

NEWS

- News Home
- Erika's Lighthouse News
- Teen Club News
- Walkathon News
- News You Can Use
- Newsletters

Blog

Soul Fitness: Exercise and Meditation

HOW EXERCISE CREATES AN OPPORTUNITY FOR MINDFUL MEDITATION.



Numerous studies point to how just 30 minutes of cardiovascular exercise 5-6 times a week increases serotonin and dopamine levels enough to make a noticeable difference in reducing depression and anxiety. Add to that the increased confidence and self-esteem that comes from a healthier body image - all great stuff!

But, there is something simultaneously and equally as important going on in our bodies (specifically in our brains) that has increasingly become the subject of much research and attention among neuropsychiatric researchers at some of the most renowned academic institutions in the country. That is, *while we are exercising, we are also meditating*. Often referred to as “being in the zone”, this phenomenon has long been understood in its application to elite athletes. Sports psychologists know the benefits of what being in the zone brings to their clients and teams - having a clear, focused head filled with positive images and expectation of success improves athletic performance. But, now researchers are uncovering how being in the zone is, in fact, a state everyone can practice while we exercise and reap the benefits.

In her book, *Choke*, University of Chicago Neuroscientist, [Sian Beilock](#), discusses how MRIs reveal what happens to a person’s brain when they “choke” under the pressure of performance and stressful situations. She also explores how meditation, done just 20 minutes a day for 40 days, results in real, tangible changes in the neural networks of the brain. Clearly, our brains are not hard-wired as once believed, giving even further hope to those suffering from depression and other mental disorders.

In addition, author [Eckhardt Tolle](#) describes the hyperactivity of the typical human mind that can’t stop thinking, worrying, fearing, and judging. For many people, especially those with depression, this becomes a tortuous compulsion and inevitably leads to feelings of criticism and aggression towards the self and others. As with meditation, a regular exercise program (or participation in sports) provides a wonderful opportunity to shift our attention away from this recurring, endless loop of compulsive and damaging thoughts. What your body is doing becomes the focus or in Zen terminology, your “mantra”, rather than the dialogue going on inside your head. This leads to a sense of peaceful space from the mind’s activity, and one starts feeling more rooted in the present moment.

But, beyond the chemical benefits that a regular exercise routine can bring, of equal importance is the opportunity to notice the peaceful, still space as you shift from mind to body awareness and, as a result, the emotional relief that comes with it. Learning to recognize this sensation and tuning into it can provide us with a powerful tool in the fight against depression and other mental illnesses, especially if we invite it into our everyday lives. However, we should note that like all muscle groups in our body, this new found awareness needs to be practiced and exercised to become stronger.

This post was a gracious contribution from, Christie Southern.

Christie is the founder of [Christie's Integrated Fitness](#), a group exercise and personal training program in Winnetka, Illinois. With over 30 years of experience, Christie is certified by the American College of Sports Medicine.

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