

Introduction

To the uninitiated, meditation may sound boring, or even worse, wasteful. When you practice meditation, however, you embrace mindfulness – the practice of intentionally focusing your energy and attention on the present without judgement. Mindfulness is an aspect of meditation, and when you are engaged, it's anything but boring or wasteful.

With practice, meditation can become a superpower, especially when you consider its myriad benefits. In fact, some scientific studies even suggest that those who practice mindful meditation lead happier lives.

The benefits of meditation are many – more happiness, better health, less stress – but meditation can also change your brain. Here are some surprising things that happen to your brain when you meditate.

Source: Kayla Matthews

<http://thoughtbrick.com/meditation/6-surprising-ways-meditation-affects-your-brain/>

1. Meditation transforms negative thoughts

Have you ever noticed how, when bad things happen, you replay it over and over in your mind? For some reason, our brains hang onto those negative thought patterns, even though reliving them is painful. Meditation breaks this cycle of detrimental thoughts by forcing your brain to be in the moment – not in an anxiety-driven piece of the past.

2. Meditation helps your brain function better

By studying spiritual leaders who spend time in prayer and meditation, researchers have discovered it makes their brains thicker, which actually makes them function better. Because of this, those who practice meditation are more often targeted as leaders.

3. Meditation lessens depression

Though studies in the past haven't been as decisive, new research suggests that mindful meditation relieves our perceived anxiety – anxiety that may not be helpful for change. Such anxieties – which seem to have no source – are closely linked to depression. Mindfulness has been a key component in alleviating symptoms associated with depression.

4. Meditation offers better pain management

Stress and pain are linked in complex ways. Pain is the brain's response to certain stimuli, and anxiety and stress can exacerbate it. When you meditate, your brain is calmer and your response to pain is better. Those recovering from addiction have found meditation helps with painful withdrawals as well, which is why meditation is often recommended for people with substance use disorders.

Meditation



5. Meditation decreases neural pathways

Practicing meditation decreases some neural pathways that increase anxiety. Lessening those paths can lead to less stress, pain and anxiety. When the brain is functioning in a more organic manner, the triggers for anxiety are also less likely to be impactful.

6. Meditation may help your brain be active longer

Our brain's gray matter in the prefrontal cortex shrinks as we get older – it's simply part of the aging process. For those who meditate, the gray matter doesn't shrink as quickly. In fact, 50-year-olds who meditate had the same gray matter as typical 25-year-olds. One significant fear of aging is the effect it has on the mind, but time spent meditating can help the brain stay clear, even as we age.

Medication without side effects

For those looking for a way to improve sleep, lessen anxiety, suffer less stress and improve their levels of pain, meditation and mindfulness offer clear hope. Meditation is an ancient practice, but its persistence in our lives suggests its power may be bigger than what we can test in a lab.

Science is starting to agree. In fact, scientists at the University of Wisconsin-Madison's Center for Healthy Minds now believe you can retrain your brain for the better with mindful meditation, and that change is measurable. What's more, meditating offers no drawbacks – there are no side effects and no fear of a negative response. In addition, most people who practice meditation feel better immediately.