

A woman with her hair in a ponytail, wearing a white halter-neck top, is sitting in a meditative lotus position on a stone ledge. She has her hands resting on her knees in a mudra. The background shows a calm blue ocean under a clear sky.

Mind

Focusing awareness on your breath doesn't just calm you down; it can physically change your brain.

Sarah Lang looks at the scientifically proven benefits of mindfulness meditation

games



What do Gwyneth Paltrow, Emma Watson and Jared Leto have in common? As well as film credits, good looks and big bank balances, they also have the popular app Headspace on their smartphones. Also accessed via its website, Headspace dubs itself a gym membership for the mind – and, like many gyms, it offers a free trial, called Take 10. Each day for 10 days you listen to a 10-minute audio file of a guided mindfulness meditation, where you quietly observe rather than ignore or feed distracting thoughts and feelings then return attention to your breath. If you like what you hear, you can sign up to Headspace’s monthly or yearly paid programme, and move onto different levels or themes (such as sleep or anxiety). At just three years old, Headspace has 2.7 million active members in 150 countries.

ANCIENT MEETS NEW

Paradoxically, in this age of technological distractions, it’s taking an app to help us slow down, breathe and just be. But mindfulness meditation is no recent invention: it is based on the 3000-year-old Buddhist notion of Sati (a spiritual awareness and one of the Seven Factors of Enlightenment). It was Dr Jon Kabat-Zinn who brought it to the West. After studying with Buddhist teachers, he integrated their practices with scientific principles and in 1979 founded the Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) programme – and later the Centre for Mindfulness for Medicine, Health Care and Society – at the University of Massachusetts Medical School. The MBSR programme is now offered by hospitals, health organisations and prisons in more than 30 countries.

So how’s it different to plain old

‘meditation’? The word ‘meditation’ usually refers to spending time in quiet thought for religious purposes or relaxation. ‘Mindfulness meditation’ is simply the best-known type of meditation: a sitting practice for a set period of time where you listen to guided meditations/audio tracks that help you be present, pay attention to and accept whatever is there in the moment. A skill developed through mindfulness meditation, ‘mindfulness’ is the ability to be present, pay attention to and accept whatever is there in the moment even when you’re not meditating.

Does it work? Yes. Unlike some alternative therapies, it’s backed up by science. A 2015 meta-analysis of systematic reviews of randomised controlled trials (in other words, the gold standard of scientific research) shows mindfulness-meditation programmes alleviate symptoms in many mental and physical conditions. Between them, more than 2000 studies have found mindfulness meditation has significant benefits – from reducing stress, anxiety, depression and pain to improving sleep.

Incredibly, a 2011 research trial found mindfulness meditation can physically change the brain. After an eight-week MBSR programme, MRI scans of participants’ brains showed decreased grey-matter density in the amygdala (where anxiety and fear arise) and increased grey-matter density in the hippocampus (important for learning, memory, self-awareness and compassion). Let’s hear it for brain plasticity.

JUST DO IT

Today, many people practise mindfulness meditation to feel calmer, centred, and more present, and to improve focus and memory. As little as 10 minutes a day for eight weeks can make a difference.

A common misconception is that mindfulness meditation is about turning off your thoughts

It’s hard to understand mindfulness meditation without giving it a go. Following the guidance of a soothing voice on an audio track, you sit or lie down, close your eyes, and take slow, deep breaths, focusing awareness on your breath either at the nostrils or the belly. Some tracks simply involve deep breathing, while others involve body scans (focusing on the sensations in one part of the body at a time) and progressive muscle relaxation (where you clench and unclench different muscles). Some focus on a particular issue (eg stress, pain, anxiety). The idea is to try a variety of tracks by different teachers, and find out whose voice you like and what works for you.

It takes patience, but many people find the more you do it, the easier it gets. You might start at 10 minutes then build up to 45 minutes. A common misconception is that mindfulness meditation is about turning off your thoughts or becoming blank. It’s not. When your mind wanders – and it will – the idea is to recognise your thoughts, emotions and sensations in a non-judgmental way. You can notice them but choose not to feed them, returning your attention to the breath and the present moment. After all, we exercise our bodies, so why not exercise our minds? >>



My path to zen

Initially sceptical about mindfulness meditation's claims, our writer tried it out – with startling results

'What a silly idea,' I thought. It was January 2011 and I had just started seeing Lisa Reynolds, a health psychologist, to help me cope with the chronic fatigue syndrome (CFS) that had plagued me for four years. Reynolds had just suggested something called 'mindfulness meditation'. What? It sounded wishy-washy: something about counting your breaths, non-judgmental awareness and acceptance.

I'm all about evidence-based medicine, and silently scream when people suggest homeopathy or other nonsense. I told her I'd look into it, and I did. It turned out the science backs it up, that mindfulness meditation works for many people. Yet I couldn't imagine it working for me. I couldn't imagine ever being able to accept my illness – especially the recurring flu-like symptoms – rather than struggling against it. But my fight-or-flight response was both the most-natural and the worst-possible reaction, given I couldn't flee – and that fighting drained and distressed me. Meanwhile, distracting myself with trashy TV or indulging myself with chocolate only helped fleetingly.

"What you're doing now isn't working for you," Reynolds said gently at our next session. "Why not give it a try? What have you got to lose?"

JUDGEMENT-FREE ZONE

She recommended guided meditations by two well-known mindfulness teachers. I found Bruno Cayoun's thick French accent a little off-putting at first, but got used to it. To start with, I preferred the tracks by Jon Kabat-Zinn: that calm, kind and, of course, non-judgmental voice I came to know so well. Playing tracks on my phone, I began using guided meditations by both men, based on how I was feeling. The body scan in the morning, the progressive muscle relaxation before bed, another track for pain, and a five-minute refresher when short on time.

At first it was boring. And hard. I'd start off listening intently and counting my breaths, but my mind kept drifting off. I'd spend two minutes thinking about *Breaking Bad* or *The Bachelor* before remembering I was meant to be meditating. Also, I kept thinking about whether it was working. High achievers beware: you can't force change to happen here. Paradoxically, change will only occur if you accept the way things are already, however imperfect. When I stopped trying to force it and just went with it, the process got easier. Gradually it went from something I made myself do to something comfortable and familiar, like a warm shower before bed.

TANGIBLE BENEFITS

After a couple of months, I started noticing small changes. I was a little more relaxed. I cried less. I started sleeping a bit better.

But the most transformative part was learning how to stop raging against my illness. How not to fall down a rabbit hole of negative thoughts about my health and my much-smaller life. How to relate to the physical discomfort: not like it, not welcome it, but accept it for now.

The fact I eventually managed to do all this – and the difference it made – astonished me. Yes, I still experienced pain and discomfort, but I'd erased much of the distress, anger and self-judgment that were making it so much worse. In a weird way, accepting rather than fighting my illness took some of its power and scariness away. And I could remind myself what I was experiencing were fluid thoughts, sensations and emotions, not necessarily the truth of things.

To be clear, I'm not saying mindfulness meditation cured my CFS (though I'm feeling much better nowadays). I'm saying it helped me deal with the illness, in tandem with cognitive behavioural therapy (which changes patterns of unhelpful thoughts and behaviours). Mindfulness meditation has also helped me through other difficult times, including a vicious circle of insomnia and anxiety while pregnant last year.

ROAD TO ACCEPTANCE

Sometimes I slack off, but I know when I need to press play. Mindfulness meditation never fails to leave me more calm and centred. I know my favourite tracks so well, I know what words are coming – and can now practise mindfulness meditation without an audio track. I also try to make mindfulness part of my everyday life, not just when I'm meditating.

The practice has taught me a lot. I've learned to recognise and accept negative thoughts without feeding them.

I've learned how to concentrate on the present and be in the moment, especially with my son. I have learned how to be kinder and more compassionate to myself.

I have learned while I can't force circumstances to be a certain way, I do have some choice in how I react. With my wiring I'll never be zen, but I have got a little closer. □

Getting started

- Select a guided mindfulness meditation. You can download free audio files at calm.auckland.ac.nz.
- Find a quiet space in your home (yes, it could be a challenge; you may need to get up early before the chaos starts! Or else pick a spot outside). Sitting is best.
- Set the timer on your clock/phone. Start with 5 or 10 minutes, depending on how busy you are. The important thing is to get going... and to be consistent.
- If you prefer a course, Mindfulness Works offers introductory ones in 11 centres nationwide.
- Supplement your practice with a little reading. Try Jon Kabat-Zinn's *Mindfulness for Beginners*.

Have you changed your life via meditation?

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