

PRESENCE OF M ND

As well as supporting mental health and your sense of self, regular meditation can help prevent injury and even improve athletic performance >>



What do you think of when someone says ‘meditation’? Kneeling Zen monks? Saffron-clad yogis floating six inches above the floor?

It’s true that various types of meditative practices have been promoted and taught within all of the great religious traditions of the world, but they’re certainly not limited to the enlightened.

From medieval Samurai swordsmen to MMA stars preparing to enter the octagon, and from Olympic diver Tom Daley to the current top-ranked tennis player in the world, Novak Djokovic, warriors and athletes alike have long made meditation a core part of their personal training and development.

BECOMING MINDFUL

The first thing to understand about meditation is that there are many different ways to do it – from emptying the mind, to filling it with imaginative visualisations. A child daydreaming in a classroom is doing a type of meditation, but it is quite different to the kind practised by elite athletes.

“Mindfulness helps us to distinguish between the normal aches and pains of training, and the more intense sensations that indicate illness or injury”



Mindfulness helps you pay closer attention to your body, leading to better results and fewer injuries

One of the most powerful movements in meditation in the last few decades has been the scientific development of ‘mindfulness’: an approach to meditation that began as a Buddhist practise, but was soon shorn of its religious trappings. Jon Kabat Zinn, an American scientist and expert in the reduction of stress, originally trained with Zen teachers, before taking mindfulness in a totally ‘secular’ direction, emphasising the science behind the practice, rather than the belief.

Now, mindfulness – which is fundamentally about developing an acute awareness of, or paying attention to, what is happening within and around you without being judgemental – is taught everywhere and has all sorts of offshoots. It’s also become big business.

ATHLETE AWARENESS

There are many reasons why mindfulness is being increasingly recognised as a powerful tool in sport. According to Dr Amy

Saltzman, author of *A Still Quiet Place for Athletes: Mindfulness Skills for Achieving Peak Performance and Finding Flow in Sports and Life*, mindfulness is remarkably effective in helping people to pay more attention to their bodies, leading to better results in training and competition.

“The ability to feel the body is essential for optimal athletic performance,” says Dr Saltzman. “As an athlete, it is critical to develop proprioception and interoception, the abilities to sense the body’s position, equilibrium, motion energy and effort. These capacities allow you to feel the subtle adjustments in weight, balance, power, trajectory and timing that make the difference between the penalty kick that lands in the back of the net and the one that bounces off the crossbar; the running pace that is just at the limit and the pace that is either too slow or too fast. Mindfulness also helps us to distinguish between the normal aches and pains of training, and the more intense sensations that indicate illness or injury.”

According to Dr Saltzman, studies have shown that footballers who practise



MEDITATION MADE EASY
HOW TO MEDITATE IN SIX SIMPLE STEPS

Choose an amount of time you want to meditate for, and set a timer.

Sit on a straight-backed chair with your feet flat on the floor.

Let your hands rest gently on your lap and softly close your eyes.

Focus on your breathing: notice the way the breath enters and leaves your lungs.

As thoughts come into your mind, recognise and acknowledge them, then return to focusing on your breath.

When your session comes to an end, slowly open your eyes and have a drink of water.

mindfulness have lower rates of injury, and that the practice of mindfulness even helps to improve rehabilitation rates for those returning to sport after injury.

Further beneficial aspects of mindfulness training were underlined by the findings of a recent study in Ulster University, called ‘State of Mind Ireland’, led by Dr Stephen Shannon. In the trial, Dr Shannon and his team put a group of athletes through a short

meditation training programme and found that the experience helped the competitors handle their stress positively.

“Our team knew that, just like muscular endurance, being mindful requires training, so we developed an introductory meditation programme for athletes who, despite reporting multiple stressors such as injury, had not yet received any prior mental health training,” said Dr Shannon.

“First and foremost, athletes are human beings, and they experience life stressors just like everyone else, including managing finances, work-life balance, and friends and family. However, with sporting participation comes the addition of physical contact and



injury, a constrained social life and, at the elite level, pressure to achieve from fans, media and sponsors.

“Meditation, and particularly mindfulness, offers a way of helping athletes become aware of what it is like to be them. To be able to drop back and observe thoughts, emotions and physical sensations without judgement. We observed that athletes who took part in two week-long, daily practices of ten minutes of mindfulness meditation, reported enhanced perceptions of emotional competence, which accompanied fewer symptoms of stress and improved mental wellbeing.”

The trial was a success: the athletes who were given the training compared very favourably with those who hadn't, demonstrating the immense potential for even basic meditation teaching to lower stress levels.

HELP AT HAND

And you don't have to take part in a scientific study to access the sort of teaching that Dr Shannon and his team gave to their athletes, because a whole host of apps are available that bring teaching from meditation experts direct to your phone. These range from the Zen teachings of Thich Nat Hanh's Plum Village community, to therapeutic mindfulness focused apps that bring a more scientific approach to calmness and mental health.

The growth in the popularity of meditation apps demonstrates the extraordinary variety of ways in which people learn to meditate. Martial arts legend Bruce



Tom Daley composes himself before the Mixed Synchro 3m Springboard Final at the 2019 FINA World Championships in South Korea

“Mindfulness can make you more resilient and better able to cope with – and learn from – failure”

Mindful relaxation techniques help to lower stress levels and relax muscles



Lee used active meditation, concentrating on the minutiae of movement, in order to develop his focus and relax his body. Many runners and cyclists find they enter meditative ‘flow’ states when they're on the move. Other athletes and martial artists use breath meditation and mindful relaxation techniques to lower their stress levels and relax their muscles, in order to maximise their performance.

But even if your stress levels are already low, and you're so relaxed you're horizontal, Dr Saltzman believes that developing a mindfulness practice can help you to improve your ability to focus and strengthen your mental resilience, by helping you to recognise when tension is developing and then choosing how you respond.

“Mindfulness allows us to be aware of the physical sensations that indicate various emotions. If we become aware that we are tightening our jaw, clenching our fists, raising

our voice, we can breathe and allow the wave of emotion to pass, rather than yelling at ourselves, our teammates or the ref.”

DIVE IN

It's that sense of calmness that leads so many people to believe in the power of meditation. Diver Tom Daley, who suffered a terrible attack of nerves at the 2012 Olympics, relies on absolute focus to perfect his craft, and he describes learning meditation as life changing, saying the change was “unbelievable” and that besides making him feel “a lot calmer”, meditating lowered his stress levels and removed his anxiety.

While Daley does a kind of meditation that helps him stay ‘in the moment’, other competitors rely more heavily on visualisation techniques that help them imagine the future. But what happens when the visualisation doesn't work: when the pass doesn't go to hand, or a puncture ruins a race?

Dr Saltzman, formerly a high-level competitive gymnast and cyclist herself, says that learning mindfulness allows an athlete to develop ‘self-compassion’ even when things go badly wrong.

She advises athletes to recognise and accept that difficult things happen, that they happen to everyone, and that you have to treat yourself as you would treat others. Practising mindfulness to develop more



Many runners find they enter meditative ‘flow’ states while on the move

compassion towards yourself can, she says, make you more resilient and better able to cope with – and learn from – failure. But does that mean it will dull your competitive edge?

ALL IN YOUR HEAD

“The competitive benefits of mindfulness are perhaps best captured in a quote from Bobby Jones, the most successful amateur golfer ever, who frequently beat the pros. He said, ‘Competitive sports are played mainly on a five-and-a-half-inch court, the space between your ears.’

“With practice, we can learn to recognise when we are distracted or buying into negative stories, then we can take a breath and remember that these thoughts are just thoughts – we don't have to believe them or act based on them. This allows us to release

ourselves from judgement and preconceived limitations, and ultimately to compete with freedom.”

Dr Shannon agrees, suggesting that you can actually turn defeats and disappointments to your advantage if you use this kind of approach: “It is nearly guaranteed that if you play sport, you will experience setback and injury. These experiences can be, paradoxically, extremely helpful in the long run by developing resilience. However, there are various responses one can utilise during these times, which is where mindfulness mediation can be useful. It offers a way of experiencing that frustration as it is, and then watching it pass away. Through increased practice, you become better at letting go of those thoughts, whereas if you are stuck in your mind, you are more likely to dwell on the past.”

5 OF THE BEST MEDITATION APPS



INSIGHT TIMER
A simple meditation timer app with optional downloads, perhaps better suited to those with some experience of meditation. It's free to download, with in-app purchases (insighttimer.com).



HEADSPACE
Guided meditations based on mindfulness teachings, to help you develop a regular meditation practice. The first two weeks are free, then there's a monthly (£9.99) or annual (£49.99) subscription to pay (headspace.com).



CALM
A variety of interesting and creative sessions to suit the needs of any user, from beginners to advanced meditators. An annual subscription amounts to a reasonable £28.99 (calm.com).



FEELING GOOD: POSITIVE MINDSET
One of the few apps that NHS doctors recommend to help develop mental resilience. It's based on a mental coaching programme for Olympic athletes. Free to download, with in-app purchases (nhs.uk/apps-library).



THE MINDFULNESS APP
This offers ‘meditation for everyone’ with a range of simple, free options and more than two hundred further courses and guided meditations available to download. Free to download, with in-app purchases ([the mindfulnessapp.com](http://themindfulnessapp.com)).

Words Simon Cross Photography Getty Images