience along the way.

1 Almost always	2 Very frequently	3 Somewhat frequently	4 Somewhat infrequently	5 Very infrequently	6 Almost never
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5. I tend not to notice feelings of physical tension or discomfort until they really grab my attention.

1 Almost always	2 Very frequently	3 Somewhat frequently	4 Somewhat infrequently	5 Very infrequently	6 Almost never
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6. I forget a person's name almost as soon as I've been told it for the first time

1 Almost always	2 Very frequently	3 Somewhat frequently	4 Somewhat infrequently	5 Very infrequently	6 Almost never
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7. It seems I am "running on automatic" without much awareness of what I'm doing.

1 Almost always	2 Very frequently	3 Somewhat frequently	4 Somewhat infrequently	5 Very infrequently	6 Almost never
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8. I rush through activities without being really attentive to them.

1 Almost always	2 Very frequently	3 Somewhat frequently	4 Somewhat infrequently	5 Very infrequently	6 Almost never
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9. I get so focused on the goal I want to achieve that I lose touch with what I am doing right now to get there.

1 Almost always	2 Very frequently	3 Somewhat frequently	4 Somewhat infrequently	5 Very infrequently	6 Almost never
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10. I do jobs or tasks automatically, without being aware of what I'm doing.

1 Almost always	2 Very frequently	3 Somewhat frequently	4 Somewhat infrequently	5 Very infrequently	6 Almost never
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11. I find myself listening to someone with one ear, doing something else at the same time.

1 Almost always	2 Very frequently	3 Somewhat frequently	4 Somewhat infrequently	5 Very infrequently	6 Almost never
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12. I drive places on "automatic pilot" and then wonder why I went there.

1 Almost always	2 Very frequently	3 Somewhat frequently	4 Somewhat infrequently	5 Very infrequently	6 Almost never
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13. I find myself preoccupied with the future or the past.

1 Almost always	2 Very frequently	3 Somewhat frequently	4 Somewhat infrequently	5 Very infrequently	6 Almost never
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14. I find myself doing things without paying attention.

1 Almost always	2 Very frequently	3 Somewhat frequently	4 Somewhat infrequently	5 Very infrequently	6 Almost never
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15. I snack without being aware that I'm eating

1 Almost always	2 Very frequently	3 Somewhat frequently	4 Somewhat infrequently	5 Very infrequently	6 Almost never
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