



The Skeptic's Guide to Meditation

If you've ever considered (but instantly dismissed) the practice, this one's for you.

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THE 4 BIGGEST MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT MEDITATION

You may have heard about all those studies suggesting a long list of health benefits from meditation, from reducing stress to boosting resilience, but perhaps one of these assumptions prevented you from giving it a shot.



In reality...

5 minutes is all it takes. I don't care if you have four jobs and 27 children, everybody has five minutes. And that's all you need to start with. If you increase your time gradually, great. If not, totally fine.

In reality...

It's for everyone, even skeptics who are allergic to all things touchy-feely. Some of the hardest-charging, highly-functioning people in society - executives, scientists, even marines - are embracing the practice as "exercise" for the brain. (More on that below!)



#3

I can't meditate because my mind is too busy.



In reality...

The good news and the bad news is... you're not special. Everyone's mind is out of control—even experienced meditators struggle with distraction. You don't need to "clear your mind" to meditate.

In reality...

If you're already the ambitious, striving sort, you'll likely stay that way—but meditation may help you realize that certain outcomes are out of your control. It'll teach you how to fail, get up, dust yourself off, and get back in the ring.

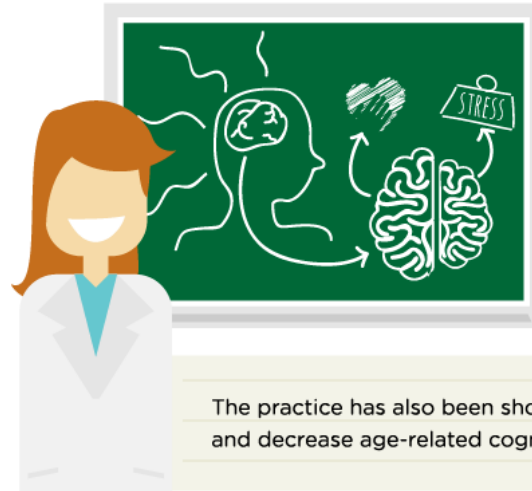
#4

Getting happier will make me lose my edge.



THE SCIENCE

What Does Meditation Do to the Brain?



In a **2011** study at Harvard, researchers took people who had never meditated before, and had them do short, daily doses of the practice.

Then they scanned their brains—and found that the gray matter in the areas associated with wellbeing and compassion literally grew, while areas associated with stress literally shrank.

The practice has also been shown to boost focus and decrease age-related cognitive decline.

Meditation Reduces Stress

Mindfulness doesn't just make us feel less stressed, it's also linked to lower levels of cortisol (the stress hormone).



An average of **12.5 minutes** of meditation per day for **8 weeks** increased Marines' resistance to stress, according to a 2011 study.

TIP



Try to meditate every day. Regularity, many experts believe, is more important than duration. **Remember: just 5 minutes!**

Meditation Makes Us More Compassionate

There's a type of meditation called "compassion meditation."

It's been shown to make:



Preschoolers more willing to give their stickers away to strangers.



Grown-ups to laugh more, socialize more, and use the word "I" less.



Meditation Boosts Self-Acceptance

People who regularly practice mindfulness meditation are more accepting of their emotions, which in turn, boosts self-control, resilience, and performance.

TIP



When meditating, every time you get lost in thought, just return your attention to feeling your breath.

(Yes, you'll have to start over countless times—that's the whole game!)

The List of Health Benefits is Almost Laughably Long

Brain imaging studies show that meditation can:



Lower high blood pressure



Lessen chronic pain



Reduce anxiety



Fight depression

Meditation has also been shown to help with:

- ADHD
- Psoriasis
- Irritable bowel syndrome



40-60%

of high-blood pressure patients in a study at Massachusetts General Hospital experienced a significant reduction in blood pressure after meditating regularly for 3 months.

It May Help You Sleep Better, Too

A University of Utah study found that higher mindfulness was associated with lower cognitive and physiological activation at bedtime, which could have benefits for sleep quality.



WHY MINDFULNESS MATTERS

WHAT IS

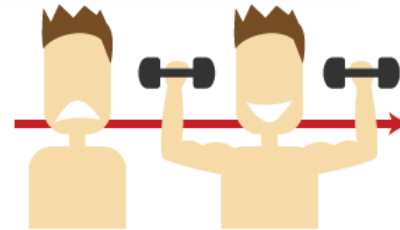
MINDFULNESS ?

It's a boring-sounding word, but it's a game-changing, life-altering proposition.



It's the ability to be aware of your thoughts and emotions, without judging them. Or, to put it more simply, it allows you to see what's going on in your head without getting carried away by it.

This is a basic human capacity we all have. Think of mindfulness as a muscle. When you build this muscle through the exercise of meditation, it can help you in the following, phenomenally useful ways:



1

You'll get better at not being carried away by passing emotional squalls



2

You'll learn to **respond**, rather than **react** to the stuff that comes up in your life



3

Your happiness will depend less on unstable, constantly changing external circumstances

EXAMPLE



Normally, when someone cuts you off in traffic, you automatically think, "I'm pissed." —and then you actually become pissed. Mindfulness allows you to slow that process down so you can respond thoughtfully instead of react mindlessly. It provides space between impulse and action.

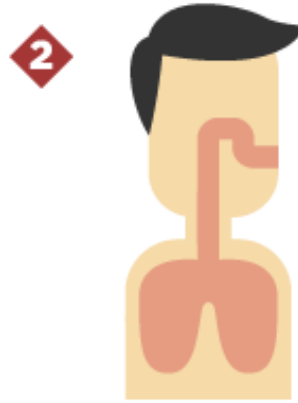
The simple act of feeling the breath can break the habits of a lifetime.

MEDITATION 101

To get started, all you need to do is...



Sit up straight with eyes closed. (You don't have to sit cross-legged if that's uncomfortable - a chair is fine.)



Focus your full attention on the feeling of your breath coming in and going out.



Every time your mind wanders (which it will - a million times), just return your attention to the feeling of the breath.



"If you don't waste your energy on variables you cannot influence, you can focus much more effectively on those you can."

—Dan Harris,
ABC News anchor &
author of *10% Happier*

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Sources

10% Happier by Dan Harris

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