
5 Ways Meditation Gives Your Brain a Boost

Mind Exercise Ups Resilience, Reduces Stress

By DAN HARRIS

Feb. 27, 2014—

I never in a million years thought I'd be the type of person who meditates. I've had an aversion to all things airy-fairy since age five, when my parents – recovering hippies – sent me to a yoga class for kids. The teacher, who disapproved of the jeans I was wearing, made me strip down and do sun salutations in my tighty-whities.

But then, a few years ago, I heard about an explosion of scientific research suggesting that meditation has an extraordinary range of health benefits. In particular, I found the neuroscience compelling. Studies say you can sculpt your brain through meditation just as you build and tone your body through exercise.

[9 Surprising Meditators](#)

Even though this research is still in its embryonic stages, what it suggests about human happiness is radical. Many of us assume that our levels of well-being, resilience, and impulse control are set from birth. Apparently, though, we have the power to essentially perform neurosurgery on ourselves, to rewire the three pounds of matter we carry around in our skull. Happiness, it turns out, is a skill.

[3-Step Brain Hack for Happiness](#)

Here are the five most mind-bending examples from the neuroscience of meditation.

How Meditation Affects Your Brain

It boosts resilience

Researchers at the University of Wisconsin-Madison scanned the brains of Tibetan monks. What they found was a "connection between meditation and resilience." Specifically, they were looking at the amygdala, the region associated with emotions and emotional memories. Their work suggests the more you meditate, the quicker your amygdala recovers from stress and trauma. Of course, critics have pointed out that studies of monks may not apply to the rest of us. Which is why the next example is so powerful...

How Meditation Affects Your Brain

It thickens gray matter

An MRI study from Harvard found that beginners who took an eight-week meditation course literally had thicker gray matter in the areas of the brain associated with self-awareness and compassion, while the regions associated with stress actually shrank.

How Meditation Affects Your Brain

It tames the voice in your head

A study out of Yale looked at the part of the brain known as the "default mode network," which is active when we're lost in thought—ruminating about the past, projecting into the future, obsessing about ourselves. The researchers found meditators were not only deactivating this region while they were practicing, but also when they were not meditating. In other words, meditation created a new default mode. [How an On-Air Panic Attack Improved My Life](#)

How Meditation Affects Your Brain

It increases focus

Scientists at UC Santa Barbara found that meditation helped students reduce their mind-wandering, and even perform better on the Graduate Record Exam (G.R.E.). Meditation has also been found to boost focus among office workers and grade-schoolers.

How Meditation Affects Your Brain

It reduces stress

A trio of studies out of the University of Miami looked at three very stressed-out groups: incarcerated youth, college students and Marines preparing to be sent overseas. In each case, the scientists found that short bursts of daily meditation protected the study subjects from stress-related degradation of mental functions such as attention and short-term memory. As a result of all this research into meditation, the practice is being embraced by executives, elite athletes, rock stars and even network news anchors. Despite my initial revulsion, I've now gone so far as to write a whole book, designed to make meditation palatable to skeptics. It's called "10% Happier." For more info, [click here](#).

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