

In the Present

ENGAGING IN MINDFULNESS PRACTICES LIKE MEDITATION AND JOURNALING CAN BE KEY TO IMPROVING AND NOURISHING YOUR MENTAL HEALTH.

BY ASHLEY RYAN

It's interesting just how much interplay exists between mindfulness and mental health. As more and more entities attempt to deteriorate our cognitive balance and clarity, activities like meditation are all the more important to our overall health. According to Bianca Gillett, the new director of recreation and fitness at Newport Beach Country Club, the cognitive changes that occur as well as the added focus that results from meditating can be extremely important for concentration. "Since we are a golf club, I think it's very beneficial because it can improve members' games," she explains.

Although the club doesn't currently have any meditation offerings, Gillett hopes to add some workshops on the Oasis Lawn to enhance the wellbeing of both the members and the staff. Until then, she says practicing at home can be just as beneficial. Here, she explains the importance behind meditation and shares her tips for trying it yourself.

A HEALTHIER YOU

It's no secret that better mental health means a healthier, happier you. But just how important are practices like meditation?

"The brain is a muscle and meditation is a form of working out," Gillett says. "... There's research showing that meditation leads to more gray matter

in the brain." This can have many benefits, from allowing you to think more rationally and stay calm in stressful situations to reducing anxiety and depression.

In fact, when it comes to depression, Gillett notes that studies on meditation have proven that it can rival antidepressants, with both meditation and prescription medication proven to offer the same effect. "And there are a lot of side effects that come from medication, so if you can do something that's a little more holistic... that's a really good tool to have."

There are a number of reasons that mental health has declined in the United States in recent years, though Gillett says three specific things stand at the top of the list. "We don't eat right; we're probably the most non-nourished we've ever been, even though we have the most amount of food," she says. "It's just too processed. We have social media, where there's competition and the mental warfare that comes from that. [And] the lack of exercise was already [a factor] before COVID, then add a year where all the gyms get shut down."

Luckily, she says meditation can make quick changes if you're open to it. "I think a lot of people are scared to be with their minds, and that's a legit fear," Gillett notes. However, she says that just a few weeks of mindfulness exercises



can allow practitioners to feel changes in their cognitive state.

"I would encourage people to just try it... to see how it feels and, if it's not for them, then don't force it," she says. "But they call it meditation practice, so it's not something that you might pick up right away. If you can stay diligent and patient with it, the effects are very beneficial."

OPENING YOUR MIND

Because mindful meditation has proven to be so pivotal for the mind and body, it's important to work it into your everyday routine. For

those just starting out, Gillett recommends using a smartphone app that offers guided sessions. One such option is Headspace, which she says is user-friendly and offers simple ways to delve into the practice. Before jumping in, Headspace explains what meditation is—a practice that allows you to "see your thoughts differently and have more focus and control over what your brain is doing," Gillett says—as well as how to do it in a relaxing way.

Other apps she suggests include Breethe, Calm and Ten Percent Happier, though Gillett also notes that guided meditation isn't the only way to start. Those more hesitant about

the practice can try beginning with gratitude practice, to be completed each morning and night. "In the morning, you start by listing off three things you're grateful for, three things that would make the day great and then a daily affirmation," Gillett explains. "And then, at the end of the day, you finish with three great things that happened that day and then is there anything you can change or improve on that could have made the day better, so a little self-reflection."

Similarly, five senses meditation is another exercise for staying in the present. Think about everything you're hearing; if you hear birds, picture them. Run through all five of your senses, thinking about what you hear, see, feel, smell and maybe even taste, as a way to clear your mind without having to think about nothing.

In addition, Gillett says that journaling can be a useful mindfulness practice as well. "Think of a hoarder," she says. "Imagine the feeling when you walk into the house. It's crowded, it feels uncomfortable, kind of claustrophobic. The same thing can happen with your mind. So, if ... you're not finding some way to filter [some thoughts] out, your brain becomes cluttered. You can't think as clear, your stress goes up. With journaling, you can just write things down—you never have to look at it again, it's just clearing that space out of your head to where it's calm and even."

It may sound overwhelming at first, but it doesn't have to take long. She says you can do a 10-, 15- or 20-minute meditation session to get in the right frame of mind. "I love meditating in the middle of the day," Gillett adds. "It just kind of recenters you and connects you back to where you're able to be just as efficient as you were in the beginning of the day."

Find a place where you feel safe and secure to conduct your sessions. This can be a room in your house, or even a spot outdoors in the backyard or at a park. "Get out in the sun; be out in nature," she suggests. "Whatever makes you most comfortable is how you want to start."

And then, of course, practice makes perfect. As you experience the benefits and learn more about your own mind, you'll discover just how incredible mindfulness can be.

