

Train your brain for perfect presence

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Eckhart Tolle's message of mindful presence was simple: that by appreciating and accepting this moment for what it is, rather than existing in the past or future, we stop being dragged about by life and become more resistant to stress.



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Even when we don't have external space in our lives, we can still learn to create internal space. And my chaotic life has finally allowed me to understand what Tolle was really talking about: brain fitness. Not in the cognitive or memory sense, but as a buffer to stress.

When *The Power of Now* was published 24 years ago, two million people around the world read about the profound sadness Tolle felt before he found himself homeless and yet deeply happy for the first time in his life.

"I had no relationships, no job, no home, no socially defined identity," the German author and spiritual teacher wrote. "I spent almost two years sitting on park benches in a state of the most intense joy."

At the time, I thought: "Cool message but not super relatable."

I mean, this was the same guy who said that he'd lived with several zen masters, "all of them cats".

But, he also wrote that "the primary cause of unhappiness is never the situation but your thoughts about it".

And this, in a time when the wheels of life are spinning faster, seems pertinent because holding my breath and hoping the moment will pass quickly or experiencing it in a distracted, agitated state because I'm thinking about everything else that needs to be done, doesn't make life any easier.

I'm not the only one feeling the spin. Egg-stains, small children and work juggles aside, there have been multiple stressors for everyone over the past year.

The upheaval and uncertainty of the pandemic has made stress, confusion and anger “commonplace” while depression and anxiety levels have become “substantially elevated” across the board.

An antidote to this external chaos and stress is to build our brain’s fitness, which is what Tolle was doing on those park benches while he practised mindful presence. Back then though, we didn’t have the developments in neuroscience research to call it what it was.

Making our minds useful

Like the duck sitting calmly on the water while its legs paddle furiously below the surface, our brains are automatically processing all sorts of internal and external stimuli while we go about our day.

Our brains do a “bloody good job” of this, says Dr Bryce Vissel, a professor of neuroscience at University of Technology Sydney and the director for the Centre of Neuroscience and Regenerative Medicine. “The body’s systems are set up to be in a hyper alert space,” says Vissel.

But because we are mostly unaware of the flurry of internal activity, there is “a certain amount of dissonance” that this creates. “Especially when you’ve got high-pressure situations or there’s a lot going on in your life.”

This stress can then build up, bubbling to the surface till we feel overwhelmed or whipped about by what is going on in our brains. What we do then often depends on the different connections and circuits our brain came prewired with when we were born, explains Dr Selena Bartlett, a professor of neuroscience at the Queensland University of Technology.

“Adverse childhood experiences over many generations wire the brain for how you react to stress, so you have a default position,” she says.

When we are in default mode, our amygdala – the part of the brain that manages stress – takes control and can cause us to catastrophise, narrate or berate. It can also cause us to freeze, react aggressively or want to run away.

Reducing external stressors, exercising, and taking care of our bodies with sleep and good nutrition all help.

But, we can also train our brain, just like any other part of the body, reshaping it and strengthening certain connections, so that it functions more usefully.

Stopping to notice our internal and external environment, integrating our experience in the present moment, is a way to do this.

“Mindfulness calms the amygdala,” Vissel says. “It’s basically momentary relief from the high alert that your body is in.”

He adds that just as becoming an elite athlete is not only about building muscle strength, but becoming better at controlling your body, practising mindfulness can change the brain structure but also give us more control over automated processes, like our breath, our heart rate or our stress response.

Improving your brain fitness

Mindfully slowing the breath, and therefore our heart rate, sends the message to our brain that we are not in danger. “Just as exercise changes your brain biology, breathing changes your brain biology,” Bartlett adds, explaining that mindful breathing expands the prefrontal cortex, which helps us focus our attention and shrinks the amygdala.

“Everything is connected,” Bartlett says. “It’s a physical thing that’s happening when you do that. Then when you practise it, the next time something comes along you’ll notice it won’t trigger you the same way because you have learned a new way of handling it.”

Retraining takes about six-to-eight weeks of consistent practice (start with 10 minutes a day using an effective app like Headspace or Smiling Mind), explains Dr Craig Hassed, an associate professor in the

Department of General Practice and the co-ordinator of mindfulness programmes at Monash University.

We don't see results from physical exercise after one session and it is the same for exercising our brains, says Hassed, who points out that Tolle's book is "bread-and-butter mindfulness".

"We are literally changing the structure and the function of the brain. So when a person self-reports 'I'm less reactive than I used to be' or 'I'm able to be considered in those situations' or 'I don't get caught up in old patterns of behaviour' it's demonstrable in the areas of the brain that regulate emotion and attention."

As well as noticing our environment and conscious breath, curiosity and seeing the novelty in a situation are ways of exercising mindful presence. And in the same way physical fitness gives us the capacity to go the extra mile, increased brain fitness gives us extra capacity to cope with stress, uncertainty and challenges. It doesn't make us immune to feeling though.

"Somebody might be pressing our buttons and a reaction arises – we are human – but there's an ability to stand back, and that opens a window of opportunity to make a more discerning choice about how to respond or whether to respond," Hassed explains.

There is ample opportunity in daily life to practise heavy lifting or, as some call it, "bicep curls for the brain".

The other night, after several hours spent trying to put a resistant toddler to bed, I battled the rising stress of knowing I still had work and a hundred other things to do.

I took a slow breath and reeled the spinning thoughts back in. I watched my little girl as she finally started to settle, her tummy rising and falling rhythmically. I allowed myself to feel the deep honour it is to be a parent. I bathed in the beauty of Now and as I was floating out of the room in a Tolle-esq bliss, smug I'd beaten my frustration, I stepped on a creaky floorboard and heard her stir: "Mum, where are you going?"

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