

MEDITATE
FOR
YOUR
HEALTH

A 21-DAY RETREAT TO
OPTIMIZE YOUR METABOLISM
AND FEEL GREAT

TIFFANY CRUIKSHANK,
LAc, MAOM

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OPTIMIZE YOUR METABOLISM
AND FEEL GREAT
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NEW
HEALTH
YOUR

TIFFANY CRUIKSHANK, LAc, MAOM
with MARISKA VAN AALST



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This book is dedicated to every person who has ever struggled with her self-worth, her body, or her potential. May this book help you to cultivate a healthy body and a nourishing mental outlook, and to discover your value and worth, as well as the immense beauty that lives inside of you.

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Introduction

Every day, all day, we are bombarded with messages from social media, family, coworkers, and even ourselves. Photoshopped ads telling us that we're not enough—we need to eat healthier, lose weight, look skinnier. It can be virtually impossible not to feel like you *should* look better or you *should* feel better, regardless of who you are.

With all this noise swirling around in our heads, figuring out where these messages stop and where our own best instincts toward health begin can be very difficult. In our struggle with these body-policing messages, we often unconsciously capitulate—or we resist their tyranny by rebelling against healthy changes—and end up hurting ourselves in the process.

We all know that the apple and kale are better for us than the doughnut, but somehow we still end up choosing the doughnut. We all know that going for a walk or to the gym will help us lose weight more than watching TV will, but we still end up on the couch. And even when we choose the apple and the gym, we sometimes still end up hitting a wall when it comes to feeling our best. We'll consult doctors, run tests to check that our thyroid, digestion, reproductive hormones, or adrenal glands are functioning properly—yet we may still not have an answer to our stubborn health woes. We still don't feel good. What's going on here?

I have a theory. I believe that the most powerful ally in the quest for vibrant health is one that is often overlooked: the huge capacity of the mind-body connection.

THE MIND-BODY CONNECTION

The mind-body connection is actually a bit mislabeled. Our “mind” lives in our nervous system, which is most definitely part of the “body.” What happens in the mind can create a direct physical effect on the rest of the body. In that way, you can say there really isn't a “connection”—they are one and the same.

And yet we know intuitively that they *are* different. A thought is just a thought—it's not completely automatic, like your heartbeat. Thoughts are more like breaths or the blinks of an eye—these can happen without our awareness but also can be studied and shifted with awareness, even if just temporarily.

When we neglect to pay attention to the mind-body connection, we might do everything “right” and still find ourselves frustrated in our health and weight-loss goals.

As a master yoga teacher, founder of Yoga Medicine, sports medicine expert, and practitioner of Chinese medicine, I have specialized in helping my patients and students optimize their health for more than a decade. And in that time, with thousands of patients and students, I've found, over and over, that ignoring the power of the mind can be the primary limiting factor in our health.

TRAINING THE BRAIN

When highly trained, the brain can help us achieve any goal, no matter what aspect of our lives—from scoring that promotion at work to having a healthy pregnancy and delivery to losing twenty pounds. But often our brain limits us. Sometimes it hampers our ability to follow through. Sometimes it makes us give in to cravings. Sometimes we just plain live up to our own low expectations.

But these very human tendencies don't necessarily mean we need to rush that brain to the psychiatrist. In fact, many of us share the exact same types of self-limiting thought patterns. And because these patterns are so universal, we have decades, even millennia, of great experience in which works to help change them.

In meditation, the goal is not so much to eliminate these thinking patterns as it is to identify them. Once we get clear about what's happening inside our head and how it affects the rest of our functioning, it's easier for our brain to make decisions that align with our true health goals. Recognizing unhelpful thought patterns allows us to directly address them through the use of simple meditations and mental affirmations (mantras) that help us achieve our goals—such as to lose weight.

Decades of medical research have shown us that meditation is powerful medicine. Studies have proven that meditation does the following:

- reduces heart rate and blood pressure
- reduces stress hormones
- reduces pain and inflammation
- reduces depression and anxiety
- improves immune system function
- improves focus and memory
- improves a sense of peaceful calm
- improves the feeling of connectedness
- improves sleep

That's just the tip of the iceberg. The research on meditation's power continues to grow more compelling—and one of the promising lines of research concerns meditation's effect on our weight loss efforts. For example, multiple studies have found that meditation helps improve our awareness of internal hunger and satiety signals, as well as our ability to regulate what and how much we eat. Meditation has been shown to reduce cravings for unhealthy food² and decrease the frequency of binge eating and emotional eating.³ Meditation can also reduce high levels of the stress hormone cortisol and resulting toxic belly fat.⁴ One study even found that an eight-week meditation class tripled the amount of weight lost by a group of elderly women, when compared with those who did not use similar techniques.⁵

Of course, meditation is not a magic wand—we still have to nourish ourselves with healthy food

and exercise. But meditation is an incredible supplement to *any* kind of weight-loss regimen, creating a multiplying effect on your preferred approach. When you make the commitment to try even five minutes of meditation a day, you strengthen and train your mind to more easily support your goals and your metabolism.

And then anything is possible.

THE MEDITATE YOUR WEIGHT PROGRAM

Over the course of my decades of work with patients and students, I've identified some very common self-limiting thought patterns and developed meditations to help draw awareness to those patterns. I've given a lot of thought to selecting the meditations, reflections, and mantras included in this book, choosing only those that I've found most effective for resetting the metabolic engine.

The 21-day program in this book is a structured, progressive, mind-training sequence. All of the meditations and exercises help you first identify and then address the thought patterns that are holding you back from achieving your health and wellness goals. Just as any athlete follows her coach's program to help her train for a race or competition, you can follow this program to help you train your mind for optimal health and wellness. To live with more energy, feel stronger and leaner, look radiant, and reach the best possible state of health doesn't mean starving ourselves or running a marathon—but it does require us to live with greater awareness.

Part 1 is a crash course in the miracle of meditation—how it works and how it can benefit every part of your body and your mind. In the first three chapters we'll delve into the science—exactly why is meditation so effective in helping us attain our goals? I'll also share details about my own experience with patients and yoga students, and how I've used these methods to help them, and myself, to heal.

In **chapter 1** I'll explain the basics of meditation and address some common misconceptions about it. In **chapter 2** we'll uncover exactly which stumbling blocks—both physical and mental—may be impeding your weight loss, and how meditation can help you get past them. In **chapter 3** we'll dig a little deeper to learn how meditation can change your physiology on a cellular, even genetic, level. You'll discover how meditation has been scientifically proven to physically alter the shape, size, and functioning of your brain, to chemically alter the endocrine system, and to tone and soothe the nervous and cardiovascular systems. You'll see exactly how meditation reroutes self-defeating neural patterns that can keep you stuck, and how these brain-based changes can help set your body up for weight loss success.

Once you understand my background, my approach, and the scientific research behind the effectiveness of meditation, you'll start to see how just five or ten or twenty minutes, once a day, can lead to radical changes in your health and happiness.

In **part 2** we begin the 21-day retreat. Each day I'll introduce you to a specific theme that I have found integral to metabolic success. I'll share my personal experiences with this topic, or a patient's story, some interesting facts or cutting-edge research. And throughout the 21 days I will also share the ways in which meditation can deepen your engagement with life and your awareness of the wonder and beauty all around you. Life will get lighter, which may be even more important than any weight loss goal you have.

From there you'll enter your daily meditation—just three minutes to start, adding on time as you feel ready. I'll talk you through all the basics—how to sit, where to sit, what you'll use to sit, and more—as well as provide a mental image, idea, or phrase to guide you. Directly after, I ask you to respond to two or three short journal prompts, to help you investigate and reflect upon how each theme reveals itself in your life. Finally, I'll send you on your way with your daily mantra and some intentions for the day, asking you to pay attention to thoughts, emotions, sensations, and experiences to help you consider and reflect upon the topic at hand.

The next day's lesson will build on the prior day's lesson and deepen your self-awareness as you develop a daily practice. Each day of the program will follow the same format, so you can more easily settle into a rhythm. My hope is that by the end of the 21 days you'll have made your meditation practice a simple habit that's easy to keep integrated into your already very full life.

Whether you've wanted to meditate your whole life and haven't found the right format or you're a seasoned meditator who wants to expand your practice to optimize your metabolism, I hope you find what you need in this book. My goal is to show you just how simple and practical the tool of meditation really is, and how incredibly powerful your results can be, all in just a few minutes a day.

Most of all, I hope you find the next three weeks to be an enjoyable lesson in YOU—what makes you tick, what holds you back, what makes you come alive, and how you can help yourself be fully present, with your arms and eyes wide open, in all areas of your life.

Let's get started!

WHAT'S

WEIGHING

YOU DON'T KNOW?

.....
Part 1
.....

1

Meditation: The Master Habit

I will never forget working with Leslie.

Leslie was very disciplined and worked extremely hard to lose weight. She followed a clean diet. She worked out at the gym regularly. But no matter what she did, she could not get her body to let go of those last fifteen pounds she wanted to lose to feel healthy again. She'd been successful at reducing her weight in the past. But this time, no luck.

When Leslie came to my office and shared her current program with me, I was struck by all the work she'd done to lose weight. There really weren't any additional diet- or exercise-related changes she could make—she'd been *that* disciplined. She was even aware that working out too hard or eating too little could stimulate counterproductive stress hormones, so she'd also been focused on striking a healthy balance between the two and on reducing stress in other areas of her life.

Leslie had done everything that I would have recommended, with the exception of one critical ingredient for success: She had not yet started to meditate.

When I suggested she begin meditation, she was skeptical but game. "I've always wanted to try meditation," she said. "Even if I don't lose weight, maybe this program will help me stick with it."

Leslie started with five minutes a day, working up to ten minutes once she felt ready. Initially, she struggled to find the time in her busy schedule, but then she quickly came to see meditation as a highlight of her day. And sure enough, shortly after coming to see me—making no other changes to her self-care routine—Leslie had lost fifteen pounds. I continued to see her once or twice a year for a few years, and she has maintained that loss, seemingly effortlessly—looking more serene (and younger!) each time I see her.

I've watched many men and women spend a tremendous amount of time perfecting their diet and exercise regimes—really pushing themselves toward clean diets, yoga, high-performance athletic gear, and more—but remaining frustrated and unhappy with their results. Some struggle with consistency, battling inner demons they can't seem to defeat, and get pulled back into self-sabotaging habits. Others, like Leslie, can motivate themselves to do all the right things, but they still don't see the changes they want, and they don't feel their best. Patients often come to me in tears, wondering what else they could possibly do to break through this frustrating plateau. Many have done everything possible to tell their bodies that they want to be at a different weight. But just like Leslie, they need to make the final, critical connection: They need to relay that message to their minds.

Leslie was still operating with outdated ideas about herself. In her mind she was an overweight woman. She hadn't yet started to visualize herself at her target weight—and her fixed image of herself ensured that her body would hold on to those fifteen pounds, no matter what. Her brain—the master

her nervous system, the captain of the whole body—needed to believe the change was possible order to allow the biochemical changes necessary to make it happen.

Meditation changed her perspective and helped her have faith in her image of herself as lean and vital. Her daily meditation practice and the resulting mental shift was all it took for her body to let go of those last fifteen pounds.

Whether I'm working with stressed-out college students or hard-charging executives, new moms or recent retirees, I have seen that meditation can be a very simple but transformative solution to a wide manner of stubborn and frustrating problems. In our quest for more vibrant health and happiness, many of us are held back by subconscious messages and long-standing patterns. We might not even know our blocks exist, even as we run headlong into them, day after day. But as little as five minutes of mindful meditation, practiced daily, can help us become aware of our blocks—which is often the first and most important step to getting past them.

As meditation helps you see your blocks, you begin to understand the connection between the hidden messages you're sending to yourself, the self-defeating patterns you unconsciously follow, and the frustrating lack of progress you've made toward your goals. But rather than nudging you into a self-chastising spiral, meditation helps you develop greater understanding of and compassion for yourself, foibles and all. It is in this space of peace and self-compassion that your body relaxes its defenses, opens up, and reveals its innate instinct for health—often enabling natural, automatic, even effortless weight loss.

As we make meditation a regular part of our daily lives, we experience small “aha!” moments that lead to progress to ever-richer insights. These changes start to compound as we become stronger and less engaged with our fears. We develop the courage to turn and face the biggest problems in our lives, the painful issues we may have avoided facing for years—issues that often turn out to be the very root causes of some of our most frustrating blocks.

These foundational shifts may take a while to occur, but once we address them, life suddenly seems easier, richer, more meaningful. We begin to heal lifelong injuries, reboot long-dormant dreams, and set off on paths that had previously seemed inaccessible.

And all of this begins with just a few minutes a day. When you tap the power of meditation, your quest to remove extra pounds is often just the beginning of a truly life-changing transformation.

SIMPLE BUT MIGHTY

The practice of meditation is actually very simple: You require nothing but an intention to quiet your mind for a few moments. You don't need any equipment or extensive training—you don't even necessarily need a quiet space (although it is handy). As simple as meditation is, its powerful effects have been studied and validated by the most prestigious medical institutions in the world. Millions of people have been subjected to sleep studies, blood tests, brain scans, and all manner of clinical trials to chronicle its effects on our various body systems. This research has proven that meditation has a verifiable, physical effect on how our bodies manage stress; it changes our physiology, our nervous and endocrine systems, even the very structure of our brains.

Meditation can support almost any effort to improve health—including the pursuit of a healthy weight. In fact, a recent analysis of peer-reviewed studies that looked at mindfulness-based

interventions to address eating behaviors related to weight gain—including overeating, binge eating and emotional eating—found that participants in 86 percent of the mindfulness studies demonstrated improvement in their weight-related goals.¹

Research shows that meditation, and especially mindfulness meditation, aids weight loss efforts the following ways:

- by teaching us to slow down and truly savor our food, so we enjoy it more and need less to feel satisfied
- by helping us understand what actual physical hunger and fullness feel like, instead of eating out of habit or craving
- by helping us question those cravings that seem “irresistible”

Many studies have shown that mindfulness techniques can reduce food cravings and enhance weight loss. But more awareness can also help us clearly see how our mental habits affect us: Why do we crave certain foods, whether healthy or unhealthy? Why do we have self-limiting mental patterns—and how do those patterns impact our body image, our health, our posture? How do we treat ourselves—and how do we interact with and treat others? How do we feel and live and breathe and move in our lives? All of these questions play a role in our health and our happiness, our level of connection with others and contentment with our lives. If we can start to get at the answers to those questions, the weight loss often comes naturally.

Seem too good to be true? How can simply sitting quietly have that much impact? Maybe you have your doubts about meditation—or you’ve tried it, but it doesn’t seem to work for you. Let’s look at a few of the most common myths about meditation to see if we can address those doubts and reservations.

SOME MYTHS ABOUT MEDITATION—AND THE TRUTH

Though meditating is simpler to do than many believe, it is also a mysterious process—how does it work, exactly? Even scientists are not exactly sure, but they’re getting closer. That mystery sometimes causes a bit of a PR problem for meditation, but I’d love to clear up a few of those misunderstandings.

Myth:

“MEDITATION IS A SPIRITUAL PRACTICE.”

Truth:

MEDITATION IS, FIRST AND FOREMOST, A MENTAL PRACTICE.

Meditation is not voodoo. Meditation is not New Age or mystical. Yes, meditation *has* been used in many forms in religious traditions and cultures throughout history and throughout the world—but the act of meditating isn’t inherently spiritual.

At its core, meditation is a means of training your mind. It has direct physiological effects on the

brain and nervous system that can be studied in the lab, tracked by sophisticated fMRI brain scanner or analyzed with a blood test, stethoscope, or heart rate monitor. In fact, over the last twenty-five years, more than three thousand studies on meditators have been conducted at some of the most respected research institutions in the world, including Harvard, Yale, Stanford, and the universities of California, North Carolina, and Wisconsin, among many others. The data from these studies is very clear: Meditation helps people lead healthier, happier, and more fulfilling lives.

Myth:

“MEDITATION JUST DOESN’T WORK FOR ME.” OR: “I CAN’T MEDITATE.”

Truth:

MEDITATION WORKS FOR EVERYONE, AND EVERYONE CAN DO IT.

I hear it all the time: “I can’t meditate—it just doesn’t work for me.”

Imagine if a baby who was just learning how to walk tried to take a step and fell down, then turned around and said, “Sorry, Mom and Dad—this walking thing just doesn’t work for me.”

Silly, right? But meditation is like walking—it’s an activity we learn to do in very short spurts, then continue to practice and improve upon for the rest of our lives.

Once you’ve mastered the basics of walking, you can go in any direction you’d like—you can run the fifty-yard dash in gym class, you can train for a 5k, you can become a marathoner. Or, like many people, you might just stick with basic walking to get you through your days. But the core mechanism involved in each of these activities is exactly the same: You put one foot in front of the other, and you move forward.

Meditation is just like that. You might just do three minutes a day; you might work up to twenty. You might fall in love with it and decide to dig deep and do a retreat. But at an elemental level, no matter where you find yourself currently, you are a meditator. From the very first moment you sit, take a breath, and notice that your mind is wandering, you’re already doing it—you’re meditating.

Myth:

“THE REAL TYPE OF MEDITATION IS [X]—AND IF YOU DON’T DO [X], YOU’RE NOT REALLY MEDITATING.”

Truth:

ANY TYPE OF MEDITATION IS “REAL”; NO ONE TYPE IS BETTER THAN ANOTHER.

When we start meditating, a common trap is to get caught in thinking we have to follow a specific type of meditation. When I first got into meditation back in the early nineties, people were very specific about it. I heard all kinds of dictums:

- You can’t be sitting on a chair—you have to sit on a cushion.
- Your legs need to be in this position.
- You have to have your right thumb on top and your left thumb on the bottom.

- ~~Your right heel must be in front.~~
- Your spine has to be right over your pelvis.
- You have to chant this or think about that.

All of these *might* be helpful suggestions to you—or not. To use meditation to reach your health goals, there are truly no absolutes of this kind. What works for you is what works for *you*. It doesn't matter if you do a visualization, or count your breaths, or simply take a moment to close your eyes and be still while riding on the bus—all of these are just tools, and all of them are forms of meditation. Anytime you take a moment to just sit there—voilà, you're meditating.

And that's the ultimate goal of meditation: that, with practice, you will get to a level of comfort in which you can just tip back into that same relaxed, focused mental space on the drop of a dime anytime you notice that you're getting stressed. By developing your meditation skills, you become able to step out of the stress loop and remain cool, calm, and collected as often as you'd like.

If you're drawn to one specific method of meditation, that's great—stick with what works for you. Find the tool that you need and use it. But from a scientific perspective, and for the results we're looking for in the mind and body, please know there are many “right” ways to do it.

Myth:

“YOU HAVE TO MEDITATE FOR TWENTY MINUTES OR MORE, OR IT'S NOT WORTH IT.”

Truth:

ANY AMOUNT OF MEDITATION CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE IN YOUR LIFE.

The length of time you spend meditating is absolutely secondary to frequency. If you have a hard time sitting still and struggle and force yourself to stay still for twenty minutes, you're not going to get the health benefits that you would get from simply sitting for five minutes and just paying attention to your breath. The extra effort you expend to sit in that spot longer than your tolerance can take will stimulate a stress response in your nervous system. I would so much rather you meditate once a day for three minutes than once a week for twenty.

Yes, that little time really does make a difference. One study found that as few as five minutes of meditation a day for four weeks significantly reduced participants' measures of stress and anxiety and increased their perceived quality of life.² Another study found that fifteen minutes of meditation a day reduced participants' measures of stress by up to 36 percent.³ But even something as simple as a single, mindful exhale can lower your blood pressure, at least for a moment or two.

Not only does meditation not take a lot of time to be effective, a new line of research suggests that meditation actually changes our *perception* of time—making us feel as though we have *more* of it in our daily lives. Remember in childhood, when the summer felt like it lasted forever? As adults, we lose this sense of luxuriously expansive time. But one German study found that seasoned mindfulness meditators experienced less subjective time pressure, a greater sense of time “expanding,” and a general slowing in their experience of the passage of time.⁴ Compared with non-meditators, they were more likely to say that the previous week and the previous month had passed “slowly.”

Imagine—just a few minutes spent meditating can deepen and expand your experience of time itself. You will have fewer of those “Where did the day go?” moments. Your weekends and vacations will feel longer. You will gain a richness in your moment-to-moment existence that you may not even realize you’re not experiencing right now.

Meditation can help you live longer, both in calendar years and in your own subjective experience of those years.

Myth:

“MEDITATION SHOULD BE DIFFICULT—AND IF IT’S NOT DIFFICULT, YOU’RE NOT DOING IT RIGHT.”

OR: “MEDITATION SHOULD BE EASY—AND IF IT’S NOT EASY, YOU’RE NOT DOING IT RIGHT.”

Truth:

MEDITATION IS SIMPLE—NOT EASY, NOT DIFFICULT. ALLOWING OURSELVES TO EXPERIENCE IT WITHOUT JUDGMENT IS THE TRICK.

People have this idea that meditation has to be difficult to have any impact on their lives. Others believe it has to be easy—as in, “I must be able to do it immediately without any challenge whatsoever, or it’s not for me.”

Neither one of these is true. But these myths come from the same place: judgment. Meditation helps us recognize that these beliefs are simply thoughts, judgments that our minds have created—not absolute truths that should guide our choice of whether or not to meditate.

Myth:

“IF YOUR MIND WANDERS, YOU’RE NOT A MEDITATOR.”

Truth:

NO MIND IS STILL ALL THE TIME.

A lot of people come to the practice with the idea that meditation is about making your mind really still. But just sitting and noticing that your mind is wandering *is* meditation. Even trained meditators experience moments when their minds wander off. That never stops.

When our mind wanders, we can start to judge ourselves: *Am I doing it right? Am I doing it wrong? Am I doing it well? Am I doing it poorly?* We get upset with ourselves for it wandering off with all these distractions. But keeping your mind focused on one point is really difficult—in fact, it’s almost impossible.

The truth is, your mind is always going to meander—and that wandering *is part of meditation*. The process of repeatedly bringing your mind back, and not scolding it for having taken a detour, *is* meditation. In the mental gym that is meditation, the act of noticing the wandering *is* that biceps curl that will strengthen your brain. You’re becoming an observer, rather than a judge—the essential shift that forms the basis of all meditation.

Myth:

“BO-RING! I HAVE NO NEED TO LEARN HOW TO FOCUS—MY BRAIN LOVES MULTITASKING!”

Truth:

NO BRAIN REALLY LOVES MULTITASKING.

According to the Laboratory of Neuro Imaging at the University of Southern California, about seventy thousand thoughts travel through our minds on a daily basis.⁵ Some of them have to do with swearing after stubbing a toe, or feeling the temperature of the water before we step into the shower or any other quotidian detail. And some thoughts are biggies—work problems, money concerns, too-much-to-do-in-too-little-time anxieties, painful heartbreak. As intelligent beings, our brains can get easily tempted by all those juicy thoughts. But for most of us, being distracted from the here and now not only exhausts us, it also causes our productivity and happiness to plummet.

One Harvard study used an iPhone app to track how often people’s minds wander and how those wanderings affect their level of happiness. They found that no matter what people were doing, from working to shopping to playing with their kids to hanging out with friends, they were much happier when their minds were not wandering. (Note: “Making love” was the activity that showed the *least* amount of mind wandering.) The researchers found that the nature of what people were doing had less impact on their happiness than their degree of mind wandering while doing it. An even deeper analysis of the data suggested that “mind wandering was the cause, not merely the consequence, of the unhappiness.”⁶

So why does mind wandering make us unhappy? Part of the answer must be that we lose our sense of flow, that total absorption in our tasks, that research has proven is a potent source of happiness. But unless we are consciously observing all of those mind-wandering thoughts, we may also be experiencing thousands of *judgments* along with them. Meditation helps us be able to sit and watch that judgment, just notice it, without having to make it go away or make it different. If we can resist judgment, we can better manage our nervous system reactivity. Every distracted thought and negative judgment is no longer an opportunity for our fight-or-flight reaction to be triggered and our stress hormone cascade to begin—we can learn how to consciously sidestep the whole business.

Thanks, brain, but I don’t want to dance right now—I’m just observing.

THE FOUNDATION OF ALL MEDITATION

Now that we’ve covered the most common myths about meditation, let’s talk a bit more about two core truths that I’ve alluded to previously. Two concepts or mind-sets form the foundation of all meditation: becoming an observer and practicing non-judgment.

Becoming an Observer

Do you know that feeling of road hypnosis, when you can drive for ten miles without even realizing it?

How many times have you driven to work on auto-pilot, reflexively taking the same turns, waiting at the same stoplights, and not noticed the trees or flowers or signs or even the people that you drove by?

Most of us experience this daily. Our gaze becomes fixed; our eyes are open but we are not really seeing. The brain hovers between being marginally alert and actually noticing what's happening around us in this moment. We can float in and out of this haze, off and on for minutes or hours without really registering the passage of time.

Certainly our nervous system needs to tune out *some* of that detail—if we zeroed in on every passing billboard or pebble on the road, we'd be overwhelmed with minutiae in minutes. But this daydreaming, sleepwalking haze is very different from the sensation of being alertly aware of the space in the mind—the sensation we can develop through meditation practice.

As we spend more time in the state of being present in meditation, we start to notice more things throughout the day, those little details of beauty or quiet majesty that add texture to our lives. Gradually, or even suddenly, we'll start to notice flowers blooming or plants that we'd never taken notice of before. After just a short period of a sustained meditation practice, our moments start to gain more depth and richness, more sensory detail. And as we notice those things, we'll be better able to catch ourselves when we dip into that “zone-out” state, where we're just going through the motions and not really being present.

Sounds easy, doesn't it? But becoming an observer, watching your thoughts without becoming engaged with them, is probably the hardest part of the meditation practice. Human nature tends to dictate that when we notice something, we automatically dig in—we want to get *involved*.

This common scenario is easily imagined with children. Many parents find that just standing back and watching your kids navigate life without interfering can require a Herculean effort in self-control. We feel the urge to tie the shoelace, to mop up the spill, to correct the mistake on the math homework. Even to give advice. We hear or see an issue, and we want to resolve, to guide, to *rescue*.

Our minds react to our thoughts just like a parent reacts to her child—the mind naturally wants to get involved, to dig in and get to work. This tendency comes from a good place—you just want to help your brain “solve” the issue that's plaguing it. But just as a child's “problem” can often resolve itself without our intervention, we can help our stress level and our well-being by strengthening our resolve to simply watch our thoughts and not get involved.

Our natural inclination to “fix” often shows up during our very first meditation session, when we start to pay attention to the breath. (Note: I'm not talking about specific yoga and meditation practices, such as *pranayama*, in which we actually look at and consciously regulate the breath—those involve a very different approach.) The instructor might begin the meditation session saying something like “Pay attention to your breath”—and your very first thought is, “I'm not breathing the right way!”

In truth, maybe you come to your mat or cushion with your breath choppy or shallow; maybe you're trying to extend your exhale for that “perfect” breath. But as you learn meditation, you'll start to realize that, rather than lengthening, deepening, slowing, or otherwise changing the breath, meditation is about simply *watching* the breath—which is much harder. Your task is not to judge the quality of your breath but to sit there without even subtly trying to modify it in any way—this is great practice for becoming an observer.

Becoming an observer is a skill that helps us in many areas of our lives. Imagine being able to keep a cool head in moments of high stress. You could choose not to escalate an argument with your child

or partner. You would be able to see a clear solution in a moment of crisis at work. Becoming an observer also helps us stay aware of what our body is asking for from moment to moment. Then, we can focus on the signals our body is sending us instead of succumbing to the mindless reactivity that can lead to poor food choices.

Training for Non-judgment

Meditation has an amazing way of making everything more conscious. Once we start to develop the skill of being an observer, we tune in to the details all around us that we might have been missing when we were simply zombie-walking through our days.

We can use meditation to train the mind in the same way we can use time in the gym to train the body. When we go to the gym, we lift weights to make our biceps stronger and better able to lift things. When we sit in meditation, we train the muscles of the mind to be less reactive and less judgmental.

Why is being nonjudgmental so important, anyway? After all, everyone makes assumptions and judgments about the world around us—that's just a part of being human, isn't it?

Not necessarily. These mental habits we've learned may *feel* like a natural part of being human, but they're not always healthy for us. Yet we fall into them every day. The friend who doesn't return the text or e-mail—she must be mad at you! The photo of a party posted on Facebook—why weren't you invited? The smirk you thought you saw on the barista's face—well, she can forget that tip! The freckle on your face that's changing shape—could it be cancer?

These quick, automatic, unexamined assumptions are not simply innocent or inert—they leave residue. Our reactions to them have an impact on our brain chemistry, hormonal reactions, cardiac health, inflammation levels—not to mention our general worldview and level of happiness. Unexamined judgments have the potential to change our anxiety level, our moods, even our relationships. If we allow them to, these judgments can define who we are. We need to be able to stop and carefully examine them, and consciously consider whether or not we want to take them in, give them any credence, or offer them residence in our brain.

The better we get at being observers, the more likely we are to notice our judgments. Once our brain starts to notice, we can decide: *Do I want to keep doing that? Is that a rational assumption? Am I as healthy as I want to be? Do I have the energy I'd like? Am I a hard worker? Am I ready to live a cleaner life?* We can start to reorient some of those subconscious thought processes and make them more conscious.

Ultimately, the judgments we have about the world around us are the same as those we have about ourselves—they're thoughts, mental shortcuts, but not reality. Heaping judgment on ourselves, especially about our weight, can be extremely damaging to our health and our self-image. Contrary to all those shaming messages we may have picked up in our youth or from the media, we cannot criticize ourselves into losing weight. Research shows that people who feel a sense of shame about their weight are actually less likely to achieve their health or weight loss goals.

Meditation can help us become aware of these thought habits and learn how to look at them without judgment, so we can eventually help shift them. Becoming an observer and adopting a nonjudgmental stance are the two essential first steps toward approaching our personal blocks with self-compassion.

and kindness.

In the next chapter we'll talk about what the most common blocks are—and how meditation can help us surmount them.

Busting Through Your Mental Blocks

Regardless of where you are in your health journey, whenever you try to make a change, you can run up against a big barrier standing in your way: your habits. Science has determined that about 70 percent of our health and longevity is dictated by our lifestyle—which is really nothing more than a collection of our long-term habits.

Most of us have at least one habit we'd prefer to kick to the curb. But while it can be tempting to go cold turkey, all-or-nothing attempts to quit bad habits can backfire, causing rebound, self-criticism, and discouragement. Despite our good intentions, sometimes our brains cling to our habits like security blankets, even when they don't serve us well.

Rather than try to kick it outright, an easier way to get rid of a habit you don't want is to develop a better one—and allow that good one to gently nudge the unhelpful one out of the picture. Meditation, in many ways, is the queen of all good habits. That daily ten minutes (or five, or even three!) spent in meditation exerts a tremendous influence over the remaining twenty-three hours and fifty minutes totally out of proportion to the little time required to do it. When you first focus on developing a meditation practice, you'll find it's much easier to develop other great habits—and loosen the grip of unhealthy ones.

I see this phenomenon every day in my practice. Few more clearly exemplify it than my patient Abby.

A BRIDGE TO NEW HABITS

Abby came to me for treatment when she was having trouble getting pregnant. She'd been trying to conceive for two years, but something wasn't working. Every time she came to my office, she would walk in and set her gigantic thirty-two-ounce soda on my desk. And there it would sit, looming over our entire consultation.

I tried everything I could to get her to stop. I would bring her handouts on why soda was bad for her. I would explain about the connection between sugar and infertility. Even her desire for a child couldn't dissuade her from this habit. No amount of information or research seemed capable of loosening Abby's grip on that soda cup.

Finally I switched gears. We started talking about what the connection was—why did she feel like she needed it? What was she getting from soda? She said she originally started drinking it to give her enough energy to get through the day. And now she'd become so dependent on it, she truly believed

was all that kept her functioning. She was petrified of attempting to navigate her busy life without it.

That huge cup had become her moral support and her friend, an indispensable companion and ally through her long days. Once we'd clarified the role that soda was playing in her life, it was clear that no amount of discussion about its health risks was going to displace this emotional connection. Instead, we needed to address the *function* of the soda; we needed to find another way to help her feel supported, and we needed to manage her anxiety about not having the energy to get things done.

Her schedule was so packed, she could commit to only three minutes of meditation per day to start, then five minutes per day a week later—but that's really all it took for her to start to recognize her energy patterns and how she could better manage her stress. She cut down a tiny bit, day by day, and slowly but surely, she began to let go of the soda—as well as her concerns about her energy level. To her great surprise, she was still managing her responsibilities quite well. In fact, she seemed to be doing even better without it.

Just weeks later, Abby felt a lot better (and looked great, too). After a little longer, she had lost some weight, but that was just a happy side benefit. The real gift came three months after starting meditation and phasing out soda: After more than two years of trying to conceive and many different procedures (conventional and alternative), Abby got pregnant.

I don't believe she would have seen this wonderful outcome without meditation. Abby's mindfulness program was what allowed her to take a good, close look at her energy level, her nourishment, and exactly what she was getting out of her "relationship" with her daily soda. The time spent in meditation helped her realize she needed to find other solutions for her anxiety—and that she also needed to form closer, more supportive relationships with her colleagues and friends, instead of relying on an extremely unhealthy beverage for moral support.

In my practice I've seen this scenario repeated over and over, with people who are trying to lose weight holding on to patterns and habits that no longer serve them. No matter where we are on our health journey, we may have long-standing emotional connections with our bad habits that make it hard to let them go. Whether our unhelpful habit is sugar or potato chips (or both), or sitting on the couch and not wanting to exercise, or slavishly counting calories and overexercising for hours a day—all of these destructive habits fulfill some need within us. Meditation helps us observe our patterns without judgment, so we can start to learn from them instead of hide from them. Facing these truths helps us get to the bottom of our authentic needs, allowing us to find more empowering, productive, and healthy ways to meet them.

UNRAVELING OUR DESTRUCTIVE HABITS

Health and fitness advice comes at us from all directions. This tsunami of musts, the constant drumbeats of "do this, don't do that," makes us feel like we can never do or be enough. Sometimes the resulting state of being overwhelmed can lead to self-defeating thoughts: *There must be something wrong with me. Everyone else can [avoid sugar/eat vegan/run five miles every day]. Why can't I? If I can't do it right, why even try?*

This all-or-nothing thinking is a mental habit that often gets in our way. But despite our culture's perennial search for silver-bullet solutions, there isn't one and there never will be. Your quest to shed weight is just that: *your* quest. What works for others might not work for you—and nothing works for

everyone.

Here's what we know does work: developing compassion for yourself; learning how to sink into the experience of the current moment; and trying not to judge yourself too harshly. Meditation can help you develop all of these beneficial mental habits, training you to stay rooted in the present instead of getting lost in regrets about the past or fears about the future.

As these habits strengthen, they'll start to nudge out less helpful ones, and you can more easily move forward with your health goals. Let's consider some of the unhelpful habits that can pack on pounds, and how meditation can help you address them.

Meditation helps you tune in to your hunger (and other body signals).

A healthy lifestyle and metabolism start with being able to hear your own internal signals. All the messages from your body and your mind can either create stumbling blocks or help you break through them—and they are far easier to hear when you meditate.

Meditation allows you to key in to the biological feedback that tells you how your plan is working. *How does drinking more water change my skin and my appetite? Do those supplements help soothe my joint pain? If I work out in the morning, how does the rest of my day feel?*

One of the most important of these signals is hunger. In all the rush-rush-rush of our lives, sometimes we eat out of habit rather than genuine hunger. We might eat everything on the plate without stopping to check in and see if we really need those last few bites. Or maybe we're just mindlessly following the "Clean your plate!" conditioning we learned as kids.

We may have forgotten what the rumble of true hunger in our belly feels like, or the satisfaction of a meal that leaves us pleasantly full but not stuffed. Instead, what, when, and how much we eat might be determined entirely by external signals: the clock on the wall, the prepackaged portion, the calories prescribed by a diet program, the foods we've been told are good for us...the bottom of a bucket of popcorn.

Multiple clinical studies suggest that mindful eating, a form of meditation in which you focus on the sensory cues of the eating experience without judgment, can be an effective way to increase our awareness of our innate biological hunger and satisfaction cues, helping reconnect us to our appetites and our body's need for different kinds and quantities of fuel.¹ If you've gotten into the habit of eating your meals on autopilot or letting your empty plate or package dictate when you're done, meditation practice can help you break free of those habits by allowing you to develop greater awareness of when you are truly hungry, and eating only then.²

Meditation helps you manage your energy level.

Another thing that meditation helps you recognize is your energy level, which is an excellent gauge of how well you're eating. Certain foods can set us up for first an energy spike and then an energy crash (Learn more about specific food choices in [chapter 6](#).) Having a regular meditation practice creates a mindful awareness of the experience in your body so that you notice how certain foods affect you both when you're eating them and then several hours afterward.

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