



Mindfulness meditation

Mindfulness is having an awareness of being consciously conscious, intentional in thought, present in the moment and the ability to observe our current state of being.

Let me give you an example of being *mindless*! Making scrambled eggs the other day, I cracked open the eggs, threw the yolk in the food recycling and put the shells in the pan. I then repeated the same action, my mind clearly not on the task in hand. Have you ever left home, realised you had forgotten something, gone back and completely forgotten what you came back in for? Good, it's not just me then!

Why be mindful?

We all have thousands of thoughts going on in our brain which separate us from the present moment, not helped by living in a world of constant disruptions and bombardment of information. In *Stolen Focus* by Johann Hari, it is suggested that from around 1986, the average westerner ingested the equivalent of 40 newspapers a day through media inputs. By 2004, that figure grew to 174 newspapers and today that figure is inevitably much higher – we are drowning in information and it's exhausting! Imagine yourself as a leaf and the wind as all the thoughts that come into your head – we are literally being blown all over the place and as soon as we settle, in comes another thought (gust of wind) and away we go again.

Many would suggest that this over stimulation has caused a pandemic of poor mental health and I believe, for that reason, that mindfulness has grown hugely in popularity.

How I got into meditation

I am a relative newcomer and, to be honest, thought meditation was all a little woo woo until earlier this year when I had to go for an MRI scan. I required a full body scan taking around 55 minutes which I was pretty relaxed about. On the day, I am made comfortable on the bed, handed a set of headphones and asked for my favourite radio station. Happy days! How many times do you get the opportunity for an uninterrupted lie down in the middle of day with a bit of smooth FM, right? Wrong! It's only when the bed slides into the machine that I realize that I have a phobia for small spaces. My rational brain is now dominated by my irrational brain who has convinced me that I am stuck! I panic and within a few seconds I was in such a state that, realising that they were not going to get a decent scan, they pulled me out.

Without the scan, the consultant is not going to be able to help so what to do? I turn to meditation. After reading a few books, listening

to experts such as Andrew Huberman, Joe Dispenza and Sam Harris, and plenty of practice, I feel ready to try again. For my second attempt, I used a concentrated type of meditation, using the distraction of a mantra involving 24 different words, each with a personal meaning. I combine this with a strong focus on my breath as I mentally visualise each of the 24 words in sequence. Before I knew it, the scan was over – fifty five minutes felt like five, images done and me relaxed.

More recently, I have used this technique whilst spending a weekend with Wim Hof (aka *The Iceman*) and submerging myself into freezing ice water for 20 minutes with only breathing and mindfulness as distraction... powerful stuff!

Mindfulness is not new

Yogis have been using mindfulness meditation for 1000s of years, since yoga was predominately centered around breathing, stillness and mindful practice. However, it wasn't until the 1980s and thanks to Functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging (fMRI) that we have been able to observe the mechanistic changes to the brain, seeing areas of the brain light up with mindfulness meditation and all the positive effects.

It's no wonder that mindfulness has proven so popular to help relieve stress, anxiety, and depression, help with ADHD, improve focus and concentration and motivation, reduce blood pressure and even support prevention of diabetes.

Mindfulness meditation can literally change our physiology and our body chemistry by triggering hormones like cortisol for focus and attention, dopamine for motivation and serotonin for a more peaceful and relaxed state. In addition, the practice can activate the pineal gland that triggers melatonin which aids sleep and is a powerful antioxidant supporting the immune system. Taking a short regular break from the day to be mindful for just a few minutes is a great way of resetting our system.

Our constant state of stress

From our ancestral evolution, our primary state is to survive. Although we are no longer faced with the threat of being killed by a predator, other

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environmental challenges still cause us to be in a constant state of fight or flight, more commonly known as chronic stress or constant stress.

That constant voice, *“why has my boss called, is it a problem?”*; *“I haven't yet found the time to call my friend back, I hope she's not annoyed with me”*. *“I only made it to the gym once this week, that's not good enough”*.

We repeat these stories and narratives to ourselves over and over again like an old broken record. This has caused us to be a nation of over thinkers – the little voices in our minds continue to pester our consciousness. [*The Chimp Paradox* by Steven Peters](#) describes the *“me, myself and I”*, separating them into three prominent areas of the brain.

The computer – the parietal, auto functioning part of the brain, where we formulate programmes that allow us to function without too much thought. Have you ever driven a car down the motorway and realized that you haven't been concentrating? That's our auto functioning taking control.

The human part of the brain – our prefrontal lobe also known as the executive function, where we process information and form rational thinking.

The chimp – the limbic part of the brain, where emotions are formed, instinctive reactions are generated and where our ego resides. It's our primitive survival mechanism – great if we need to jump out of the way of a speeding car but less helpful when in conflict with others as often our instincts are to say or do things we later regret.

This is further amplified as the chimp part of the brain is five times stronger and faster than our human part. This is perfect for orienting us towards survival and avoiding danger, but in our modern environment can also be an incessant nag. As humans, we are more motivated towards

avoiding failure than we are to achieving success and our chimps can play a big part in stopping us from moving forward or leaning into projects or goals for fear of not being able to achieve them. A 'can't do' attitude rather than 'I can do'! I call these the ANT of thinking (Automatic Negative Thoughts) and, like ants, these thoughts can be continuously crawling all over our minds.

In Peters' book, he suggests an exercise called *development time*, taking 10 minutes to reflect on these three areas of the brain and acknowledge times where your chimp has hijacked your thinking, considering the rationality, logic and genuine usefulness of such thinking. As a past CEO of my own business, I would certainly endorse this form of mindfulness. All too often I would find myself reacting quickly and irrationally to situations with my chimp or ego taking the initial control. Peters suggests managing this part of the brain rather than trying to control it. Being aware and mindful will help in the management of the chimp, supporting a more considered reactive state. In a potentially conflictual situation, a quote that I always fall back on before opening my mouth is...

"Between stimulus and response is a space and in the space we have the choice of how we react. Mindfulness allows us to be more conscious of our response and our actions."

Mindfulness allows us to stay in the present moment

We have a part of the brain called the 'default mode network' – it's a region that allows the mind to wander and split our thinking into past, present and future, two of which we can do simultaneously.

Of course this is helpful – having memories of the past, awareness of the present and anticipation of the future. However, as humans, we spend too much of our time thinking and feeling in the past and future – guilt or regret of past decisions, fearful or fantasizing of the future.

Mindfulness allows us to take perspective. Let's face it; the past has gone, all we can do is learn from it and the future hasn't yet happened. Some

statistics suggest 90% of worry is about things that never happen or materialise.

The present is all we have and mindfulness allows us to slow our thinking and stay in the moment, have awareness and rest our minds. Like sleep, mindfulness allows the brain to relax and repair. As Eckhart Tolle says, *"The moment you realise that you are not present, you are present"*.

The wandering mind is an unhappy mind

A study paper in 2010 with the above title printed results from over 2,200 adult participants showing that 50% of the time we are thinking about something different to the task in hand. The results showed that if we are thinking about something different to what we are actually doing, we are less likely to be happy at that moment. What's really interesting is that even if we are thinking about something more enjoyable than the task we are doing, the results were the same. It is the mismatch that causes less positive thinking – you could be shovelling snow off the driveway and thinking about laying on a sunbed in the Caribbean and you would still not be as happy. Fully engaging in the present moment in whatever we are doing, often referred to as our *flow state*, improves our overall happiness.

Master your mind and be the captain of your soul

The mind is a powerful tool, possibly the most powerful tool we have in both our physiology and biology. You only have to consider the placebo effect and how people can make themselves better simply by taking a sugar pill, thinking it's



a pharmacological drug – [watch 'The Power of Mindset' for more on this subject](#). Mindfulness supports the management of our mindset and can play a huge role in our overall health.

What are the types of different meditation and which would be most suitable for me?

Before discussing the different types of meditation, it is useful to understand your own prominent state of being which is subject to change depending on your situation and environment.

Andrew Huberman refers to our sensory position from two states:

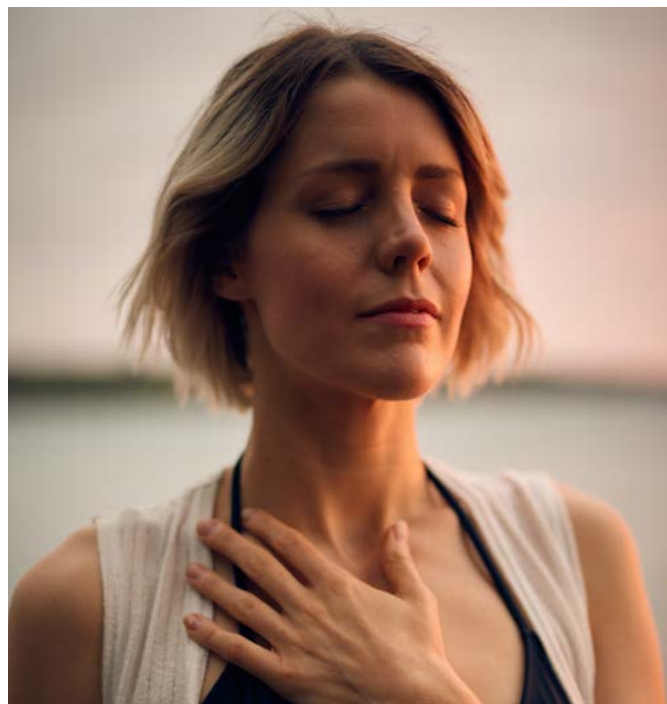
Interoception – where we are in tune with sensation, feeling and perceptions from our skin inside. A useful way of establishing our state is to shut your eyes and if you can count your own heart beats without touching a pulse, you are in an *interoceptive* state.

Exteroception – however, if you can be easily distracted by exterior senses (skin outwards) and perhaps not as in tune with your body, then you are in a more *exteroceptive* state.

Both also work in tandem. For example, you could be reading a menu and have the sensations of how good the food will taste when it comes. However, knowing your *dominant* state is helpful in considering how you should apply mindfulness. If you are very aware of your body's internal state, focusing on the outside by taking a mindful walk could be more advantageous in developing your mindfulness. Equally, if you are very distracted by the environment to the extent that you are out of tune with your body, then more interoceptive meditation like closing your eyes and focusing on your breathing might be more helpful. Closing your eyes is important as 40% of the brain's processing is connected to vision.

Like most things in life, doing the opposite of your dominant state or pushing yourself out of your comfort zone is where you will develop new neural circuitry and enhance neuroplasticity and an overall enhanced sense of being.

Personally, I like to mix the two with mindfulness, walking, running or exercise and also by sitting quietly, closing my eyes and concentrating on my



breathing and doing a virtual body scan or using the mantra I used in the MRI scanner.

There are a number of different types of meditation where various forms of focus and distraction are used to take the mind away from thought. A good place to start is with our breath.

Breathing and breath meditation

Breathing is an essential form of living ([see my resource on the power of breath](#)) and also a popular part of our mindfulness meditation. Our autonomic nervous system comprises two systems, *sympathetic* and *parasympathetic*. Sympathetic being our fight or flight and parasympathetic being our rest and digest. Modern life tends to put many of us in a constant state of fight or flight which, coupled with the fact we all tend to over breathe, places us into a state of hyperventilation – like driving a car with your foot on the accelerator and brake simultaneously.

Generally, our inhales tend to promote our sympathetic and our exhales tend to promote our parasympathetic system.

Focusing on our breathing really helps, not only as a focus and distraction from thoughts, but also as a way of creating equal cyclical breathing patterns which regulates a more harmonious heart rate and state of being.

To start, try these simple steps

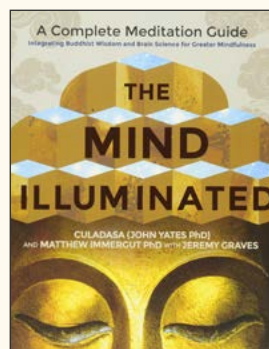
- 1 Set your alarm for three minutes.
- 2 Be comfortable – either lying down or sitting with your feet on the floor and hands relaxed.
- 3 If you are sitting – feel your back against the chair, head slightly down, shoulders relaxed, eyes closed.
- 4 Start with relaxed and equal cyclical breaths through your nose (or mouth if you can't breathe through your nose) of around five seconds in and five seconds out.
- 5 Visualise the tip of your nose as the air passes, count (in your head) your breaths in and out.
- 6 As thoughts come into your mind, try not to judge them, let them pass and gently bring your focus back to your breath. Imagine meditation as the sun on your face and your thoughts as the clouds gently passing the sun.
- 7 Continue until you hear your alarm.
- 8 After a few sessions, try extending the period to five minutes and then 10.

Conclusion

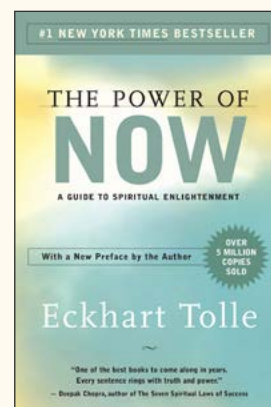
I have come to the conclusion that although it is infinitely beneficial to find space to incorporate mindful meditation into our busy schedules – whether that be first thing, last thing, or sometime during the day – for me, mindfulness is not so much about what we build into our lives but what we remove. Being aware of our thoughts and replacing the constant voices in our heads with an awareness of the present moment is like finding the door to stillness, peace and ultimately better mental wellbeing.

I now try to incorporate this mindfulness of presence into as many parts of my day as I can, like brushing my teeth in the morning or taking a walk or a run and incorporate it into my interactions with others by mindfully listening, without judgment and without thought to my response, just listening with focus. In reality, this is all we have so let's enjoy it!

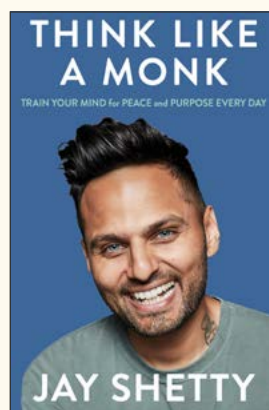
RECOMMENDED READING



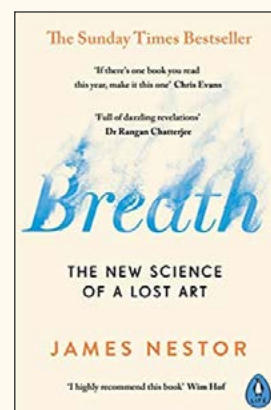
The Mind Illuminated
Matthew Immergut



The Power of Now
Eckhart Tolle



Think Like a Monk
Jay Shetty



The Breath
James Nestor

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

Listen:



Andrew Huberman (Hubermanlab)
Meditation and Free Will with Sam Harris –
Why you should meditate

Apps:

