

Asset Health *Talk*

Keeping your health and wellbeing in the know

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How *Meditation* Changes Your Brain

Stop what you are doing right now and take a deep breath. Think about where you are and what you see, smell and hear. Now close your eyes and take another slow, deep breath. Try to focus your mind on your breathing – how does it feel? Hey, guess what? You are meditating. Well, you are in the beginning phases of meditating. That wasn't so hard, was it? No Tibetan trip planned to learn the ancient practice; no stateside weekend retreat needed. You've probably heard someone mention how meditation and mindfulness tend to help people melt away stress. And for that reason, and many more, meditation is making big waves in neuroscience research.

What Is Meditation?

By nature, the mind tends to wander. Meditation is meant to corral your surplus of thoughts (or at least organize them) to help you remain present and hopefully enjoy each experience, even if it's a tough one. The practice of meditation generally begins with breathing to allow your mind to relax. By training your brain to be here or still, you can alleviate the negative impact of stress on your brain physically and functionally.

A recent *60 Minutes* documentary featuring news personality Anderson Cooper tested the science behind meditation. Cooper underwent an electroencephalography (EEG) test, a test that shows brain activity. He was told to imagine a stressful situation, then to relax into a meditative state. He spent time learning how to meditate prior to his EEG. When he imagined a stressful encounter, the EEG machine showed a spike in brain activity, but quickly quieted when he used his meditation and breathing.

“This is just the next generation of exercise.”

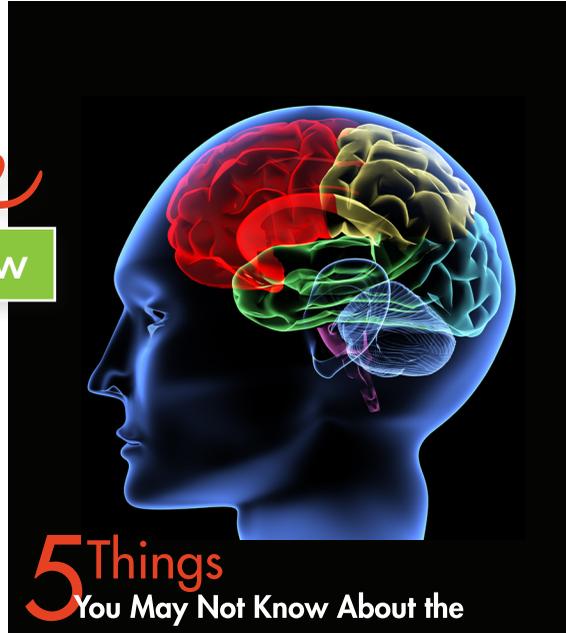
“Meditation is really a form of cognitive training,” says Judson Brewer, head of the University of Massachusetts Medical School's Center for Mindfulness.

Check out some of the following ways meditation changes your brain:

- Reduces feelings of negative moods, such as anger or stress
- Increases pain tolerance
- Boosts memory and goal-setting
- Improves sleep

“60 Minutes' Explores the Rise of Mindfulness, from Google to Congress,” Alice Walton, forbes.com, Dec. 14, 2014.

“How Meditation Changes Our Brains for the Better,” Leigh Weingus, huffingtonpost.com, Jan. 20, 2015.



HUMAN BRAIN

Each March, scientists, physicians and humans alike celebrate the matter resting above our shoulders – the brain. Brain Awareness Week spotlights the astounding capability of the organ and offers a glimpse into the tremendous research in neuroscience.

Here are five quick facts about the human brain:

1 Your brain devours energy. Even though it only takes up about 2% of your total body weight, your brain consumes 20% of the oxygen and 25% of the sugar in your blood.

2 The adult brain doesn't fully mature until you are in your mid-20s. The kicker is the last region of the brain to be fully developed is the frontal lobe, known for reasoning and empathy. Apologies to any parents of a teen in a rebellious phase.

3 For the most part, male and female brains are actually pretty similar. Even though men and women have distinct differences, science shows these differences are attributed to hormone variations during brain development, rather than brain structure.

4 The brain begins as a tube. It is one of the first structures to develop as an embryo.

5 The more wrinkled the brain, the wiser the person. If you have more cerebral wrinkles, that means there is tighter storage in your cranium, and in turn, more thinking power.

“Staying Sharp: Current Advances in Brain Research: Successful Aging and Your Brain,” the Dana Alliance for Brain Initiatives, dana.org, accessed on Feb. 9, 2015.

“10 Things You Didn't Know About the Brain,” Stephanie Pappas, livescience.com, Feb. 18, 2011.

“The Teen Brain: It's Just Not Grown Up Yet,” Richard Knox, npr.org, March 1, 2010.

PARENTS:

Have Dinner with Your Children

Here's Why

Supper time – It's the slot in the schedule that doesn't always make it to the table. Or maybe it does, but in the lives of most families, dinner often competes with after-school activities, playdates or even exercise. But in an effort to engage your children in these evening activities, are they missing out on a prime developmental boost that can be found right in your own kitchen?

Anne Fishel, a clinical psychology professor at Harvard Medical School, elaborates on why enjoying dinner with your children may be one of the most important things you do for them.



The benefits include:

BETTER REPORT CARDS

Kids who regularly have dinner with their families tend to do better in school. Having dinner each night is “an even more powerful predictor of high achievement scores than time spent in school, doing homework, playing sports or doing art,” Fishel says.

IMPROVED VOCABULARY

It's no wonder that talking with your kids can provoke their use of bigger words. But did you know that dinnertime conversation boosts vocabulary even more than being read to aloud?

FEWER MEDICAL CONDITIONS

If your family dines together each night, the odds of obesity fall dramatically along with other conditions, such as asthma.

WISER TEEN YEARS

Teens are less likely to take up what Fishel calls risky behavior if they spend more time with family in the evening. Risky behavior includes: smoking, drinking, using illegal drugs, violence, eating disorders, school problems and sexual activity.

HAPPIER, LESS-STRESSED KIDS

Emotional health surely benefits from a family meal each evening. Kids are more likely to exhibit a positive mood, but also a positive view of the future, too.

STRONGER PARENT-CHILD BONDS

Fishel says dinner can be one of the most reliable times for a family to connect and catch up. Kids were surveyed on when they were most likely to talk with their parents. The top-ranked answer: during dinner.

Keep these dinnertime guidelines in mind:

Eat a balanced meal. It doesn't have to be found on a healthy cooking show, but your family dinner is a prime time to make sure your kids are getting some veggies and lean protein. Fishel suggests shooting for a well-balanced meal that is moderately healthy.

Dine together at a table. Whether you sit together in your kitchen or your neighbor's, share the meal where meals are meant to be. Avoid eating in the family room.

Keep the TV off. If the TV is on, the benefits of a family dinner are out the window, Fishel says.

Save the hard lessons for another time. Repetitive mealtime reprimanding is shown to negate the positive effects of a family dinner altogether.

Talk to your kids. Conversation is the key to why family dinners are so beneficial to your child's development. “Sharing a roast chicken won't magically transform parent-child relationships. But, dinner may be the one time of the day when a parent and child can share a positive experience – a well-cooked meal, a joke, or a story – and these small moments can gain momentum to create stronger connections away from the table,” Fishel says.

“The Most Important Thing You Can Do with Your Kids? Eat Dinner with Them,” Anne Fishel, washingtonpost.com, Jan. 12, 2015.