Dr. Rob’s Science Connection -- Enhancing Brain Health

## 5 Ways Meditation Can Support Optimal Brain Health

## Issue 10

Many of us are interested in maximizing brain health so we can live life to its fullest. Most people are aware that physical exercise and cognitive stimulation have shown great promise in maximizing brain health. But there is another intervention that has been well supported by science in recent years – meditation or mindfulness training. Many of the positive effects of meditation are experienced through improving executive functioning (e.g., our ability to pay attention, be aware, and inhibit intrusive thoughts or emotions). The good news is that if we can improve executive functioning, we usually see improvements in memory ability and emotional well-being.

Meditation is really brain training. There are different ways to meditate. Sometimes, it involves an open acceptance and awareness of thoughts and surroundings. Other times, it can involve a focused concentration on one’s breath or one’s body. But whatever type of meditation one does, it appears to alter the brain in beneficial ways.

**5 Ways Meditation Can Improve Your Brain Health**

1. **Improve the ability to pay attention and make new memories.** [Research](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/26462570) shows meditation or mindfulness training cannot only lead to improvements in the ability to make new memories, thereby, possibly delaying symptoms of cognitive impairment. But it could also reduce risk factors related to having a stroke and thus vascular dementia, the second most common type of dementia.

2. **Reduce the negative effects of stress.** Research has shown that meditation can lead to a number of positive effects related to stress.

3. **Maximize happiness and decrease symptoms of depression.** Meditation and mindfulness training can help us turn off negative emotions and be more aware and grateful of the good things. Many times, people get stuck on a negative emotion (psychologists call this *emotional perseveration*), and it is associated with depression. The good news is meditation can help reduce emotional perseveration.

In a recent study published in the [Journal of the American Medical Association](https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jamainternalmedicine/fullarticle/1809754), researchers concluded that meditation can reduce symptoms of depression and anxiety. The mental health improvements were consistent with what we see in modern antidepressant medication, without any of the drug side effects.

4. **Facilitate social engagement through better focus and less distractibility.** We have so many things competing for our attention these days. Mindfulness training can help us stay focused and fully present in social situations.

5. **Improve the efficiency of your brain functioning.** We have seen meditation associated with enzyme activity that keeps cells healthy, with fewer age-related changes in the hippocampus (where we make new memories).

While we still need more research on the effects of meditation on health outcomes, the initial research is very promising. And, unlike many pharmaceuticals used for attention, memory, depression and anxiety, we are unaware of any side effects of meditation. To learn more, do an Internet search. There are many good videos and articles available. Or, consider downloading an app to help teach and guide your practice. You don’t need to spend a lot of time engaging in meditation and mindfulness training, maybe just 5-10 minutes a day. If you are too busy to spend 5-10 minutes a day meditating, then I recommend 10-20 minutes a day.

Dr. Rob Winningham is a Professor of Psychology and Gerontology at Western Oregon University. For the past 20 years he has researched human memory and ways to enhance cognitive abilities. His brain stimulation activities are used by thousands of retirement communities and have been shown to improve memory ability. For more information go to: [www.robwinningham.com](http://www.robwinningham.com)

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