

Mindfulness Fixes Your Brain While Boosting Your Performance

There's no shortage of advice out there claiming to make you better, but mindfulness meditation is the rare, research-proven technique that boosts your performance by physically altering your brain.

Researchers from the University of British Columbia recently pooled data from more than 20 studies to understand how practicing mindfulness affects the brain. While the researchers found significant changes in eight brain regions, there are two regions that are of particular importance.

In these brain regions, the simple act of practicing mindfulness increased both brain activity and the density of brain tissue:

1. The anterior cingulate cortex (ACC), which is responsible for self-control. It enables you to resist distractions, to focus, and to avoid impulsivity in order to work efficiently and make great decisions. The ACC is also responsible for flexibility, and people who have problems in this brain area are known to stick to ineffective problem-solving strategies when they should be adjusting their approach.
2. The hippocampus, which, among other things, is responsible for resilience in the face of setbacks and challenges. The hippocampus is readily damaged by stress, making it a need area for most people. The hippocampus is red/orange in the image below.

Mindfulness is a simple, yet effective form of meditation that enables you to gain control of unruly thoughts and behaviors. People who practice mindfulness are more focused, even when they are not meditating. Mindfulness is an excellent technique to reduce stress because it allows you to stop feeling out of control, to stop jumping from one thought to the next, and to stop ruminating on negative thoughts. Overall, it's a great way to make it through your busy day in a calm and productive manner.

Just as doing curls increases muscle density in your biceps, practicing mindfulness increases the density of brain matter where it counts. Mindfulness is perhaps the only technique that can change your brain in this way, which produces a ripple of other positive effects. Thankfully, you can reap the benefits of mindfulness in as little as a few minutes a day.

Gandhi was once with a group of followers who inquired about his schedule. He told them, "I need to set aside at least one hour each day to meditate." They were vexed by this and told him, "There's no way you have that much time!" He responded, "Well, if that's the case, then I need to set aside two hours a day to meditate." Like Gandhi, you'll soon find that mindfulness is one of very few things that are well worth your precious time, and the busier you are, the more important it is to have a clear mind if you want to be productive.

Mindfulness doesn't have to take place in the mountains of Nepal or a weekend retreat under a vow of silence. The beauty of the technique is that it's so simple you can do it anywhere and just about anytime. Mindfulness is the simple act of focusing all of your attention on the present. This requires you to observe your thoughts and feelings objectively, without judgment, which helps you to awaken your experience and live in the moment. This way, life doesn't pass you by.

Focus on your breathing

Sit in a comfortable chair with your feet flat on the floor, and spend a few minutes doing nothing but breathing slowly in and out. Focus all your attention on your breath. Feel the air travel into your mouth, down your windpipe, and into your lungs. Then feel your body shift as it pushes the air out of your lungs. When thoughts surface that distract you from your breathing, don't worry. Just let them pass, and shift your attention back to your breathing. After some practice, you should be able to spend a few to several minutes doing nothing but immersing yourself in the act of breathing, at the expense of all the other thoughts.

Go for a walk

You can also meditate just by going for a walk. All you need to do is focus on each step. Feel your legs move and your feet hit the ground. Focus solely on the act of walking and the sensations of your surroundings (the cool breeze, the hot sun, or the dog barking in the distance). When you feel other thoughts creeping into your mind, focus even harder on the sensation of walking. Focusing on something that's second nature is refreshing because it alters your frame of mind as you turn off the never-ending stream of thoughts that normally dominate your attention. You can do the same thing when you brush your teeth, comb your hair, or eat a meal.

Feel your body

You don't even need to stop doing what you're doing to practice mindfulness. All you have to do is focus all of your attention on what you're doing without thinking about why you're doing it, what you should do next, or what you should be doing. Whether it's the gentle stroke of your fingers on the keyboard or your posture in your chair, you can direct your attention from your thoughts to your bodily sensations at the spur of the moment.

Repeat one positive thing about yourself, over and over

One of the main goals of mindfulness is to stop the steam of thoughts that cycle through your mind over and over again each day. Funnily enough, a great way to do this is to choose a short, positive message about yourself and to repeat it over and over with each breath to keep your mind on track. A great phrase of choice is "I am capable." The simplicity keeps you grounded in the exercise and keeps other thoughts from taking over. The right phrase also builds a little confidence, which never hurts.

Interrupt the stress cycle

Any moment when you feel stressed, overwhelmed, or stuck on something is the perfect moment to practice mindfulness. Just stop what you're doing, let the thoughts go for a moment, and practice your favorite mindfulness technique (breathing, walking, or focusing on body sensations). Even a few minutes of this can make a huge difference in quieting your mind and reducing stress. You'll be surprised how reasonable things look once you've taken a few moments to clear your head.

Bringing it all together

Nothing can improve your brain the way mindfulness meditation can. Give it a try, and you'll be surprised where it takes you.

Source(s):

<http://qz.com/542644/mindfulness-fixes-your-brain-while-boosting-your-performance/>

<http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3004979/>