

Illinois employees reduce stress during Take Ten for Stress Relief Challenge!

By Audrey Hoene, Campus Wellbeing Services Student Intern

Over 400 Illinois employees embraced their inner Zen during our recent Take Ten for Stress Relief Challenge. The goal of the self-paced challenge was to introduce participants to new stress relief activities, and help them foster a daily habit. Participants practiced a variety of relaxation activities including tai chi, yoga, different forms of meditation and guided imagery. Continue reading to learn what employees had to say about this fun wellness activity.

Departments join in

Co-workers in some departments found that taking part together made the event more fun and easier to do. Dawn Flynn and Pat Walsh and several co-workers at Procurement Services at Facilities & Services completed stress relief activities together. Pat inspired coworkers to sign up for the challenge. The first week of the challenge, the office stopped working for ten minutes daily, and went into a spare room to de-stress. They tried some of the activities from the McKinley website such as head to toe muscle relaxation. They also did some office yoga exercises: but Pat and Dawn laughingly warned not to attempt these on rolling chairs!

Other departments had several participants. Departments with the highest involvement included Cooperative Extension (23), Housing (18), and the Library (17).

Benefits Galore

Employees reaped a myriad of benefits from the challenge. These ranged from lowered blood pressure to better focus at work. “Doing activities during the day helps lower my blood pressure and just makes me feel better,” remarked Pat Walsh. Robin Johnston, from the U of I Extension, said she became more aware of her stress levels while sitting at work focusing on numerous tasks.

Doing the activities during work helped Dawn Flynn focus. “Work is mentally exhausting; these activities give your mind a break and a recharge to go back refreshed.”

Teoko Person from the Child Development Laboratory found practicing relaxation techniques helped calm her nerves before giving a presentation. She was in her office feeling a little anxious when she closed her eyes and only focused on her breathing while speaking

encouraging words to herself. Teoko said, “I felt so much more relaxed after that focus on breathing. My presentation flowed well, and I feel that the breathing exercises made a difference.”

Participants saw value at home too. Improved sleep was a commonly cited benefit. Pat Walsh said she would shut off the TV at night and do guided mindfulness exercises or muscle relaxation which put her right to sleep.



Pat Walsh and Dawn Flynn learned to relax at work and at home

Staying on track

Many participants appreciated the online tracking system and weekly e-newsletter, saying it helped keep them motivated. Robin Johnston stated, “The tracking system, as well as my friend I did walking meditations with kept me accountable.” Heidi Thiele from Civil & Environmental Engineering stated, “I liked the accountability and the features around each of the methods. I'm definitely keeping those newsletters for future reference! There were a lot of great resources mentioned throughout the course as well, that I'd never even knew existed & could be utilized!” Katrina Smith from the Child Development Laboratory echoed, “Being held accountable by tracking gave me additional motivation to use the techniques. It's difficult to

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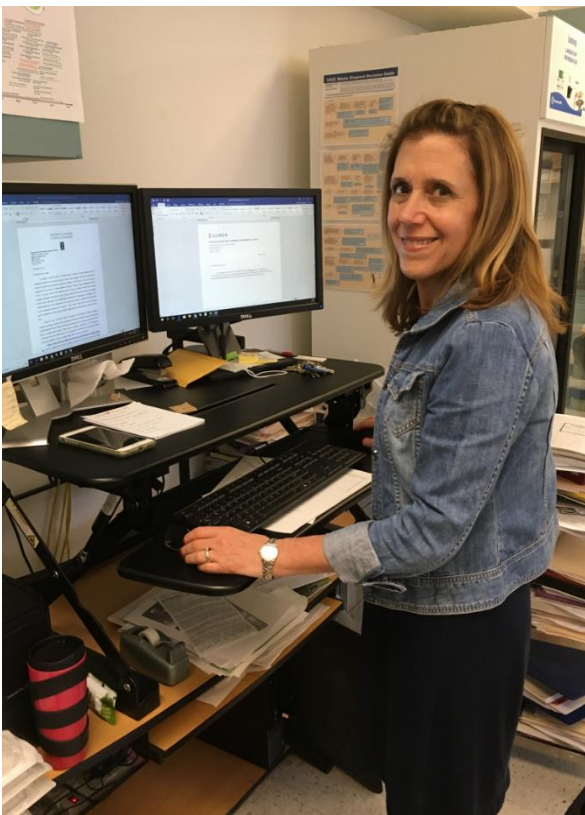
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find time on my own to do them, knowing that no one is going to hold me accountable. I'm always last to take care of myself.”

Trying something new

Sixty-two percent of participants tried a new stress relief technique during the challenge. Trying new activities was useful to many. “I liked the muscle relaxation. That was new to me and really helped,” remarked Jenness Drummond from Facilities & Services.

Marcia Monaco Siegel, a research assistant professor in the Department of Food Science and Human Nutrition, tried mindfulness exercises with the help of an app called Headspace. She used this app in the evening after she was done with work for the day. Marcia mentioned, “I learned mindfulness was an exercise of self-compassion. When my mind wandered off, I learned to accept where it went and not to blame myself. I didn’t have to be perfect. I’m normally an intense person, so to let go and be in tune with my body brought a sense of calm.” Marcia mentioned she missed the activity on the days that she skipped. “There was definitely a difference in level of agitation between the days I did and didn’t complete the mindfulness activities.”



Marcia Monaco Siegel began a new practice of mindful meditation

Keeping it up

Everyone who reached the challenge goal was entered into a prize drawing: 60 participants received stress relief kits. While some participants got prizes, just about everyone plans to continue. In fact over 99 percent of participants said they will keep doing stress relief exercises after the challenge ends. Prize winner Teoko Pearson mentioned, “It’s nice the work payed off, but it didn’t matter if I got a prize. I found the challenge interesting. It was so beneficial for me learn more ways to take care of myself.”

Many participants discovered what research has already shown: that daily practice of relaxation activities greatly improves overall health and wellbeing. Heather Simmons, a Law & Business Reference Librarian, participated in the challenge all four weeks. She also teaches mindfulness sessions for law students here on campus. She believes that students who consistently come to the sessions do better in classes, have less stress, and overall are more successful. Heather stated, “If everyone in the world practiced mindfulness, there would be no wars, and we would solve a lot of humanity’s problems.”



Participant Heather Simmons teaches mindfulness to Law students