

The Butterfly Effect

MEDITATION MAY NOT BE A CURE-ALL, BUT IT HEALS—OR AT LEAST EASES—MANY ILLS.

EACH YEAR, WHEN January 1 rolls around, people resolve to stop smoking, start exercising, get more sleep, eat more vegetables, and (insert your favorite perennial goal here). Beyond the sleep/eat well/exercise trifecta, there are few sure things that will have a far-reaching effect on both your mental and physical health. But you should add one more: meditation. Here's how regular mindfulness practice can lead to positive changes throughout your body.

—Emma Seppala, Ph.D.



Mind wandering? Brain sluggish? Try some oms. Ongoing meditation is associated with a higher volume of gray matter in the brain as well as improved cognitive abilities, specifically attention, memory, and creativity. While there's no evidence yet that meditation directly results in a healthier brain, a reduction in circulating stress hormones may help preserve neurons, suggest researchers in *Frontiers in Psychology*. Most experiments look at longtime meditators, but one study found that even four days of meditation training can improve focus.

Some of the most persistent emotional aches are eased by meditation. Studies have shown that it decreases loneliness, stress, anxiety, and depression. And once people struggling with anxiety see the positive effects of meditation, they are likely to stick with the practice, alleviating their symptoms even more. One study on compassion paired meditators and nonmeditators with a person who appeared to be injured; people who had just learned to meditate in an 8-week course were much more likely to offer assistance.

Mind over body? Overall physical well-being can be improved with meditation; numerous studies have shown it can decrease pain and chronic inflammation and increase immune function. Participants who had been trained to meditate while being subjected to uncomfortable stimuli rated their pain 57 percent less unpleasant and 40 percent less intense than when they just tried to close their eyes and be still. In another study, meditators given a flu vaccine produced more antibodies than people in the nonmeditating control group.

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