

The Dark Side of Mindfulness

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44–56 minutes

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In 2004, [Willoughby Britton](#), then a doctoral candidate in clinical psychology at the University of Arizona, began recruiting participants for a [study](#) that, she felt sure, would show meditation improves sleep.

Britton, a meditation teacher, was so devoted to the practice that she saw herself as a “double agent,” someone who uses science to promote meditation. Although she had grown up in a nonpracticing Episcopalian home, she’d become deeply invested in Buddhist teachings. She read meditation books in her spare time and at one point considered becoming a Buddhist nun. She was confident that meditation improved most things, including sleep; it had already improved much about her own life.

For her study, Britton split 26 participants into two groups: one that would go through an eight-week-long meditation class, and one that would serve as a control group. She brought them all into a lab to sleep overnight while sensors measured their brain waves, muscle activity, and eye movements.

But when she reviewed the results, she was dismayed to find they were the opposite of what she had predicted. The participants in the meditation group slept more fitfully, with more frequent awakenings, than those who didn’t meditate. They spent more time in “Stage 1,” the lightest sleep phase, from which people are easily roused. “Graph after graph after graph, no matter how you looked at it—number of awakenings, number of micro arousals, number of Stage 1 minutes,” Britton told me, the amount of meditation that the subjects practiced was directly correlated with worse sleep quality.

Britton wasn’t sure what had happened. Had she done something wrong? Designed the study poorly? Was the result a fluke, a random finding that didn’t mean much? Or

perhaps meditators just need less sleep. At the time, promoting meditation was more important to her than scientific ethics, and she worried that publishing the results would mean “harming the dharma”—criticizing the teachings of the Buddha. So she didn’t.

On a meditation retreat not long after this, she was chatting about her study with a meditation teacher when the teacher said, “I don’t know why all you psychologists try to make meditation into a relaxation technique. Everyone knows if you meditate enough, you stop sleeping.”

On some level, Britton must have known this. At that point, she had spent years both meditating and studying the brain. Because most kinds of meditation aim to enhance concentration, the practice can act like a stimulant. And just as chemical stimulants such as caffeine and Adderall can interfere with sleep, so, too, can excessive meditation.

What else, she wondered, did meditation teachers know that they weren’t telling people? Gradually, starting with that sleep study, the tiers of thought propping up Britton’s worldview—that Buddhism is a cure-all, and that meditation was always beneficial, and could never cause harm—would collapse. Over time, she would find that meditation, a multibillion-dollar industry that is promoted as a treatment for anxiety, chronic pain, [alcohol abuse](#), addiction, and many other ailments, can sometimes, for some people, cause severe and lasting side effects: depression, anxiety, even acute psychosis. Losing the belief system that had been foundational to her life would lead her to produce a trailblazing body of research about the adverse effects of meditation, and then to found a clinical practice geared toward helping the people—a lot of them, as it turns out—who believe that meditation has harmed them.

Britton has straight blond hair, blue eyes, and a muted affect. When you say something to her, she pauses, as if considering whether or not to smile. A colleague once suggested to her that she might be autistic. “And I’m like, ‘Okay,’” she told me one day recently.

She grew up on a farm in Massachusetts with parents who believed that a person should find a problem that isn’t being solved and embrace it as their niche. Her father’s niche was fermenting waste from local businesses and selling it as compost.

Britton was, by her own description, a weird kid who spent a lot of time by herself. She was always asking strange questions like “What is looking out of my eyes?”

One day during the summer break after her junior year at Colgate University, where she was majoring in neuroscience, Britton went over to the house of her best friend, Sarah, a

champion athlete at Dartmouth, and discovered her lying lifeless on the bed, a hunting rifle on the floor and a splatter of blood on the wall. Overwhelmed by the pressure of competitive sports, Sarah [had taken her own life](#).

After Sarah's death, Britton developed symptoms of PTSD. She grew afraid of crossing the street and of driving. She didn't like opening doors, because she feared she might find a dead body behind them. At one point, while killing rats at her bench in the National Institutes of Health lab where she worked between college and graduate school, she watched the blood drain from their eyes and wondered aloud to a colleague, "Where does it go?" "In the freezer," the colleague responded. But Britton wasn't asking about the rat's body, but its life force. Where did *that* go?

She was reluctant to take medication, so her father sent her the book *A Path With Heart*, by the famous meditation teacher Jack Kornfield. She appreciated Kornfield's explanation for why humans are so prone to rumination—"over and over we feel the familiar tug of thoughts and reactions that take us away from the present moment," he writes—and that he offered a way out via meditation. She began meditating for half an hour to an hour each day.

In graduate school, Britton initially focused her research on the neuroscience of near-death experiences, but for her dissertation she pivoted to studying meditation, which had been so steadying for her personally.

Meditation was, even then, having a moment. In [2005](#), the filmmaker David Lynch established a foundation that aimed to promote Transcendental Meditation in colleges and schools. Soon, tech CEOs were flocking to [mindfulness summits](#) to learn about "wisdom in the workplace" or "conscious leadership," and a mindfulness [class](#) for Google employees regularly had a long waiting list. High-powered celebs including [Oprah](#) and [Arianna Huffington](#) credited meditation for centering them amid their empire building. LeBron James [partnered](#) with Calm, a multibillion-dollar meditation-and-sleep app. Today, according to one study, about [half](#) of all Americans have tried meditation, and about a fifth meditate regularly.

Meditation's popularity is well-founded. Although the practice has long been supported by the more woo-woo corners of the wellness industry, as well as by Eastern philosophy, an accumulating body of scientific research has suggested that it has all kinds of measurable benefits. Major studies show that meditation can [alleviate](#) anxiety and depression—at least about as [well as](#) the antidepressant Lexapro can, but without the cost and with fewer side effects. Even short periods of meditation have shown notable effects

on the brain: [Several studies](#) have found that eight weeks of meditation training can reduce reactivity in the amygdala, the emotion center of the brain, and [another](#) showed that meditation could help activate brain regions involved in attention, memory, and perspective-taking in people with social-anxiety disorder. Other reputable studies have linked meditation to positive mood; [improved immune function](#); [reduced chronic inflammation](#); [less back pain](#); [lower blood pressure](#); enhanced self-awareness; better [attention spans](#); [greater](#) compassion; and [even reduced feelings of loneliness in older adults](#).

Beyond the scientific evidence, Britton believes that meditation became popular because it's a health hack that people can do independently, without relying on expensive medical care. The practice suggests that "underneath all of your thinking is some beautiful, basic state" just waiting to be discovered, she said. It probably helps, she added, that meditation is "this ancient thing from Asia and therefore seems more legit or real or something."

In graduate school, Britton became a serious meditator in the Western insight tradition, which includes sitting and focusing on an "anchor," such as one's breath, sometimes for hours at a time. Britton describes it as an austere practice intended to "train the mind." She molded her life around ancient Buddhist principles. When colleagues remarked on her plain appearance, she said, "Why would I adorn myself?"

Soon, Britton immersed herself in Tibetan studies. Instead of reading novels at night, she'd read dharma books. Her belief at this time, she said, was that "getting enlightened is the most helpful thing you could do for the world." She considered dropping out of academia to move to a monastery in Asia, which would have meant renouncing her former life, taking a vow of celibacy, and living under a new name.

But she stayed in the United States and continued her academic work, while also training to teach mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR), a secular meditation program developed in the '70s by a molecular biologist named Jon Kabat-Zinn, and a related course called mindfulness-based cognitive therapy. These classes promise to help everyday people with their stress, low moods, and chronic pain; alongside daily meditation practice, they typically include some non-Buddhist teachings from psychology and literature.

Britton moved to Rhode Island to begin her clinical residency at Brown University's Warren Alpert Medical School. She didn't know anyone, and, working 12-hour days, she felt intimidated by the cutthroat Ivy League academic life. To fill the time she had to herself, she started meditating for three hours a day.

One night, after meditating on her balcony for an hour, she went back inside and noticed that her house felt like someone else's home. A picture of her with two friends looked like a picture of three people she happened to know.

Britton decided to take a walk, and as she strolled the streets of Providence, she felt like a bird sitting on her own shoulder, watching herself. She walked into a creperie where she noticed two people arguing. When they both turned and glared at her, she thought, *Oh my God, I forgot that I am a person.*

What Britton was experiencing is called dissociation, a state that can occasionally be evolutionarily useful—it can help people push through a task when faced with overwhelming terrors. But according to Britton and other researchers, it can happen to extreme meditators too. Britton told me that extensive meditation can prompt the prefrontal cortex to essentially shut off the brain's emotional centers, causing feelings to seem blunted. And without the typical emotions that we project onto objects, familiar things—our hands, our homes—can start to look foreign. Heleen Slagter, a cognitive neuroscientist at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam who studies meditation, says that part of the way the brain gives rise to our sense of self is by predicting how we will interact with the world in the future. If you spend enough time zeroing in on the present moment, as one aims to do during meditation, Slagter says, your sense of the future can start to recede—and with it your sense of self. This can produce dissociation.

Britton began dissociating a few times a week. She had trouble driving because she couldn't sense where her body began and ended. She'd watch a sappy commercial and suddenly notice her face was wet, not realizing she had shed tears. She felt porous, like other people's states of mind were her own, a fact that became especially disturbing when she was treating suicidal patients. The dissociation continued for six or seven years, sometimes happening during meditation, but other times at random.

When she told meditation teachers about the dissociation, she said they told her she had entered a new stage of enlightenment—that she was “riding the ox backward.” She had “seen the truth of no-self,” they said, and this was a good thing. They told her to keep meditating, which made the dissociation worse. Somehow, Britton got through her postdoc, but she wasn't entirely functional. She didn't date anyone for a decade.



Lauren Lancaster for *The Atlantic*

Willoughby Britton at home in Vermont. Now retired from Brown University, she runs an organization that counsels people who have had distressing experiences during or after meditation, such as insomnia, anxiety, depression—even psychosis.

Even before she started dissociating, another layer of Britton's worldview began to crumble after she moved to Rhode Island and was working at an inpatient psychiatric hospital as part of her residency. One day, someone came in from a meditation-retreat center in a state of florid psychosis. Three months later, *another* psychotic meditator came in, from the same retreat center. *That's weird*, Britton thought. *Do they know each other?* They did not.

It's well known that psychedelics such as LSD can spark psychotic breaks, but meditation can produce altered states of consciousness almost as powerful as those induced by psychedelics. The brain likes and expects a certain amount of input; go long enough without doing anything and the neurons might start to fire spontaneously, producing, say, flashes of light or made-up memories. Inuit people in the Arctic Circle have been known to experience a type of hysteria known as *piblokto*, which might be brought on by the

sensory deprivation of long winters. No one seems to know why, exactly, psychedelics and meditation can both occasionally prompt psychosis, but it might have to do with the fact that both can have the effect of “rewiring your brain,” which *can* be a positive thing but can also mean your brain just [doesn't work](#) the way it used to. It might become more easily influenced, for example, or impart grave significance on unimportant events.

At this point in her research, Britton's studies were still mostly focused on the benefits of meditation, such as on how it can be helpful for [depressed people](#) and [substance-abusing teens](#). But now, when she spoke about her studies at conferences, she'd sometimes briefly mention some of the potential adverse effects of meditation. Afterward, people would corner her in the halls or in the bathroom and tell her they'd had negative experiences with meditation—everything from increased depression to psychotic breaks.

She started to wonder whether the unintended effects of meditation might extend beyond a few anecdotes and her own experience with dissociation. Centuries ago, meditation was practiced mostly by monks and other spiritual seekers in East Asia and India; it wasn't something ordinary people did, Pierce Salguero, a historian of Buddhism and medicine at Penn State Abington and the editor of the book *Meditation Sickness*, told me. The point of meditation was never merely to relax or just “clear your mind” but to wholly rearrange one's relationship to one's thoughts. This might make sense for a Buddhist monk pursuing the great unbinding, but not for a random Brooklynite who just wants to be more productive at work. The “no-self” teachings of Buddhism can be at odds with the goals of Westerners, who are generally aiming to be their best selves, not to disconnect from themselves.

Britton began to perceive that the research on mindfulness contained a giant lacuna: its potential risks. Meditation researchers, she felt, tended not to find adverse effects among their study participants because they didn't ask their participants about them. What's more, many meditation [studies](#) are funded by pro-meditation organizations, and some study participants might feel pressured to say that their mental health improved after meditating. There's no such thing as a placebo for meditation, which complicates studying its effects. When Britton looked for past studies on the risks of meditation, she found mostly isolated [case reports](#) and small [studies](#)—one of which [found](#) that two of 27 long-term meditators had had “profound adverse effects,” including confusion, depression, and severe shaking.

Britton still believed in many of the potential benefits of meditation, but she began to rethink her role as a booster for it. “It just seemed like the world does not need another meditation researcher who's going to promote meditation,” Britton told me. “We're like

Starbucks—there’s one on every corner.” Assessing the extent and severity of possible negative effects of meditation, she decided, would be her version of a problem to solve—her niche. In 2007, she began interviewing meditators for what would become the first comprehensive study of meditation’s adverse effects.

In 2010, Britton met a religious-studies scholar named [Jared Lindahl](#) at a conference. At that point, Britton had been meditating so much that she saw stars even with her eyes open—usually either one blue star or one white star—a phenomenon that Buddhists call *nimitta*. Lindahl had written his [dissertation](#) on visual light experiences of this sort. Meeting him, Britton said, “was having somebody understand a part of my experience that no one else had understood.” They wrote a [paper](#) about meditation-induced light experiences together, began meditating together, and, eventually, fell in love. The year she met Lindahl, she also finally published the [sleep](#) study she’d conducted in Arizona—the one showing that too much meditation can keep people awake.

Lindahl joined her on the meditation-challenges project, for which they conducted interviews about various types of adverse effects experienced and witnessed by 60 meditators and 32 meditation teachers—a smallish sample that is nevertheless rather large for qualitative studies such as this one. They finally published their first [study](#), called “The Varieties of Contemplative Experience,” in 2017, nearly 10 years after they started it.

The most common adverse effects, reported by 82 percent of the meditators (which, importantly, included only people who had experienced an adverse effect of any kind), were “fear, anxiety, panic, or paranoia.” Second-most common were “changes in motivation or goal,” experienced by 78 percent. (Britton later talked with one meditator who sat on her couch for two years, unable to do much of anything, though most of the motivational effects reported were less dramatic.) Smaller numbers reported experiencing delusions, hallucinations, physical pain, rage, and suicidality. The effects lasted for a median duration of one to three years, and the majority of the sample indicated “moderate to severe” impairment in at least one area.

Although the study suggests that what’s most likely to cause problems is intensive meditation—sitting in silence in a retreat hall for hours or days on end—28 percent of the meditators had issues arise from their everyday non-retreat practice, and 25 percent of those in the study were meditating less than an hour each day.

Being an experienced or even expert meditator didn't necessarily protect people. "I was like, 'You've written a bunch of dharma books. How come you never mentioned this?'" she told me she asked one of the teachers. "And he's like, 'Well, it's not good advertising.'" Notably, much of Britton's sample of people harmed by meditation had graduate degrees; Britton believes that this is because high achievers tend to try to "ace" meditation, by, say, ignoring any internal sense that something might be wrong. (This struck me as similar to the endurance it takes to earn a Ph.D.: Power through years of pain and tedium for the promise of a big payoff at the end.)

As a study, "The Varieties of Contemplative Experience" had some inherent limitations. Because it recruited people who had had negative experiences, the study could conclude nothing about their prevalence. The study also couldn't definitively prove causality—for instance, it's possible that the meditators' symptoms happened after meditation, but for unrelated reasons. Some Buddhists would also say that experiencing negative emotions or other bad effects is *supposed* to be part of the practice. But by and large, the study was well received and widely cited in the field. It acknowledged its own limitations and, if anything, respect has grown for it over time.

In part that's because subsequent studies, some of which Britton was involved with and some not—and some of which were conducted in part by the most well-known academic boosters of meditation—have provided sturdy evidence that some percentage of meditators do experience negative effects from it, ranging from mild to severe. The frequency of bad effects found varies, but most studies, and most experts I talked with, estimate that about 10 percent of all meditators experience them, with the prevalence being considerably higher in certain situations. Richard Sears, a clinical psychologist and Zen master who's been practicing meditation for some 40 years, [has said](#) that he thinks Britton's research is important. "Something is happening" to these meditators who have bad experiences, "and we should be aware of it. This is opening up a conversation."

Britton and Lindahl went on to publish many other studies on meditation's dark aspects, including delusion-like [ideation](#) and feeling bolts of [electricity](#) traveling through the body. One study subject grew paranoid at a meditation retreat, left, and on the way home believed that street signs were delivering secret messages just to her; another became convinced that she needed to save the world from a "black Tantric plot" contrived by retreat-center staffers, threw water in her meditation teacher's face and slapped the center's director; a third began experiencing "messianic visions" about the "need to sacrifice myself in some way for the benefit of saving mankind" and was convinced that meditation teachers were communicating with him in secret code; a fourth reported that

meditation awakened an “energy” inside him with “a will of its own” that once almost compelled him to jump from a balcony because it “wanted to lift up and fly.” None of these people had previously experienced any psychosis or been treated for mental illness.

Different types of meditation seem to have different adverse effects on the people who experience them. In [one](#) of Britton’s studies, a “noting” practice—labeling thoughts or body sensations—was more likely to trigger anxiety, whereas focusing on an anchor such as one’s breath was more likely to prompt a depressive episode. Overall, Britton has [found](#) that about one in 10 people who have meditated, even once, had an adverse effect that lasted more than a month—a rate that, were meditation a drug, would qualify as “very common” under the standard classification used for adverse drug reactions. More frequent meditation tends to increase negative effects, Britton said.

The body of evidence that Britton and Lindahl have amassed showing that meditation can sometimes cause harm is now bolstered by others’ research. A Clemson University study found that [mindfulness](#) can paradoxically increase distress. (Cultivating a hopeful outlook was more effective than mindfulness at shoring up workers’ resilience and well-being.) A [2020 study](#) found that 3 to 7 percent of schoolteachers and university students in the U.K. who took a mindfulness class reported “unpleasant experiences”—including anxiety, distressing memories, obsessive thoughts, and physical pain; another [study](#) found that a quarter of meditators experienced “unwanted effects” such as panic attacks, nausea, headaches, dizziness, insomnia, and dissociation, though most of these effects were transitory. A German research group studying more than 1,300 regular meditators around the world found that 13 [percent](#) experienced adverse effects, including a small number who experienced “very severe effects with lasting consequences” or “extremely severe effects” that were life-threatening or required hospitalization. Yet [another](#) large survey found that a quarter of meditators, and a higher percentage of nonreligious meditators, had a “particularly unpleasant meditation-related experience.”

To some extent, this is to be expected. It would be odd if a single treatment, billed as the solution for dozens of mental and physical problems, alleviated all of these ailments without any side effects. In medicine, “if it’s not doing any harm, then it’s probably also not helping,” Nicholas Van Dam, a psychologist at the University of Melbourne who has co-authored papers with Britton, told me. Along with a team of researchers in Australia, Van Dam [found](#) that about 9 percent of meditators in their survey reported a functional impairment arising from a meditation-related problem, including sleep changes and a sense of disconnection from others. Van Dam’s team suggested that people should be warned that meditation is contraindicated for certain groups, just as certain medications

should not be given to some people. Miguel Farias, an experimental psychologist at Coventry and Oxford Universities who specializes in the science of meditation, told me that the early literature on cognitive behavioral therapy, from the '70s and '80s, recommended against meditating during a depressive episode. "Physical activity is a wonderful antidote to depression," Farias said. But "meditation makes you physically be more passive." In a systematic review, Farias and his co-authors [found](#) that adverse events among all meditators were "not uncommon," appearing in 65 percent of the studies reviewed; the most prevalent symptoms were anxiety and depression.

Some of the side effects these researchers are finding may be attributable to the fact that, in the years since Eastern traditions of meditation were introduced to the West in the 19th century, this once primarily religious ritual has expanded far beyond its original intent; its more sweeping remit may have consequences that the practice's original Buddhist context might have prevented. But as Salguero and others pointed out, early Buddhist texts cautioned that "meditation sickness" plagued even the devout contemplatives of earlier eras: In one eighth-century Chinese writing, the Buddha warns of 50 "demonic states" in which meditators could become trapped, including hallucinations, sorrow, anxiety, suicidal thoughts, and possession by ghosts.

While working on my most recent [book](#), about personality change, I wanted desperately to change one thing about myself in particular: to bring down my stratospheric level of neuroticism, the personality trait associated with anxiety and depression. When I Googled *how to reduce depression and anxiety*, the first drug-free thing that came up was meditation.

So I signed up for an online mindfulness-based-stress-reduction class—the kind of meditation that Britton also once taught, and which now has hundreds of classes and instructors to choose from around the country.

I found some of the class's Buddhist teachings, though watered down for newbies, very helpful, and by the end of the eight-week class, a test revealed that my neuroticism score had, indeed, ticked down. This surprised me because I'm bad at meditating, so I would spend entire 45-minute sessions reviewing my to-do list, my worries, and other earthly matters.

What annoyed me the most, though, was the way the meditation teachers talked, which tended toward New Age-isms in passive voice. "There's a subtle striving in what you shared," one of the teachers responded when I asked a question about how to make "mindful walking" more restorative. "Maybe you want for it to be relaxing and not

challenging. But that's not the reason we practice. We practice for the sake of practicing and to meet with whatever is arising."

This is what Britton calls a "thought-terminating cliché": a profound-seeming phrase deployed by people in power to quash debate—or, as Britton put it, a way for teachers to politely convey "Shut the fuck up and do what I say."

But many Buddhists and meditation teachers would agree with my instructor: Feeling, and observing, discomfort is part of the point. In keeping with this, a good number of the meditators whom Britton has interviewed told her that when they had brought up their symptoms with meditation teachers, the teachers dismissed them, saying things like "It gets worse before it gets better" and "What you resist persists." Their teachers would suggest that all negative experiences are inherently growth opportunities, or that perhaps the person was meditating incorrectly. The mentality seemed to be "Try our product and if you don't like it, then you did it wrong," Britton said.

This attitude tracks with what I heard from a few experienced meditators who suffered acute distress while meditating. One man told me that after a long retreat, when he began experiencing spasms that would seize up half his face, his meditation teacher just told him to relax more. Two other experienced meditators I talked with, Terran Palmer-Angell and Carmen Maria Alvarez, also told me that some fellow meditators at a long retreat they attended, organized by the Center for Contemplative Research, had experienced psychotic breaks or developed tics, including one man who would rotate his head around compulsively. The teacher and one of the center's co-founders, B. Alan Wallace, they said, told them that it was just "an involuntary movement" and nothing to be concerned about.

Palmer-Angell and Alvarez emphasized that their experiences reflected this specific retreat, and not meditation in general. Eva Natanya, the center's other co-founder, told me that "no one has been diagnosed with a psychotic break by a psychiatrist" at the retreat since its founding, in 2020. However, she said that some "individuals develop physical tics" because of a "burst of energy" while meditating. She said these tics are sometimes referred to as "involuntary movements," and that initially, meditators might be encouraged to "let it go and go back to meditating because that energy will work itself out by itself." She added that she herself worked with the person with the compulsive head rotations by "asking questions and listening." She said the center has multiple forms of support available, including meetings with herself and Wallace, psychological counseling, appointments with doctors, and physiotherapy.

Britton remembers peddling a version of this logic as an MBSR teacher herself. “I was trying to tell people ‘Nothing is good or bad, but thinking makes it so,’” channeling Hamlet and Stoic philosophy. For a while, this idea seemed radical, and constructively life-changing: *The secret to a good life is to just be okay with whatever!* But then her own meditation practice started to make her think “like, *Okay, but wait; I don’t feel like I exist now.*” That didn’t seem like a good thing, no matter how you thought about it.



Lauren Lancaster for *The Atlantic*

Having moved away from Buddhism, Britton now finds her own kind of tranquility in the natural world, taking care of her plants and chopping wood.

After Britton and Lindahl published the “Varieties” study, the phone in their lab started ringing. People experiencing psychosis, dissociation, tics, and other problems after meditating were asking for help. The meditators felt confused and ashamed, like they had damaged themselves. Traditional psychotherapists, they said, didn’t understand what they were going through—and neither did anyone else. How can you hurt yourself meditating?

The surge in outreach prompted Britton to open what she called [Cheetah House](#)—a play on *citta*, the Sanskrit word for “consciousness”—and develop it into a full-fledged nonprofit aimed at helping people who have had difficult meditation experiences. Based at first out of her house in Providence, it now serves 200 people a month, entirely over Zoom.

The Cheetah House program consists mostly of talks with experts, sessions with a “care team” member, and support groups with other meditators who have had distressing experiences. The program is priced on a sliding scale; most people pay \$50 a session with a care-team member, and \$100 or more for a session with Britton herself.

Many of Cheetah House’s clients have (relatively) manageable problems such as anxiety and insomnia, but Britton told me that, once or twice a month, she gets a call from someone whose family member has had a psychotic break triggered by meditation. Far more rarely, people have [killed themselves](#) after intensive meditation retreats. “When people say that I’m fearmongering,” Britton told me, “my response is, ‘We haven’t even gotten into the suicides yet.’” She recently decided to start a support group for the parents of meditators who experienced severe psychiatric symptoms after 13 families, four of whose children had already died, expressed interest.

Between half and three-quarters of Cheetah House’s clientele began having symptoms after a meditation retreat, Britton told me. People often go on retreats to try to deepen their practice or to “relax”—but these are generally not relaxing affairs. Many retreats involve waking up at dawn, eating very little, and sitting perfectly still while focusing on one’s breath for hours on end. Several days of this, Britton said, can cause neurons to become more sensitive, such that minor stimuli, like the ticking of a clock or the sound of another person’s breath, can start to feel overwhelming—as can emotions such as rage and grief. Kieran Fox, a psychiatrist at UC San Francisco and an experienced meditator, told me that retreats are “some of the hardest things I’ve ever done in my entire life. And that’s including med school.”

Among the Cheetah House clients I interviewed, retreats were a common trigger for adverse effects. One meditator, Dan Millstein, told me that after a 10-day retreat, he spent years feeling emotionally shut down and disconnected, like he was “living behind a glass wall or a veil.” Another man, Billy, who asked that I not use his last name, had been meditating regularly for a decade when a seven-day silent retreat ratcheted up his physical and mental anxiety: Shivering relentlessly, he started feeling better when he stopped meditating.

About 15 years ago, a woman who asked to remain anonymous was on her second 10-day silent retreat when she began feeling a twitch in her face that developed into an urge to roll her head around. She felt like electricity was shooting through her body. She would shake uncontrollably and at times writhe on the floor. Eventually, she was hospitalized for psychosis. She was later diagnosed with complex PTSD, and although she's learned how to manage those symptoms, she told me that she still experiences involuntary muscle movements today. Another woman, Rebecca Fischer, told me that, more than 12 years after a retreat she attended, she still has chronic pain in her legs and back.

A good number of Cheetah House's clients do suffer ill effects outside of retreats. In the days after meditating at home with an app, a client named Susan Small told me she was driving when "my whole sense of myself disappeared," and she went on to experience "waves of terror" for months. A man named Eoin told me that after eight days of doing 30-minute audio meditations on his own every morning, he started feeling like a "nervous wreck," on the edge of psychosis, and like he didn't really know who he was, a phenomenon called depersonalization.

These people and other clients said they appreciated hearing from fellow meditators with similar experiences, and that Cheetah House helped them feel less like a "misfit toy," as Millstein put it. They'd had a hard time finding support elsewhere, in part because one of the most common recommendations for emotional distress is to try meditating. Many of her clients, Britton said, seem relieved when she tells them it's okay if they want to stop.

One recent New Year's Eve, Britton hosted what she jokingly called a "parallel play" party—a kind of get-together for introverts where everyone works on a craft so they don't have to talk much. She made margaritas, and friends and colleagues brought over magazines to cut up for collages. A few hours in, someone held up an [article](#) from the magazine *Psychotherapy Networker* and said, "Hey, is this about you?"

The story was, indeed, about Cheetah House, and Britton waited until everyone left to read it. One quote in particular stopped her cold:

"There should be a trigger warning for the Cheetah House website," says renowned Buddhist teacher and clinical psychologist Jack Kornfield. "Too much of it is misleading information and over-the-top fearmongering."

This was *the* Jack Kornfield, the mindfulness guru who wrote *A Path With Heart*, the book that had launched Britton's journey into Buddhism. He was like a father figure and

a mentor to her. *Jack Kornfield* thought she was fearmongering. Now all she could think was “*Thanks, Dad.*” She spent a week in bed after that. (Kornfield declined to comment.)

As she continued with her research, Britton gradually started to feel iced out of the Buddhist circles that had once comprised her entire personal and professional networks. She said a Buddhist organization sent her a threatening letter after she interviewed members of their community. One time, after she gave a talk about adverse effects at a conference, Britton said a prominent meditation researcher cornered her outside and yelled, “I don’t believe you!” (The researcher denies saying this.)

Invitations to conferences started to dry up—and when she did receive them, she said, it would turn out to be an invite to debate whether meditation-related challenges even existed—“just an insult to everyone that I’ve interviewed,” she said.

“If you want to build a bridge, you can’t just be like, *A bridge is gonna be so cool.* You have to think about where could it possibly fail,” Britton told me. “And it’s so unpopular to be that person.” Her former postdoc, Roman Palitsky, told me that Britton suffered for pointing out the problems with the bridge. “Nobody was doing meditation difficulties before her, not seriously anyway,” he said. “And I think large parts of the meditation world kind of turned on her.”

Some of this criticism can be chalked up to differing interpretations of the science, and of how best to treat stubborn afflictions such as anxiety and depression when all of the remedies have potential downsides. “Is it better for an anxious person to be meditating or on Lexapro?” is not an easily answerable question. Fox, the UCSF psychiatrist, told me that some of the neuroscientific effects that Britton attributes to meditation, such as increased activity in the insula, can also be interpreted as a sign of better “autonomic awareness”—basically, being more attuned to the inner workings of your body—rather than a sign of trauma or panic.

But some of the criticism seems to emanate from a reflexive defensiveness on the part of meditation’s promoters, who—perhaps understandably, given the abundant benefits that have shown to be associated with the practice—don’t want to tarnish the reputation of a good thing.

I’ve noticed that people are apt to defend meditation with a zeal I haven’t witnessed since evangelical youth group in my teens. You don’t enjoy meditation? *Good, you’re not supposed to enjoy it.* You say it doesn’t work for you? *Well, you’re just not doing it right.* The answer to every problem with meditation seems to be more meditation.

This touchiness can extend to meditation researchers, most of whom are meditators themselves; academic meetings Britton attended would sometimes kick off with a meditation. Nicholas Van Dam, the University of Melbourne psychologist, told me that meditation communities tend to carry a sense that “if you say anything bad, you’re negating the good.” Farias mentioned that after he included a chapter about meditation’s risks in his book *The Buddha Pill*, some of his friends “were very, very annoyed,” and a couple of them told him that “we could not be publicly seen as associates.”

Some pro-meditation researchers are more evenhanded—recognizing the value of Britton’s findings even if they quibble with aspects of them. Eric Loucks, the director of the Mindfulness Center at Brown, pointed out that a person can have a challenging experience during meditation and still find their overall meditation practice to be beneficial. He also noted that several studies have found mindfulness-based interventions to have fewer side effects than pharmacological treatments, including [Lexapro](#). Still, he called Britton “innovative” and “courageous,” and said her work influenced not only his own views and scholarship—including updates to the standard MBSR curriculum, which the Mindfulness Center now maintains—but also mindfulness research as a whole. “Just looking for the good stuff,” he said, is not his goal. “We really want to know the truth.”

But several meditation teachers I interviewed did seem protective of the practice. Carol Greco, a psychologist at the University of Pittsburgh and an MBSR teacher, once co-authored a paper that [aimed](#) to “dispel the notion” that anxiety, pain, and psychosis “are adverse events due to mindfulness meditation.” She seemed chagrined that I was working on this story, writing in an email, “I would rather talk with you about how meditation can be helpful.” When Britton’s studies began coming out, she said, it “brought a heightened awareness of the potential of trauma in a person’s background and how we can create a safe environment.” But her “heart hurt” because “it felt like it was making mindfulness and meditation seem like it’s really dangerous and really bad.” She told me that in her two decades as a meditation teacher she’s never seen a serious adverse event like psychosis or dissociation.

A few of the scholars I interviewed who defended meditation acknowledged some of Britton’s findings, at least implicitly. Richard Davidson, a University of Wisconsin at Madison professor of psychiatry and psychology who is a well-known mindfulness researcher, told me that, as far as relaxation techniques go, meditation is fairly benign. He believes that for most people there’s a greater risk of harm from *not* meditating than there is from meditating, because the physical and emotional benefits of the practice are so robust, and he’s co-authored [studies](#) supporting that claim. But, he added, people with

serious psychiatric disorders should meditate only under the guidance of a mental-health professional who also happens to be a meditator—advice that would probably come as news to the many thousands of people who meditate by using apps at home.

The Buddhist scholar and teacher Gil Fronsdal told me that although he doesn't think meditation causes adverse effects, retreats may exacerbate preexisting psychological problems. (Britton said adverse effects can crop up even for people without prior mental-health conditions.) Fronsdal recalled one meditator who gradually lost touch with reality after a monthlong retreat: She stalked Fronsdal's wife, became homeless, and spent hours in a medical-law library researching how it was that Fronsdal had managed to exchange his wife's spine for hers. Having schizophrenic people on meditation retreats has been "one of my most challenging situations as a teacher," he told me. He said that people with psychosis shouldn't go on meditation retreats, and neither should people who are "hyper-anxious"—a quality that described me when I sat for a daylong MBSR retreat for my book.

The substantial and sometimes hostile pushback against her work has made Britton hypervigilant. Maybe excessively so: To my eye, she sometimes detects criticism where there isn't any. When I asked her to describe what it was like working at Brown's largely pro-meditation research group while publishing study after study finding that meditation can be risky, she wouldn't say much more than that the situation could be "tense." (Loucks, the Mindfulness Center's director, denied that there was tension.) "When it comes to somebody choosing their religion or your friendship," she told me at one point, "they will choose their religion every time."

Starting in the early 2020s, Britton and Lindahl struggled to find funding to continue studying the downsides of meditation; they said an organization once rejected their proposal for a grant on "transformative experiences" for being too critical of religion. She says that when they submitted papers to academic journals, the peer-review comments for the papers focusing on the risks of meditation were "six times longer" than for those focusing on the benefits.

Equanimity is a cornerstone of Buddhist thought; Britton herself had repeated the words to rooms full of meditation students many times: "Nothing is good or bad, but thinking makes it so." But she was starting to think that, actually, some things are good and other things are bad. Sure, you can just accept everything, but sometimes you shouldn't. She had made a big contribution to the field; it seemed to me like she was feeling done with Brown, with academia, with living in Rhode Island, with all of it.

When Britton first met Lindahl, he persuaded her to start taking one day off a week, something she had not done in two decades. Then it was two days. Then she stopped teaching in the summers. Soon, they were scouting for a plot of land in Vermont they could move to. They now live in an off-the-grid cabin in the woods, where a botanical drawing greets visitors on a wall by the entryway. What is the human soul, the caption reads, but a claw pointing back to the forest?

Britton is consulting on a research project with her former postdoc, Palitsky, who is now at Emory University and [running a much larger, longitudinal study](#) of meditation-related challenges. This summer, both she and Lindahl officially left Brown. They're enjoying exploring "other sections of the bookstore," as she put it. Running Cheetah House takes up the bulk of her time now.

Britton stopped meditating in 2017, around the time she published the "Varieties" study, and she "began to have a less romantic and more nuanced view of Buddhism." Now she finds her own kind of tranquility in the natural world, taking care of her plants and chopping wood.

It's important to emphasize that neither Britton's research nor her work with Cheetah House clients has turned her against meditation per se; it's just attuned her to the importance of doing it safely. Meditating for longer than about 30 minutes a day tends to be associated with more negative side effects, she said, and certain types of meditation can be a poor fit for certain people. (For instance, some anxious people shouldn't do a "body scan" type of meditation, because they are already too focused on their body.) People considering extended meditation retreats should try meditating for a few hours at home first, to be sure they can tolerate long stretches. And those who experience challenges with their meditation practice should consider changing the kind of meditation they're doing, modifying their practice, or just not meditating. "Treat meditation like any other relationship," she said. "If you feel like shit with that person, maybe it's time to break up."

Spending so much time with Britton made me want to revisit my own adventures in Buddhism and what I had found valuable about it. Mostly, I found old notes about how much I hated meditating: *"This is the part of the book where I'm not having a lot of fun"; "I would literally rather give birth than do nothing for 45 minutes"; "I'm just an anxious immigrant who fears you can mindful yourself onto a park bench."*

But I also came across some teachings that I did appreciate, and which I'm going to oversimplify here because I'm not a Buddhist. Among them: The Buddha taught that

people should pursue a [“middle way”](#) between decadent indulgence and rigid austerity—to not live mindlessly, but to not be so ascetic as to immiserate yourself. “Avoiding these two extremes,” one [sutta](#) reads, “the Realized One understood the middle way of practice.” Maybe he was onto something.

Comments

Red_Lobster

Buddha only practiced meditation with his inner circle. He thought that meditation practices were too intense for people without more personal guidance. Meditation in East Asia is a part deep philosophical traditional with training and a community, it is not something you undertake on your own just to optimize your mental health.

Wf84

Completely agreed and thank you. The number of people sucked into exoticism and "magic foreigner" tropes that go LARPing at Buddhism with zero clue or appreciation for it's actual history and practice, and without committment to the totality of what Buddhism is (and is not) is shameful.

AndyPanda

Pooh-pooh to those pathetic LARPers who don't come to explore Buddhism already fully enlightened and aware like your holiness. Exotic magic foreigners? Back when I went a-LARPing in the early 90s the Tibetans I encountered were more than happy and willing to use their exotic magic foreignerness as currency. And for some it even worked some real magic on the to them exotic white American women.

Wf84

Thank you for proving my point.

AndyPanda

Your only point was to expresses your superiority. I rejected Buddhism but I cannot imagine any temple tolerating your elitist negativity towards others.

drewjlevine100

(Edited)

I have mixed feelings about this article. I think it's good that the potential harms are being highlighted but there is so much perspective and context that is missing-something as simple as what are the aims of mindfulness practice? They can be far less than achieving total enlightenment, instead developing a greater resilience to life's ups and downs and more kindness towards oneself and others. A glaring omission in the article is no mention of the essential role of kindness and compassion practices. These provide a balance to awareness practices. There is almost no mention of some of the basic insights of mindfulness of mindfulness into the nature of human suffering and how to reduce it. Still for all its flaws the article is a salutary reminder for those that teach mindfulness great care must be taken to avoid the harms mentioned in this article even if the prevalence of them is still unknown.

Lauren.LMSW

Thank you for the article. This is important information for mental health clinicians. Meditation is often recommended without any consideration that it might be harmful to some people.

Vertview42

I find it fascinating that it was so clearly overlooked that the entire stated purpose of this ancient practice was literally to obliterate one's sense of self and experience in the world by trained (but often secluded) religious devotees.

Binx

I had a nightmarish experience with meditation. I have very bad OCD and developed obsessions/compulsions surrounding it. Ruined my life for a number of months. It is not for everyone.

WillowCFraser

Agreed. Meditation makes me anxious and antsy, makes my mind race. I'm more relaxed when I'm walking or at my dance classes.

Julzlex28

Me too, which is why I love this article. I tell people this and they say I am just not trying. Same when I tell them yoga is boring. For meditating and feeling one with myself and my body, nature walks, birding, and actual exercise consisting of running, waking,

and weights do the trick. Cycling, too, especially flying down a hill. I just don't have a bike right now.

beverlyjk

The article starts out with Britton making an unwise ethical error: Burying a scientific study because she wanted to protect the dharma. Buddhism is much more about meditation and also has teachings on ethics, honesty, and holding to strong views. There is nothing in it about protecting the dharma or "nothing being right or wrong". What Britton did was clearly wrong and not very Buddhist. It sounds like she was also obsessive about her meditation practice, something not encouraged in Buddhist circles. From the rest of the article it looks like she has been over-compensating since. I would also like to point out that there are a lot of bad meditation teachers and retreat centers out there and this article does not seem to even try to distinguish them. It reads as very negatively biased and contrarian. A lot of the quotes of Buddhist teachers responding to students questions and issues are made without context and slanted to make it seem cult-like and evoke paranoid reactions based on very cliched ideas about authority figures telling students "if it's not working you are doing it wrong". There are other interpretations of the teacher responses that make sense in the context of true Buddhist teachings that this article reports very little on, or only in a shallow and passing fashion.

LongGame

Those of us just starting out can't be expected to discern all that. This serves as a healthy warning. Whether you close your eyes to meditate or pray, beware - there may be harm afoot.

betterlate

Perhaps if you are drawn to meditate for hours on end, that obsessiveness itself is a red flag more so than the activity. Most grad students and faculty have other competing priorities.

JimF1952

I had the same thought. The author said she found herself in a situation with little social interaction and went to meditating for 3 hours at night. I don't know if she thought that prolonged meditation would actually benefit her somehow, but my reaction was that she was escaping an uncomfortable social situation by avoiding reality. I've attended

meditation intensives that include several hours of meditation in a day, but that was guided practice for a few days in a stretch.

I_am_annoyed

Yes, indeed. Feels like meditation practice was just another expression of neurosis.

hahood17

I meditated for years and years, but during Covid lockdown I amped it up to an hour plus a day. Many of the things described in this article happened and I stopped. I have never really gone back to a practice and don't ever really plan to. It was scary and deeply disturbing. That being said, we all have to find our "middle way" and it will look differently for everyone... though "middle" is probably a very good word to emphasize.

marmikk

Wow -thanks for this. I used to try meditating, but my mind would always wander.

d_pauleen

(Edited)

All minds wander. Stay with it.

JimF1952

Exactly. Contrary to what many people think, your mind does not stop. It's not the point of meditation.

dansarah0

My late husband, who was a psychiatrist/psychotherapist, suggested a meditation technique in which all you do is get into a comfortable position, close your eyes, and attempt to not move and not swallow. You don't try to control your thoughts or your breathing. When you feel the need to move or swallow, you do that and then return to not moving and not swallowing. For me that is an excellent natural way to calm down. It may, not bring on Nirvana, but it helps me cope with life itself. Oh, and you just do a few minutes every once in a while.

surfy

Reading this article might lead one to think that Buddhism is merely the practice of meditation, which it is not. I hope the researchers acknowledge that self-selection bias is inherent in the high percentage of patients who experience adverse effects after multi-day 'meditation retreats' led by meditation 'instructors.' Such long periods of meditation and deprivation are not part of the any Buddhist tradition for lay persons that I am aware of. If there is such a thing as woo-woo malpractice, these retreats would be good candidates.

Wf84

I love the term "woo-woo malpractice", thank you. And I agree with you about the issues with salad-bar-Buddhism

mwanderson

I'm pretty sure that 'woo-woo' of all varieties is impervious to malpractice.

In many ways, woo-woo is akin to MAGA: it means never having to say you're sorry. All will be well, provided that you do your woo-woo correctly, and pay your fees on time.

Decca

In Northern Thailand is not uncommon for lay people to go on multi-day meditation retreats but I have the feeling Thai people go into them with quite a different attitude & also (though I never went on either kind) that the ones for local Buddhists just have a different feeling than the ones in English set up for expats- maybe less intense/"serious" & more social if that makes sense. In any case there's a big difference when it's a practice that you've been exposed to from childhood and is more familiar, and coming in with a Western mind and IDK maybe taking it more competitively or intensely. One guy (American) I met had just arrived in CM and was doing audio-guided meditation on his own- he was convinced he was going to reach the higher states of consciousness but not sure if it would take one or two months. Local people didn't go into it like that for sure, it was more making merit and a sense of a good thing to do. Also, while many lay people I knew in CM did meditate, it was only one thing in their religious practice and not the most important - for most Westerners who meditate, meditation is the only thing.

wenzee

CM? what is that

scandals7274

It's nice to know that I don't have to figure out how to meditate for an hour every day and can just accept that it's not a good fit for me. Ever since I was a kid, I've struggled with occasionally feeling like I'm not real or living in a dream world. I can have auditory hallucinations when I have to lie in silence in the dark - like if I use really good earplugs at night or get an MRI done. For those and other reasons I always feel like psychosis is possible for me under the right circumstances. I hate mindfulness exercises that are similar to meditation. They make me feel panic or rage. It's nice to know that that's not automatically a weakness and could just be a preference that's protecting me from ever going ot a meditation retreat.

Christina1009

I've been following the Guardian series (now finished) reporting on various research at a university in Australia concerning the many varieties of synaesthesia - the neural production of unusual or unexpected links between various senses. The most commonly reported is between colours and figures. But there are many other types, apparently, that many fewer people make. What is reported here seems akin to this kind of neurological investigation. I have both suffered and benefited off and on from some of these connections, though more to the extent of "what the ____?" than neurosis or belief. However the research seems to be pointing some ways towards trauma flashback relief - how did those experiences get encoded in the brain and is it possible (or even desirable) to unlink them?

dansarah0

Trauma flashbacks are mysterious. When there was an early trauma that got “forgotten”, the experience gets recorded, but in parts of the brain (mind) that have no language. Uncovering what is behind a flashback can be difficult and tricky. When a sense of that emerges, it is helpful to get some real support from people who know that bad things can happen and know how to help. Meditation can bring up the problem, but then it can make it worse without curing anything.

BJG

Thank you for sharing your own experience.

MHarmon

You may be experiencing Hypnagogic Hallucinations, which is a type of narcolepsy. It happens when you are tired and transitioning from wakefulness to sleep. Some people see or hear random things, as if they're beginning to dream.

<https://my.clevelandclinic.org/health/articles/23234-hypnagogic-hallucinations>

ClarenceGideon

(Edited)

The mistake is believing that meditation is a tool that was invented to soothe and relax stressed-out urban professionals. It is not. Serious meditation will awaken you to truths that you may be too weak to handle or unwilling to accept. If you want to remain in the Matrix, choose the blue pill instead. But don't blame a practice that was created to help you see beyond the illusion after your personal illusions have been shattered. This is what it was designed to do. We live in a profoundly sick civilization and once your eyes have been opened to that fact, and once you realize that your identity and beliefs have been constructed on a foundation of lies, there is no way to unsee those truths.

ShannonRose

Thank you. This is the correct answer.

pwalker724

The first Nobel Truth...

Nopenada

Well said and very in line with my own experiences when I've taken meditation and devotion too far when my skills are far more needed and rewarding in the secular realm. I'd venture also that there are many who use this as a way to gain power over others by being the guru. I avoid all those types in my life. The middle way and focusing on how meditation can help guide the goals in my life like being calmer and kinder in tough situations has helped.

My husband went to a meditation retreat a month ago and has been unable to sleep since, suffering from very unusual insomnia. When I suggested he could just take a break and skip his morning meditation, he was horrified as he was taught then he will have to start all over but he indulged me and skipped that day. He slept great that night. In retrospect I

do think there's a little bit of "brain flossing" that happens during meditation but perhaps the things that get dislodged can be too much either energetically or psychically so touching earth for a few days should be recommended. As I tell my students as a yoga teacher - no one is getting medals here, the best thing to do when you need a break is to listen and take one.

Very much appreciated your comment

ClarenceGideon

Your husband is very lucky to have you. Everyone is at a different place in our journey and there are no one-size-fits-all answers. I personally avoid any teachers who preach dogma and who seek to do anything more than provide insights to help guide the way. And as you said, no one is getting medals here and it isn't a competition. Your students and your husband are very fortunate to have you in their lives.

Endeavor

(Edited)

"Britton became a serious meditator in the Western insight tradition, which includes sitting and focusing on an "anchor," such as one's breath, sometimes for hours at a time."

Obsessing over anything, be it alcohol, work, popularity or meditation, in my humble opinion, is not healthy. I meditate 15-20 minutes several times a week and find it clears my head and relaxes me, and helps me focus on what is important, why I should be grateful and behave better, and what are temporary distractions.

gaylefromtexas

Obsessing is the opposite of meditating.

ksmcdjab

I am a Buddhist. I'm with Jack Kornfield on this. Experienced meditators know that the mind and body play tricks on us throughout life. Everything passes, everything changes and you sit through it, observing, practicing awareness. A former practitioner is making a

new living as a Zoomer with other former meditators doing an "expose" of Buddhist practices and blaming the practices for the difficulties in their lives. But we all have difficulties! I respect her education and scholarship but there is nothing new or "revelatory" here. The photograph of the scientist now in New England says it all -- chopping wood, carrying water -- this is quintessential Zen practice!

scoutlefkowitz

Barf. Chopping wood and carrying water are quintessential human practices. Meditation isn't for everyone. It's great for many. It may be adverse for people psychologically predisposed to taking it too far. The issue here is extremism, absolutism, radicalism of any kind, and an inability of a movement that has become a mass cultural and billion dollar business to face any kind of critical analysis. Stop with the ageism and the insularity. It's a big old beautiful world. Practice what the man in charge of the movement always says is the highest ideal: kindness.

kai

yes!

Icey

It's not an expose. It is just acknowledging the side effects along with the good. And certainly it is not blaming Buddhism as a religion for all the negatives in their lives. Even old Buddhist texts mentioned the side effects of their practices. Not to mention closing your eyes to the truths of the world is anti enlightenment.

I_am_annoyed

Actually it is. The meditation practice in question is predominantly insight, and the article fails to mention that is only one type of practice. There are hundreds of ways to meditate, and Goenka or similar Vipassana retreats are extreme. If you're not a Buddhist the article seems nuanced, but it's not. It fails to mention some very basic facts.

wjohnston

(Edited)

It might be an idea to look into what meditation actually does. (And I say this having been a nearly daily practitioner of meditation for around 50 years, including many dozens of week-long intensive retreats.)

When we start to quiet our superficial thoughts, a first step in meditation, everything that lies deeper comes to the surface. And frequently, what lies deeper can be difficult and disturbing, at best.

As a consequence anybody who begins a meditation practice should work with a teacher or screening panel of advanced practitioners who can help make it clear that this is possible. And when it is more possible than not, they should dissuade people from the practice. Teachers and advanced practitioners should not be gung-ho proselytizers of meditation for its own sake. Meditation can be like a powerful drug (think psilocybin) that isn't for everyone. When it is good, it is great. When it is bad, it can be very bad.

Not everyone is made to practice meditation and many who are not made for meditation can find peace and tranquility in other practices. Chopping wood, for example, can work just fine, and unlike meditation, it provides something that will help keep you warm on cold winter evenings.

I_am_annoyed

Yes, or working through all the things you're running away from in various kinds of therapy first. Meditation shouldn't be the first line of defense, especially since the modern western person has enormous amounts of stress, trauma, and information inputs — more so than maybe any other population in history.

Basiktasq

Maybe Westerners shouldn't try to separate aspects of 3000 year old religions into that which is easily marketed or used for secular practice. The Buddha wasn't promoting a new yoga studio or studying for his PhD. And maybe it wasn't designed for clinical use.

thetwo

I can't help think this would be like praying for several hours a day to no one in particular.

Lucia

(Edited)

No. You're clearing your mind, not praying.

I've been meditating since 2010, it's given me calm and understanding. I started because my very stressful job needed some resolution. Before I retired, two co-workers repeatedly sat next to me in meetings or came to my office instead of texting or calling because they felt calmed by my presence. After I returned from week or two week silent retreats, I really didn't want to talk. In meetings, I'd text someone my thoughts and they'd read them. Co-workers were amused. I went through a two year program to teach it, my colleagues signed up when I offered series of classes. Have you ever realized you were made to do something? That's how I feel about meditation.

On average, I meditate 40 minutes to a few hours most days. Usually about 40 minutes, with good effects. One day, after leaving a 2 week silent meditation, I sat in my car because I'd forgotten how to drive. I went to Costco, it was surreal, like being on drugs. I was fine when I got home.

I wish it worked for everyone as well as it does for me. Knowing it's a bad experience for some is disturbing.

SarcasticFringehead

"I sat in my car because I'd forgotten how to drive."

This is the disassociation that the article mentions. It is not a good thing unless you are a monk.

boreal

I used to dismiss meditation as "not for me" because I had a hard time sitting still for very long. Lo and behold, that is the point! One day I decided to try again and it's one of the best things I've done. I meditate a few times per week for 10-15 minutes each time. For me it brings about a subtle shift and equanimity that I can carry with me through the rest of life, which is just as much of a practice as those 10 minutes on the couch.

This article felt rather contrarian and sensational, but that is the one part I can agree with: as with all things, moderation is key...

jdchalky2025

It's also not a magic bullet. One can't sit for one session and expect it to be a cure-all. It takes repetition and learning over time to still your mind. I've been meditating for 23 years and I've seen very little (if any) downside.

d_pauleen

Ha, ha. I've been meditating for fifty years and I have experienced very little 'still mind' Probably explained by my day job being an academic.

B_C6977

They do say 30 mins is the maximum time at which they recommend to stop, so you're not really at odds with what they're saying.

I_am_annoyed

That's just one person's opinion

lpx

This is a well-researched and thought-provoking article. Thank you.

tony_guarisco

This is not well-researched! It does not appear to include TM which is very distinct and has no religious basis of any kind.

mikeking

You raise a great point. Meditation practices differ from each other in how they are practiced, their purpose, their effects on mind and body and in the research on them. The research suggests there are variously concentration techniques, open monitoring techniques (mindfulness) and automatic self-transcending techniques (such as

Transcendental Meditation). This means that broad generalisations about meditation may be inaccurate.

dansarah0

Exactly.

kai

the article is not about TM so the fact that it does not mention it does not mean it is not well researched. The article is about issues with a specific type of meditation so it is specific, not general and "all inclusive."

NoelleOx

As a long-time meditator (and as someone who worked closely with Jack Kornfield on his book, *The Wise Heart*) I have to say that I don't feel it was ever hidden from me, for a moment, that to seriously enter the path of buddhist meditation was profoundly challenging. In fact, one of the first teachings I remember encountering was, "Best not to start this path. Once begun, best to finish!" Over the years, I have heard a number of teachers acknowledge the paradox that it takes considerable ego-strength to see through the solidity of ego. I have definitely been on intensive retreats where somebody cracked and had to leave. And like most serious "way-seekers" I know, I have spent hour upon hour sobbing on my cushion as wave after wave of grief--often not just for myself but for the world as a whole--passed through me. And yet--on the other side of this grief have been the greatest joy and deepest peace I've ever known. It's natural for people to want to share these treasures--but I agree that they should not be shared in a way that underestimates the intensity of shadow-material that can arise along the journey....

Nopenada

Well said! I attempted the practice of tonglen meditation a few years ago where you picture yourself breathing in specific people's pain and then breathing out peace to them and as a practice I just realized I did not yet have the emotional resilience at that time to undertake it. Simply sitting in nature and letting my thoughts clear for 10-20 minutes at a time have given me more benefit. Maybe someday I will be ready for that but instead of pushing, trying to let my mind tell me when it is ready for next steps, if it truly is.

bit0perator

I find it interesting that so many anecdotal stories of mediation feel very self-aggrandizing, almost as if others just lacked the will to do it correctly (not far off from cult-like behaviors).

I think the clear answer when it comes to mediation and its benefit towards someone, which is often true with most things in life, is "it depends".

Different brains and different life experiences shape us all differently, and assuming that one type of literally anything (meditation included) is some "right" or "wrong" way to find the truths in life is reductive, short-sided, and lacks empathy.

I'm glad that for you you've found your truths through meditative practice, but to prop yourself up as some superior being that you were able to handle that darkness that others could not shows your true character in my opinion.

I found peace in the "flow" of my life, which has not been without significant challenges. It is my truth, and it has been hard fought and won through significant internal turmoil. It has given me a significant mental constitution, yet meditation still breaks me down very quickly. Assuming someone can't hack meditation because they lack the constitution is to fundamentally misunderstand the complexity of the human experience. Those seeking truth will find it in their own ways, and it's very possible that my personal path would have cracked you, just like your path would crack me.

cbodie

Meditation is a lot like exercise - going to the gym and overdoing it is a real risk for someone with no experience, but going for a brisk walk is very low risk. For mindfulness, a milder form like walking without music, people watching, doing one thing attentively, are pretty safe activities that can help people be more mindful of the present. A common therapist recommendation for people with anxiety is to notice and name things in a room - a chair, a table, a bookcase. And if it doesn't work for them, no need to keep trying.

I wonder how many people seriously would deny another persons trauma related to a six hour silent retreat for example. I think the vast majority of people know that that could be difficult for anyone, and that there's no real need to go for it in hopes of being healthier. It reminds me more of bodybuilding, something that isn't needed to get the benefits of exercise and is inherently risky.

That being said, mindfulness is one form of quiet reflection, and if it doesn't work, substitute it with some other form of quiet reflection - journaling, nature walk, praying, warm shower.

Kent

(Edited)

My years-long foray into meditation and Buddhism peaked a little before the lowest point of my despair. While I'm not prepared to say that meditation was the *main* cause of the worst year of my life—actually, I think it was "medication", i.e. the psychiatric pills I had so long avoided and, thankfully, no longer take—I do think I became hyper-fixated on meditation as a panacea for what I still view not as my 'mental illness', but my soul sickness.

After a dramatic recovery from despair by way of ketamine, I still went on the monastery tour I had always planned to do before things got so dark that I knew I shouldn't go sit in the woods alone. (I had done a few 10-days with no major difficulties.) Originally, I had thought to stay for a year plus, maybe ordain; I came back to the world after four months. I wasn't getting depressed again, but felt a restless call to be in the world, helping people. I knew this is not against the Buddhist path, that the Buddha did not call all people to be ascetics.

Some meditation teachers, especially monks but some lay, too, criticize Westerners for taking the practices out of their moral and communal contexts. That makes sense to me. For those who want to sit quietly 20 minutes a day in their bedroom, that's great. But to go really deep, better be supported by a community of fellow practitioners and wise

teachers whose guidance goes beyond platitudes and groupthink. Most of us are not built to be mystics. It gets tough down there.

mwanderson

IMO, there is the world of the mystical, and there is the world of the rational; both are worlds of perception.

So, when those two worlds collide, and trouble ensues, someone is going to be labeled as being insane.

Again, strictly IMO, it's best to keep those lanes distinctly separated. Some of us figure out which lane we belong in and realize that we have no real capacity for the other.

curiousnettle7

Like the article points out, meditation has been treated as a cure-all for many common mental health symptoms. This article has changed my perspective about meditation being appropriate for all people.

10-20minutes of meditation a few times a week seems to be a safe range for many people. Like the article points out, if you are not enjoying or finding value in the experience, you should certainly stop and re-evaluate.

As someone who is more neurotic than average, I have also enjoyed journaling or long walks either in nature or in the city as valuable alternatives to short 10-20 meditations.

Exercise has continued to be my safe haven as it has been for over two decades.

Respectfully,

curious nettle

Phoenix52

"journaling or long walks either in nature" are my go-to's as well!

Teju26

Journaling and long walks in nature are indeed forms of meditation. Meditation is not just sitting on a cushion.

Skyman

Movement is medicine.

reginekelly

Yes! As I age and stiffness is an issue, I am chagrined to find my go-to walking is often not meditatively the same. I hope I can figure it out.

Reptilicus

It is amazing how therapies that are almost impossible to test in double (or even single) blind studies can appear to cure just about anything. And this says nothing about the number of scientists who, personally excited about the therapy themselves, use science to “prove” it works and if somehow results disappoint them, simply don’t publish.

Stargate

Is meditation impossible to test?

napaquail

It is impossible to do "Blind" studies of meditation. To test a pill you give half the people the real pill, and half a placebo, and the subjects don't know which they got. But a person knows whether they meditated or not.

albalb

Meditation has always sounded extremely boring to me. That’s the side effect that has kept me from ever considering it.

cacambo

It's not a side effect. It's the whole point.

albalb

I thought it was some kind of enlightenment. However, in that case I already experience enough boredom.

Teju26

Enlightenment is a BS term. It implies a state, a state of permanence. There is no place to get to but here.

cacambo

Meditate on the mantra, "what is boredom?" and you will surely become enlightened grasshopper!

bloolight

I've been practicing Buddhism in the "Plum Village" tradition of Thich Nhat Hanh for the last eight years, and I do not see the kinds of obsessive approach described by the article to be very consistent with what I have been taught. Mindfulness is one very important piece of a much bigger puzzle in such traditions, and Nhat Hanh never felt that people should spend hours and hours at a time forcing themselves to stew in their own thoughts. In fact, I see mindfulness as a way of directing perception outward rather than inward. I've been on two different week-long retreats at the Magnolia Grove Monastery and Practice center, and both times I found it to be a gentle, peaceful experience with only two modest sitting meditations per day along with a short walking meditation done outside in the fresh air. There are hundreds of videos of TNH teaching about mindfulness available for free on YouTube for anybody curious about this particular approach.

boringalice

TNH writings are gentle, common sense guides to finding peace and easing our suffering. His work saved me from myself.

aldretti_strawman

(Edited)

Thank you for bringing this up. The title of the article is misleading. Meditation and mindfulness are NOT the same thing. Thich Nhat Hanh in his classic book of teachings titled "The Miracle of Mindfulness" defines mindfulness as doing things in a fully conscious manner. This may mean meditation, but it also can be employed in play, walking or even (as described in the book) doing dishes. I do not meditate but I strive to be mindful. This is especially critical as I've found it more difficult to concentrate as I've gotten older. Practicing mindfulness helps me be more present and more focused. Meditation may not be for everyone (it doesn't work for me), but mindfulness is a practice that can help anyone get more out of their lives.

AuntHedonia

This article focuses on Buddhist meditation practices but there are ample examples of similar experiences with Christian meditation practices, too. What do you think St. John of the Cross's dark night of the soul was all about?

And the question arises as whether some people just have latent issues that any type of meditation will bring out.

shashiponraja

Strongly agree with this. Intense meditation practices don't seem like something the average person is drawn towards to begin with. I can't help but wonder whether the data suggests a higher than baseline incidence of side effects. A double blind may not be possible but retrospective cohort data abounds.

PLWatts

It's almost like spiritual practices weren't invented to keep us happy and complacent. Weird.

Bonanza

I'm surprised to see this much misunderstanding about meditation and buddhism. For one, teachers are not 'keeping things away' from meditators. It's common knowledge that meditation is not about relaxation. It's incredibly hard, like weight lifting for your brain. It is not pleasant, but it can create deeply pleasurable experiences once you get deep enough into it. But even that isn't the point. The point is insight. Truth. Nobody really

inside of buddhism ever said finding truth should be fun or pleasant. Her notion to start that it should help with sleep just shows she was likely absorbed in a wellness/yoga style of learning, which is a perversion of the whole thing.

For those readers curious about meditation, or had bad experiences, you may also have absorbed some of the woo woo cultural water we swim in, with this magical orient kind of thinking. It is very worth it to pursue the truth of your existence, through your mind. But it's really hard.

A_Little_Birdie

I'm surprised that you're surprised. Meditation is routinely recommended in the most benign of ways, as beneficial to mental health and whatever ails you. My own therapist practiced and recommended it to me many times when I was depressed.

Try googling help.for anxiety. stress, depression or sleep and you will see some references to meditating. Google benefits of meditation and you will see the same list - stress, anxiety, mental wellbeing, sleep, etc. And the apps push the same benefits.

For people who are not part of a community of practice yes, it comes as a surprise that there can be adverse effects.

my2cents

(Edited)

One missing aspect in this valuable discussion is that in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, having an ongoing connection with a knowledgeable and ethical teacher who can wisely guide you and help solve problems skillfully is essential. Disturbances like those mentioned often are attributed to *lung* disorders (powerful energy imbalances) and a wise teacher will help a student identify remedies such as going to a peaceful environment, relaxing the demands you are making on yourself, etc., including stopping or changing your meditation practice. You might be advised to change from mindfulness meditations to analytical meditations, using your intelligence to place your experiences within the context of overall teachings about perception, reality, the importance of both compassion

and wisdom, etc. Wisdom would include knowing how to skillfully deal with problems, not follow any practice (or teacher) blindly. Mindfulness meditation is not at all the same thing as the practices within Tibetan Buddhism and the two should not be conflated. It is good to have these things openly discussed, of course, and problems identified; discernment is essential and painting a picture with only broad strokes can lead to distortion.

mwanderson

"One missing aspect in this valuable discussion is that in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, having an ongoing connection with a knowledgeable and ethical teacher who can wisely guide you and help solve problems skillfully is essential."

Well, unlike the typical 'Tibetan Buddhist tradition,' most of this is going on with marginally trained teachers who are capitalists first and who therefore tend to dismiss any potential harm as 'not doing right' or downplay any problem with some other meaningless platitude.

And never mind how many small programs have evolved over time to take on either a cultish feel or become an outright cult of enlightenment personality.

suzanne

I spent a winter in a California zen center. Practice required sitting zazen in a room without window views, facing a wall. Entire days were often spent in silence, 45 minute periods of seated meditation alternating with ten minutes of walking meditation, from a dawn bell to darkness.

The concept of no self is often misunderstood as nihilism, and attracts people who seek it. Multiple times, cars were called to carry away practitioners in various states of emotional distress. A lay priest told me that he'd switched from dropping acid in the sixties to meditation as a mode of altered consciousness. Another had been incarcerated at San Quentin where he'd taken meditation classes offered by the retreat center. After his release, he'd become a Zen priest there, where he found the familiarity and comfort of prison life. He'd smuggle in chocolate and slip some under my door.

I remember how hard it was to re-enter normal life. Riding in a car at 30 mph felt terrifyingly fast. I had to leave a Starbucks line because after months of food and beverages chosen for me, the sudden ability to choose felt overwhelming.

Before I'd gone in, I'd had a daily morning meditation practice for about ten years. After returning home, I did not sit again for many years. Now, I sit like Richard Alpert's cat in a sunny windowsill, getting up not by a bell, but whenever I feel like it.

scott506737

Khazan wrote: "This might make sense for a Buddhist monk pursuing the great unbinding, but not for a random Brooklynite who just wants to be more productive at work."

After five years of regular mindfulness meditation, I'm now quite good at sitting and noticing what I notice. But if anything, the practice has made me less productive professionally. If thoughts are transient appearances that aren't worth holding on to, it can be tough to muster the always-in-mind drive needed to chip away at large projects.

Urgdor

If you need to chip away at a large project, just chip away at the project. If you're meditating, just meditate. Just try to be present with the myriad aspects of life while they're happening, nothing more and nothing less.

Persephone

Westerners have been sold meditation as a technique for cultivating calm. But being a psychonaut is dangerous—the spiritual path is full of risk—and meditation was always guided by a teacher in the rarefied environments where it was traditionally practiced. And Buddhism is a practice that requires commitment to the Buddhist path, teachers of the dharma who can keep you on the path, and a sangha to support you. In other words, an institution, a refuge in a dangerous world, where you will meet Mara. The expectation of safety may be misguided; the expectation that you can do it without an institution may also be misguided.

Pelorus357

Okay, so 10% or so meditators have some kind of negative experience, at some point, to some degree. I am in the 90% that have not, and am very thankful for the ways it has made my life better.

jillanne89

I so appreciate this piece and the work that Britton, Lindahl, and others have done in this field. About 10 years ago I started having panic attacks out of the blue (a lot of stressors probably just coming together and pushed me over the edge). I started fearing the panic attacks and sought out any reprieve or solution - psychotherapy, somatic therapy, mindfulness meditation, yoga, breathwork, hypnosis, the list goes on. And the meditation work all made it worse! With hindsight, I can now see that it was just intensifying the inward focus which was intensifying my anxiety, but at the time when I asked the meditation teachers why I felt worse they just told me I was doing it wrong, which made me feel more isolated and hopeless. And you ask anyone what to do when you're anxious and they say meditate, which I think now is not wise advice. I'm now fully recovered and I got here by engaging with my life - not trying to solve my anxiety. Outwardly focusing on social stuff, hobbies, my job, etc. The inward focus can really exacerbate any of these problems (depression, anxiety, insomnia).

beverlyjk

I too had sudden-onset panic attacks at one point in my life and my Buddhist community and teachers really helped. I am sorry you got a bad teacher. They should have told you to try another practice that was not so triggering to your anxiety. There are many. I could not do breath meditation for many years because of it but there are a lot of ways to do meditation. My teacher specializes in a kind of "open awareness" that is much more suitable to those who might be triggered by intensive focussing on the breath.

napaquail

Other options include chanting mantras, and walking meditation, paying attention to the walking motion itself, or to the environment.

Nopenada

I'm so grateful for your comment. I had the exact same experience after undergoing a meditation retreat and trying to bring the intense practice home and I'm glad I know myself well enough to switch gears when something is counterproductive. Know thyself, right?

darjeeling

Sounds true.

I practiced meditation for 50 years, much of it in a mindfulness-based tradition, as well as years of tantric practice both Buddhist and non-Buddhist. I have experienced a number of interesting (and temporary) states of being or non-being – including no mind and the dissolution of my physicality – but nothing that I would describe as rendering me psychologically fragile. My most lasting side effect of meditation is a physical tic I first experienced on a long retreat in 2002 that persists to this day – benignly, for the most part, for which I'm very grateful.

My generally positive experiences with meditation notwithstanding, the sometimes negative experiences reported in this article and in the work of Willoughby Britton and other researchers ring true to me, and I especially recognize the gaslighting such courageous individuals have suffered at the hands of meditation teachers, researchers whose work is slanted by their personal investment in meditation, and Western institutions that uncritically advance meditation as beneficial to all.

Thank you for this important article.

California_Polish

This is great, Buddhism as a religion causes harm, psychosis and mental illness. We can isolate all kinds of data and then trivialize the issues, point out the good that it does. Sure. have at it. But time and time again when it comes to religion, there are studies that show how much harm it does. let's do the monotheism ones next. Let's start with a Catholic charlatan like Amy Coney Barrett. You may have heard how this "devout practitioner" is one of the most powerful 9 in USA causing real time damage to the world through her mental illness that she calls religious beliefs.

Icey

That's like saying drinking water causes people to die because 100% of people who die have previously had water.

lizzieWA

Bad analogy. There's no control group of people who have never drunk water. There *are* people who have never been religious. So it would (theoretically at least) be possible to compare the harms caused by religion and the harms caused by having no religion.

Icey

There are also non religious people who have meditated. This is talking about meditation, not Buddhism. Many practitioners don't understand or care about Buddhism. Trying to make this about religion was weird in the first place. Especially when the commenter opened with "Buddhism causes psychosis and mental illness" which is just straight up racist. Then immediately pivoting to Catholicism and political attacks. It does look suspiciously like they're just using this opportunity push her political agenda.

Kent

This article is not meant as a broad criticism of religion. You don't know what you're talking about.

ChisnauToday

Wow! This blew me away. I'm a long-time meditator who has done more long retreats than I can count.

Buddhism and meditation have changed my life for the better AND I once did a monthlong that resulted in months and months of panic attacks. The panic attacks started on that retreat and I just kept at it bc I am like the academic described in the article-I just jumped in and forced myself to keep meditating. The attacks continued unceasingly for many months. I ended up having to take the Lexapro. It was one of the most difficult periods of my life and decades later I still see it as such.

For years, I wondered about these attacks that seemed connected to my practice at the monthlong. I've had wonderful teachers but have never had one who could adequately explain this experience. I've copied the links to to all the research cited in this anrticle and I hope I can gain some more understanding.

I'm still digesting this article. I love how the author concludes with the Buddha's teachings on the Middle Way. It is best to not go into the extremes in either direction. We don't have to push ourselves as far as we possibly can in the practice. And at the same time, we shouldn't throw out the practice completely bc there are some possible adverse effects.

ChapWillie

Only in America, which has refined Western culture's base assumption that people's value is solely based on what they produce to its essential vapid madness, would meditation be assumed to be primarily an aid in productivity. As in, "If you meditate, you will feel better, produce more, be worth more, and thus, be happy." No one has ever achieved this state of perpetual material bliss, but that myth is our core cultural tenant and not likely to just fade away. Yet, it can be seen for what it is.

Buddhism came out of the East, whose base assumptions of value are radically different, as a way to take a "self" that embraces and appreciates itself as it is (e.g. "worthy"), and then systematically disintegrate it, revealing the true underlying undying essence of being—enlightenment.

This is a dangerous undertaking that requires profound wisdom and support to achieve. It is not meant to cure—and especially not self-cure—disturbing mental ailments. In fact, disassociation is actually part of the process, not an occasional, unfortunate byproduct. Expecting meditation to make you more happily productive is magical thinking based on assumptions rooted in cultural delusion.

Meditation is not a prescription-free antidepressant. Quite the contrary. It is designed to break through those delusions to reveal an eternal yet non-existent independent self in a world empty of the meanings we project upon it.

It is not designed to make you more productive. It is designed to awaken.

TheDowagerQueenBeastly

The article should have been titled "The Dark Side of Meditation," not "The Dark Side of Mindfulness."

There are many mindfulness techniques that don't involve meditation. I've found that mindfulness strategies in Dialectical Behavior Therapy have really helped me deal with stress. No meditation or even the expectation of being less anxious long-term, just practical moments of mindfulness to prevent emotions from preoccupying or overwhelming me so much that I can't function effectively in the moment.

It can be as simple as refocusing briefly but fully on a sensory input, a mental image, or a mantra that provides space to acknowledge the emotion but also that it is transitory and doesn't have to control me. It takes maybe 2-5 minutes to interrupt my ruminating so I can focus on work again.

Kahoutek

I could not agree more-- mindfulness and meditation are not synonyms.

None of the negative effects described in this article arose because a person was paying attention to what was going on around them, in the moment, or performing an activity while trying to focus on that activity, which is my understanding of mindfulness. .

jdearr

I hesitate to offer anything, but I can confidently state that one of the best healing things in my life has been contemplation of the first verse of Chapter 10 of the Dao De Jing: Can you afford to forget that the body and the spirit are connected in this world? Literal translation is more like: Carry the soul and the body without separating them.

Focusing on the internal without connecting the external was a recipe for unresolved Complex PTSD for me. Combining meditation with proprioception exercises changed it dramatically for me.

I have a sense that our hectic Western lifestyle is at odds with trying to put the spirit and body together in a healthy way. No surprise to me that people seeking inner healing have psychic breaks in this milieu.

djacksonusc

I think it's wonderful that Britton moved to a "chop wood and carry water" routine. Sometimes it's the physical connection with the universe where our awareness and best insights are gleaned. Many people I know practice a walking meditation in nature or riding their bikes for 10 miles. However people connect with their higher selves is a beautiful way to generate positive energy, personal growth and gratitude for life. If one is having a negative experience, try something else. The possibilities are infinite.

Paperdoll3

People should exhaust themselves physically more often. I have been a stonemason for 50 years and have rarely had a bad night's sleep. Days are straightforward too, very little confusion.

BossaNova

Spot on.

Petuunia

Another way could be spending quiet time with gentle animals. Sitting, if you will (if the animal enjoys your company). I find time with animals so peaceful and joyful. If I can't get to an animal sanctuary, I watch videos of all sorts of animal connections and love. It even helps the squirrel who lives in my head calm down.

Joedan

I appreciate the perspective. I would have benefitted from a few more stats, like preexisting conditions.

Hap

Meditation is an important part of the Buddhist tradition, but it is only one aspect of the Noble Eightfold Path. It is very misleading to characterize meditation-associated psychosis as something specifically associated with Buddhism, the tradition has been around for 2 millennia. This essay leaves a very negative impression of the practice...if I

was unfamiliar, my take away could easily be, "Buddhist meditation causes psychosis." I just wonder what Thich Nhat Hanh would say.

lindacatherinejones1952

About 25 years ago when I was in my 50s, I began to meditate while saying healing affirmations to heal some stuff that I thought was only surface and because I had taken a group class and enjoyed it. Within a week old, deep implicit memories from my childhood began to surface in words that came out of my mouth. First, there was great sadness, and I cried a lot for the sadness in my childhood. Then anger appeared, and I stayed with that although it was a bit uncomfortable, and then it left, and then came back and left again. But then guilt and resentment surfaced, and I developed anxiety, which I didn't even know existed. But within one and a half years, I knew all the answers to my deepest problems in life, and although I will always have manageable anxiety, along with the proper medication, I am glad that I was able to finally learn what had happened and how it had affected my life. I wouldn't have given it up for anything, but I did have a lot of frightening body sensations and did it alone since I didn't really know what was happening. So I would say I understand the negative effects although in my case they were positive. I had spent years off and on in talk therapy and there wasn't one therapist who even came near to realizing that one of the great sources of my hurt was that I was born to parents grieving a stillborn baby who had been taken and buried in an unknown communal grave, and they never knew where she was. I was born into the loss of that unresolved grief.

ReleaseTheHounds

I'm very sorry for the your family's shared grief.

dansarah0

Thanks for letting us know about that.

jimmi

Interesting - I wouldn't call myself a Buddhist, but some of the principles such as The Four Noble Truths, letting go of Attachment (so important, to me anyway) - let go of the stories we tell ourselves, let go of the attachment to anger, revenge, etc - very useful. I have meditated for probably 30 years ... and sat with a Sangha for 15 years.

I can tell I'm certainly not as knowledgeable as some of the people commenting here - but those principles have always made much sense to me, and even jive with my world view after psychotherapy. Let go & be here now - this is good! Stop the attachment to wanting to figure everything out! (I'm retired, a wonderful wife, & healthy) enjoy this moment, because I know it won't last forever.

Montaigne63

The argument of this article – that unregulated meditation can be dangerous— is not news. Buddhists have known it for thousands of years. That's why there are teachers, and that's why there are precepts. And there are different kinds of meditation and different schools of meditation and different reasons for meditating. The idea that, as a student of western psychology, you are qualified to run meditation sessions and do experiments based on them, and then come to trustworthy positive or negative conclusions about the usefulness of Buddhist practices to social- science-based preconceptions about health and success, is absurd. It's like disguising oneself as a Priest, advertising the health benefits of auricular confession, then running experiments to prove oneself right, then finding out it's sometimes otherwise and publishing the results as if they were big news.

Both the writer of the article and its subject seem to need teaching. Neither of them seems to have any idea what they are doing.

ThoreauDaoist

This article is a swirl of half-digested ideas — more like someone put random thoughts about meditation in a blender and hit 'purée.' After 30+ years of Zen practice, much of it in demanding settings, I can offer at least one grounded point: meditation isn't a universal remedy, and it's certainly not for everyone.

TJefferson

I began meditation on the advice of my psychotherapist and a part of therapy. I became a relatively dedicated mediator and went to several weekend silent retreats and benefited from the practice. I did notice at a few of these that one or two participants experienced serious psychological effects which arose during small group check-in meetings with a facilitator. He was sympathetic but I believe a trained psychotherapist should be either on-call or on-site, just in case.

dansarah0

Exactly. Meditating can wake up all those “monsters that live under the bed”.

Worldtraveler94

(Edited)

I have been meditating for 10 years on my own. I don't go to retreats. I have read books by Thich Nhat Hanh, Pema Chodron, Charlotte Joko Beck, Jon Kabat Zinn and J Krishnamurti. I have found those books and my meditation practice very helpful. I understand myself better and accept myself more. Typically 30 minutes to an hour, both sitting and walking meditation. I don't judge myself when I practice and let the experience be whatever it is on that day. Some days are easier, some days are harder. Generally, when my mind is preoccupied, anxious or obsessed about something, I find meditation calms me. This is my lived experience.

stanleysteamer

Buddhism and meditation aside, somebody needs to teach her how to stand correctly to safely split wood. Maybe it's just a photo op, but she seems too far from the chopping block and is totally unbalanced. That's an accident waiting to happen.

zonemind

I decided it HAD to be because of the photo op. Nobody could chop wood like that for very long without serious regret, even without an accident.

OutbackDem

After reading this I'm glad I took up knitting rather than meditation.

dansarah0

Maybe that is not “rather than”!

Polo54

Article's title and implied thesis

references the term “mindfulness

“without defining it. Religion,
meditation, Buddhism, and
mindfulness generally used
without even a
basic discernment,
renders the premise flawed from the start.

The argument against
meditation practice
here (largely based on anecdotal
evidence) can be
likened to
claiming that
physical exercise has adverse effects for
some.

pmlb

Agreed. These terms are not interchangeable. Someone who meditates isn't necessarily Buddhist, not all Buddhists necessarily meditate (they may participate in many other practices), and not all Buddhists consider it to be a religion. "Mindfulness meditation" is its own thing, almost a fully corporate term at this point.

That said, I'm still glad to see this article. As a Buddhist who, indeed, deals with adverse effects from meditation, I am glad to see this conversation happening. It's unfortunate that Gil Fronsdal seems to straight up deny the existence or even possibility of adverse effects, because he is a real leading voice in the West. I find this such a strange position to take; everything must have its positives and negatives.

I would have liked to have seen the article go further into Buddhism's prescriptions for "meditation sickness," and not just its recognition of such. This particular omission gives the article a more confrontational flair, kinda like "Buddhism vs. people who have adverse effects," without acknowledging that there are certainly teachings, teachers, and practitioners out there who welcome our experiences. When I told my teachers I was having nightmares during a silent retreat, they kindly advised me to listen to my body and mind and stop meditating if that's what I felt was necessary. I'm now working both with resources from Cheetah House, and with a teacher to learn more about practices outside of meditation.

Thanks for the article!

simonasays

I think this article relies a little heavily on fearmongering. Why are so many articles framed as “the dangers of...” or “the dark side of...”? I wish it had focused more on the common characteristics, circumstances, or vulnerabilities of people who experience adverse effects from meditation. I don't doubt a small subset of those people exist.

Many things can be true at once: meditation can be deeply beneficial for many people, while also being harmful for a subset of people—particularly when it is introduced during certain psychological states, major life events, or periods of instability. That nuance would have made the article far more useful.

OIVirginny

Why such titles? Gets our eyeballs on the story. It's not a fear-mongering story, really. The headline? Bad.

SarcasticFringehead

When ten to twelve percent of meditators experience disturbing mental and physical problems, an article about this is not fearmongering.

annejablonski

I'm genuinely glad this article exists. I've practiced and taught mindfulness-related practices for many years, and Britton's work raises cautions we should take seriously. Meditation isn't universally benign, and responding to genuine distress with "keep meditating—it's part of the process" can clearly do harm.

Where I push back is on the tendency to blur mindfulness, meditation, MBSR, intensive Buddhist practice, and extended silent retreats into essentially the same thing. They aren't. Many of the most alarming examples involve hours of meditation or multi-day retreats. That's very different from much of what I understand as everyday mindfulness.

For me, mindfulness and meditation aren't synonymous. Meditation can cultivate mindfulness, but so can walking, moving, listening, feeling my feet on the earth, or simply noticing I've disappeared into thought and returning to the life happening around me.

Nor do I think mindfulness is necessarily about feeling better. Sometimes presence means feeling grief, vulnerability, or compassion more deeply. But genuine psychological distress should never be romanticized as spiritual "progress." Sometimes wisdom means stopping.

So I come away less wary of mindfulness than wary of one-size-fits-all mindfulness. Bodies, nervous systems, and histories differ. What settles one person may overwhelm another.

For me, mindfulness isn't about escaping the world. It's about becoming more fully available to it.

brocktm22

Well said. I found the title misleading and you painted the distinction between mindfulness and meditation beautifully.

Flovarian

This article reminds me of a piece that stuck with me from the New York Times Magazine about a Zen master who lost his sense of self:

https://www.nytimes.com/2009/04/26/magazine/26zen-t.html?unlocked_article_code=1.-lA._9nw.z4hQU1GK85CO&smid=nytcore-ios-share

janestarks

Great article! Thank you.

stonepit

Terrific article. Thanks for the share.

rjz

wow a good story, profound insights, and moving, thank you.

santiago_de_compost

Wow I have been preoccupied by this issue for years, and this is one of the best articulations of it I've yet found. Thank you!

jknox1a

This is like saying exercise harms some people LOL. Of course it does. What KIND of exercise taught by WHO to accomplish WHAT? There are as many kinds of meditation as there are exercise and need to be selected intelligently for the given person !!

eheffner

Thanks for giving me permission to not start meditating. It always seemed like something I "should" be doing. I prefer to walk in nature and take in my surroundings.

CtGa

It's rather surprising how therapeutic a meaningfully long walk is -- both physically and mentally.

I'm in my 70s now and can no longer pursue my previous running habit. But I can walk, by golly, and I'm fortunate to live in a place where miles of beautiful trails exist. (Although honestly, I don't think nature trails are a mandatory part of the practice. I've spent many a wonderful afternoon walking in cities.)

bigbirdmd

Even water, when consumed in excess, is toxic.

Catsaplenty

Like every other excessive religion - whether evangelicals, extremist Muslims, New Agers, cultists - it seems like the common ground is obsessiveness, rejection of other points of view, and a certainty that theirs is the real truth.

wishmaster

Sounds like many of these people went so intensely into their practice that they achieved kundalini awakening without being prepared for it. Your vessel must be ready to handle that energy—through grounding, through yoga, through spiritual instruction.

Depersonalization can be realization of the atma and make you feel more connected depending on your beliefs. Detaching meditation from spirituality yet going to monk levels of meditation practice doesn't make much sense to me. I always work within the Hindu tradition, not Buddhism though so I guess our meditation goals are fundamentally different in perspective.

elixir21218

(Edited)

Yes, I am surprised to find your comment the only one that mentions Kundalini. Not recognizing the so-called "subtle body" energies disregards the immense power and impact that can be unleashed with meditation practice. It's basically like stirring the psyche with a blender. Lots of shadow stuff there! Why wouldn't you expect it to arise? My advice, read up on this awakening which is recognized and perhaps given greater importance in the Shaivism traditions than Buddhist. The late Sally Kempton who practiced as a monk for many years is a very good source. Serious practitioners are aware that this is an initiation into realms that are not for the faint-hearted.

dansarah0

I forgot about that, but it is absolutely true. My late husband was a psychiatrist/psychotherapist who studied many kinds of healing techniques. He could recognise the symptoms of kundalini openings, and was able to help people get grounded in themselves. Then they were able to integrate the gifts they had also received with the psychic opening.

Tristan

I meditate semi-regularly using guided meditation with the Calm and Waking Up apps, and I always feel like it does help me refresh my mind and have it settle down a bit. Like many in the modern age, I feel rushed throughout the day; I have a job and a family with small kids, finding time for hobbies is hard, let alone reading a book or magazine like the Atlantic. Then there's also the news cycle and other topics of interest to follow up on... so much stuff to do, endless entertainment and good shows to watch, interesting podcasts to listen to,... simply no minute to waste in this packed life where I try to salvage even the time in the bathroom by listening to some YouTube video on my growing "watch later" list.

After meditating, I feel like all of this pressure to catch up eases, and I find myself calmer and less rushed, being able to focus and enjoy the simpler, direct moments better than I would otherwise rush past. And then I regret not meditating more regularly as I let the urgency to tick things off and get "the most" out of my days win.

No negative experiences with meditation so far for me, but I am convinced that people with psychological irregularities should be careful.

pmlb

"Psychological irregularities," pathologizes people instead of recognizing the power and implementation of these teachings. We all have different mental constructs; one person's "irregularity" is another person's banal trait.

Florida

I also use Waking Up

DonnaGee

(Edited)

I've read through all of the comments (about 450), and am curious about the number of people who complained that this article was "too long." It's in the Atlantic, which is a long-form magazine.

As tech and media train us all to seek the short and sensational, to not demand in-depth reporting and supporting evidence, it's curious to me that even Atlantic subscribers are succumbing. On an article on mindfulness, no less.

I enjoy long-form writing, and appreciated this article. As a student of the Feldenkrais Method, I appreciate all the more that Feldenkrais is based on awareness *through* movement, keeping us safely and comfortably in our bodies as we increase our capacity for awareness that we take from the floor into everyday, functional living

TheDowagerQueenBeastly

I can get restless with long-form -- I find knitting something simple while I read or listen is very helpful for focus. It puts the twitchy physical brain cells to good use and frees my mind to focus.

I could have used it during my school and college days. I went back to school in my 40's and knit during lectures. It was a little frowned upon at first, but I made more eye contact with the professor than anyone else and got better grades. It was a running class joke that my scarf was actually a coded set of test answers.

DonnaGee

That's a great story! I've also founds that keeping my hands active can be very grounding

WTK

It's axiomatic: One doesn't go to The Atlantic or Harper's or The New Yorker in search of infonuggets or bullet points. Thank God.

eric64

(Edited)

What I took away from the article was clear, and heavier practitioners and instructors should agree. If you believe in the brain altering effectiveness of meditation - I do BTW- then you should also realize it can have differing impacts and emotional effects on people. A potential negative response only reinforces that it is, indeed, a neurologically impactful practice. The mistake is assuming all people will react positively to a complex mind altering maneuver, That mistake is poor therapeutic practice in any healing field. No point in being defensive...be enlightened.

In addition, those week long - or even full day retreats - are absolute torture for anyone without mindful black belt level experience. For me it was a kind of personal mental masochism that I am pretty sure the Big B would caution against in his infinite wisdom. You don't need to climb Everest to get some great exercise. Enlightenment is not a competition, its a real struggle that leads to blissful nothingness and the only one true desire ...to have a martini. .

Ghostwriter28

Totally agree with you except for the martini--will substitute chocolate.

Petrus

Agree, this is one of the saner comments. Can it be dark chocolate?

medrite

I am a psychotherapist and i sometimes incorporate mindfulness techniques in my work with patients. Years ago, while still an intern, i read a book on meditation in therapy and the author stated that it can indeed be a very negative experience for some and was even associated with reports of psychotic breaks in a few people. So this information has been out there for a while. I remain a proponent of mindfulness practice, but if someone tells me they don't like it or just didn't find it helpful, i say, "that's ok, it's not for everyone. We'll try something else."

amweiss

The title of this article is probably turning off people who could benefit from the practice.

sumserjohnr

As I read this article, I thought of the time I spent as a Peace Corps volunteer in a remote part of Afghanistan. I was the only westerner in a small town that was a hard nut to crack. I thought the resulting solitude, with its endless reading and long walks, would produce good ideas and valuable insights. Instead, I felt like I was losing myself, that my mind was stopping.

The answers aren't already in our heads.

Just my experience, of course, but seems relevant.

shdooley

Loneliness is lethal.

col_kd

An excellent article. I'm glad I took the time to read it. It's not a subject I'd typically give much attention to. The line that you can mindful yourself onto a park bench is going to stick with me. I think he hit the nail on the head. I think it's unlikely Buddha would take an issue with her research. A lot of her detractors seemed to have skipped over the moderation in all things teaching.

Starman1958

“Many retreats involve waking up at dawn, eating very little, and sitting perfectly still while focusing on one's breath for hours on end.”

Sounds like torture, and definitely not healthy.

beverlyjk

This is not a realistic portrayal of most meditation retreats.

napaquail

Every intensive meditation retreat I have attended has provided ample food, breaks during the day, and getting up to move at least every 30 minutes, along with the opportunity to skip a session if you are getting too uncomfortable.

DonnaGee

My former husband went on a ten-day vipassanna meditation retreat. It was as described in the article - very basic and minimal food, long periods of sitting, and some light chores

ThoreauDaoist

It is torture, but if it gets too bad you can always ask for the keisaku, which is a long flat stick that is slapped across your shoulder blades. Then you can concentrate on the pain in your shoulders not the pain in your knees.

sbsteve

If you leaf through the Monster Manual for Dungeons and Dragons, you will find a wide variety of monsters, with different qualities and varying degrees of deadliness. We all have some of these buried within us. So the question becomes, do we 1. Cruise through life staying as close to the surface as possible? 2. Medicate with pharmaceutical or recreational substances? or 3. Face the monsters straight on, nakedly. Of those three, the third invokes "courage" and "hero", St. George and the dragon, Jung and Joseph Campbell, etcetera. Sharath Jois, late teacher in the Ashtanga tradition, stressed that yoga practice requires a taste for adventure. Due to our past, some of us will have nasty Ancient Red Dragons down there. Even the greatest hero may wilt before such inner force. I'm an Ashtanga teacher and, believe me, I know what I offer is not for everyone. Seated mindfulness is gentler but over long retreats will usually be potent. I disagree with anyone who markets it as gentle and benign: better to present it as strong stuff but clean. And as for sleep: dating from the Upanishads, yogins have likened the states of meditation to those of sleep. The yogin remakes her relationship to these states, with the potential for replacing mundane sleep with nightly epic adventures. Not for everyone.

Chanchanchan

A big problem with this article is using the terms "mindfulness meditation" and Buddhism interchangeably. What she was doing and studying is not the religious practice of Buddhism, but a self help tool called "mindfulness". I agree that the mindfulness craze and applying its use to everyone with every problem is not wise. But I fear you have painted the religious practice as harmful too.

deqm

Conclusion: mentally ill people should not meditate for three hours. For this we needed an article in the great Atlantic? Maybe so.

Leslie

Meditation is a big business and many people have invested a lot of time and money into it. I meditated for over 20 years and I was a teacher of meditation. This article and these people who are studying the negative aspects of Buddhist meditation have clarified much that I found problematic with how it is taught and the harm it has done in the retreat centers around the U.S. The original teachings are 2600 years old and were not meant to be cherry-picked and homogenized for western culture! There is a lot of wisdom in Buddhism but it's been corrupted by greed and stupidity. The Cheetah House looks like it is providing some much needed over-sight.

goldbar

I practiced meditation and mindfulness for a few years at the suggestion of a therapist and, for the most part, I had healthy experiences and felt the benefits of the practice. My therapist had identified me as a ruminator with excessive anxiety previously, but I went about attempting the treatment regardless.

I did experience seeing flashes of light that I would relay to the therapist, who brushed them off never to speak of them again. The flashing lights were unsettling, and my therapist's unwillingness to engage (among other things) led to a reluctance to seek further treatment. Now, a few years later, I find myself back in the behavioral healthcare continuum again seeking treatment. No doubt, I will find a counselor who will again recommend mindfulness and meditation.

Now I know how to respond to those proposals. Thank you for sharing the article and thank you for helping me understand a little bit more about my personal experience with mindfulness and meditation.

Natalie5

I think people are upset because humans want to categorize things as "good" or "bad" when in reality everything is nuanced. Her research highlights that nuance. It is then the job of the user (or practitioner in this case) to weigh the pros and cons - and compare to other treatments. I imagine for many people meditation still comes out as a pro, but not everyone.

d_pauleen

Honestly, I think this article could be boiled down to this quote,

“But, he added, people with serious psychiatric disorders should meditate only under the guidance of a mental-health professional who also happens to be a meditator—advice that would probably come as news to the many thousands of people who meditate by using apps at home.”

The rest is just filler.

Raul_Gabriel

(Edited)

Without rereading the article, it seems like the studies show excessive meditation causes negative effects in around 10% of people. Wouldn't that be true with all activities taken to excess? I enjoy mountain biking but probably not ready for a 10 day intensive MTB "retreat". Moderation, folks.

ewbruhn

“Moderation, folks” pretty much sums up the teaching of the wisest. Buddah, Jesus, etc. I guess that includes you too, as your advice travels in very good company.

In perhaps typical American overstriving, people (and “Big Meditation INC) went straight to full bore and the assumption that this TOOL was a solution.

People hope to “master” this tool. To ace it, to win. To be the “best” at it.

Instead, the solution is.....moderation.

sgmgasper

Go for a run, even if you don't run. Go for 30 minutes and alternate walking and running. Nothing beats it for focus, clearing the head and feeling good.

I'm serious, if you want to get in touch with yourself, run.

MisterSolo

I agree with you; I've always done some of my best thinking running. I was exhausted skimming through this article; meditating and 'mindfulness' seems like an awful lot of work and can be pretty stressful and who needs that?

mrsthor09

(Edited)

Maybe for some people, just like meditation.

sgmgasper

Sure but without the potential negative impacts

Cobweb.Henry

My knees very much beg to differ.

mikeb1

I had an experience at a Zen retreat where the Roshi yelled at me and made sweeping negative statements about me. I told him I was having anxiety surface during meditation and he was dismissive. I realized that he was using his position of power in a harmful way, and rather than leave I just protected myself with him. I still enjoyed the group meditations, despite my anxiety. Looking back, it was the failed relationship with this teacher that felt hurtful and unresolved for a long time. Years before, I'd been turned off to Buddhism when after a day with Jack Kornfield, I told him about a sweat lodge with a Native elder that ended with a feast including different foods including "grandfather stew" with beef. He exploded at me, saying "You can't eat meat and be spiritual!" I've concluded that there's a lot of dogma--ego--in American Buddhism, just like in everything else in America. As Robert Bly remarked, we haven't come far.

timelinestimelyness

the monks in Thailand, eat meat, and they practice one of the closest versions of Buddhism to the original teachings.

Pepshard

While I find the issues raised in the article worthy of consideration and even concern, it's disappointing that so little effort is made to acknowledge that meditation, far from being a singular activity, takes many forms. Anyone with little experience but who might be interested in finding out more about the different types of meditation—whether it be zen zazen, vipassana, mantra meditation, self-enquiry, or Centering prayer, to name a small sample—would not be served by the lack of nuance here. To make or even entertain such sweeping generalizations (especially disingenuously in the piece's title) undermines the larger point it tries to make: whatever form it may take, meditation can have negative effects if practiced by people who may not be suited for the particular form they take up, or are not properly introduced to it and cared for once they do start practicing. When I began meditating in 1990, I had spent two years taking classes meant to prepare me if and when I decided to take it on. I was given practices designed to strengthen my ability to focus. For instance, paying attention to the touch of the water and suds as I did the dishes. Or actually listening to the sound of the voice of the person speaking to me. Basic stuff, but it helped me see the value of focused awareness. Not everyone has the time or inclination to spend that kind of time. But like most things in life, the readiness (and the proper guidance and support) is all.

Nimetu

True, but the editors already let our intrepid reporter publish a very long piece. I suspect we both would be interested in the next phase of this research, which is figuring what aspects of those many approaches are best for avoiding or alleviating those negative consequences. That's be really useful to know

Catsongs

(Edited)

I hear there's a dark side to journaling and keeping a diary. The dark side of writing is well known, no news there.. And psychotherapy's got a dark side. Some folks travel abroad and have a tough time. Then there's psychiatric medications, very dark side there. Reading the news and hanging out in your favorite online silo can be devastating, to self and others. Come to think of it, there's a dark side to life. I'm waiting for the studies to help us understand the dark side of self-help books, the dark side of listening to podcasts. Oh, and be sure not to listen to your CDs or .mp3s backwards, you may find the Dark Lord instructing you to do Dark Things. And stay tuned, after learning of the dark side of Buddhism, I'm sure someone will enlighten us about the dark side of practices in Hinduism, Confucianism, Taoism, Islam, Judaism, Christianity and more. It's a dangerous

world out here! On the bright side, there's no downside to technology! AI will save us! Thank goodness. And Mars, no downside to living there. Or so I've heard. I'm waiting on those rigorous studies.

BossaNova

(Edited)

Great perspective.

Notmainstream

Very disappointing that in a publication of this caliber, in a lengthy article supposedly about meditation, the author uses the words "mindfulness" and "meditation" interchangeably and doesn't seem to know the difference.

brocktm22

Agreed. It's unfortunate

NAP

Darn! Now I gotta worry that meditation

is bad for me, too? What's next? Golden

Retriever puppies?

Raul_Gabriel

(Edited)

Brilliant! 🤖

Did you hear what happened to Gladis? Drank a litre of pure spring water. Went to the restroom , decided to take advantage of the time sitting down and get in a little healthful meditating. Fell asleep, fell off the toilet, hit her head and her golden retriever puppy gnawed her face off!

What are the odds?

RSilvers

Aside from the focus on one researcher instead of the research itself, the author flips between “meditation” and “mindfulness” without distinguishing between them. That’s pretty sloppy for The Atlantic

Hirudinea

The author should have spoken to practitioners outside of the Western world, meditation sickness is well known in China.

Anecdotally, I've been meditating off and on for 35 years and have never had a bad experience, but my spouse, who has adhd, experiences meditation as literal torture and tends towards hallucination. Some people just should not practice. I only teach my tai chi students zhan zhuang, which requires enough physical exertion that no one dissociates.

dansarah0

Yes, adhd will do that. Also, adding motion and the kind of close concentration on moving, as in tai chi, would help a lot.

Murray

(Edited)

Why does this author (and the Atlantic editor whom I surmise is responsible for the title) conflate mindfulness with meditation? They are not the same thing at all.

A certain proportion of the population is statistically predisposed to psychosis. These same people may be more likely to try meditation. Any correlation or causation related to existing mental illness, the small, almost anecdotal studies cited, the specific instance of Britton (whose life experience hardly seems typical and has seemingly corrupted her objectivity as a scientist), as well as the personal (and frankly irrelevant) experience of the author, are not helpful in understanding any potential issues with meditation. I.e., I trust none of this in evaluating the potential dangers of meditation for the general public.

As journalism, this article has so many flaws I wonder why it's in The Atlantic at all.

rajarshi_ghoshal

Well I am a hindu and from India (eastern part) and yes mediation is not something you are supposed to do alone or to relax yourself in our tradition. And it is indeed possible to reach a deep psychotic state with too much meditation.

AlFipsson

In my academic experience with North America, I got the impression that there is often an ahistorical approach to the studied topics, as if whatever happened before is more or less irrelevant. There are many Chinese, Japanese, Tibetan and Indian historical texts that point out the potential risks of meditation, and describe possible disturbing experiences that are similar if not identical to those described in this article. So my point is that this is not new knowledge, and maybe a more careful reading of what had been done before where Buddhist practices were developed might have been helpful and informative to Western practitioners.

tony1993

I was surprised by the statement from the article.

“This might make sense for a Buddhist monk pursuing the great unbinding, but not for a random Brooklynite who just wants to be more productive at work. The ‘no-self’ teachings of Buddhism can be at odds with the goals of Westerners, who are generally aiming to be their best selves, not to disconnect from themselves.”

As a Buddhist, I find the notion of **disconnection** somewhat backwards.

Meditation can cultivate relaxed awareness, insight, and compassion, allowing us to become more fully present and connected — to ourselves, to others, and to our experience. That presence can sometimes be uncomfortable or awkward, but with practice and compassion, it can also become deeply fulfilling.

The Buddhist teaching of “**no-self**” is not about disconnecting from ourselves. It invites us to loosen our attachment to a fixed sense of self and recognize ourselves as an unfolding process of experience, one that, over time, can release our dependence on external sources of refuge.

merganzer

A significant number of people, many who are following Buddhist precepts, are seriously harmed by meditation and should stop. What is hard to understand? Stop blaming the many victims

ClarenceGideon

The only thing they are victims of is ignorant or dishonest marketing campaigns and their own delusion that the purpose of meditation is to de-stress in order to perform better at their corporate job.

mikebara

Sure meditation can be dangerous. What the article fails to do is make important distinctions, so that meditation can be anything from 15 minutes a day in the morning at home to a month-long intensive retreat. It's like arguing that 'exercise is dangerous' and not pointing out that you're probably more likely to get hurt free-climbing El Capitan than you are walking around the block. In the end, it feels like a fantastic narrative that the author didn't want to diminish with what really should have been required context.

Mcanic

The context is right there. People with little or no training in the full practice of meditation are being encouraged to do exactly what you're saying. Grab an app and meditate! No risk at all. It's exactly like thinking you'll just start hiking by heading up El Capitan.

BoxingFluffy

No, it isn't. A ten-minute session of stillness is nothing at all like an unprepared hike up El Capitan.

ysarig

This article reference meditation as a singular activity. There are hundreds of different types of meditations. A meditation that is good to one person may not be good for another.

MissNina

Okay, a job killing rats and watching blood come out of their eyes? This to me is a huge red flag about this person. Who does that? If someone is okay with doing that- at all, even once- what does it say about the kind of person they are? Would I take anything they say seriously- probably not.

merganzer

She was a research student. What do you think is behind every medicine and every doctor that you have ever talked to?

Nimetu

They're called medical researchers and are responsible for the medicines that keep you and a whole lot of other people alive

Middleoak

(Edited)

Killing rats for study or after experimentation for study is pretty common in graduate level biology-related classes and research.

amweiss

As a mindfulness meditation teacher for the past 18 years, I can say there is a big difference between a daily meditation and going on retreat. Experienced teachers can recognize students who might have problems and guide them accordingly.

4kindness

The article and some of the comments unfortunately reflect the 3 poisons identified by Buddhism: obsession, aggression and delusion. Mindfulness offers antidotes such as patience, kindness and wonder.

Persephone

The very best nutshelling of the issue.

merganzer

The article also identifies that meditation can result in serious negative effects for a significant portion of practitioners regardless of any religion they may ascribe to

MeowFluffs

Kind of seems to me like assuming yoga will relax you. Practices like these (not unlike therapy) are designed to bring things up in the mind, body and spiritual Self. So of course anyone with any kind of trauma, anxiety, etc would certainly be confronted with it in their practice.

AndersPytte

Meditation is necessarily dangerous, because of its power. Here's how I would express the mental health issues as tersely as possible. Neurosis is the product of repressed unconscious material; psychosis is the overwhelming of the ego by this unconscious content. Dabbling in the territory between these two extremes must be done with care.

I'm not a meditator, but I have practiced Jungian archetypal dreamwork for over thirty-five years. The practice involves nurturing a state of controlled psychosis in which the ego is not overwhelmed, rather maintains a sense of self in the stormy sea of psychotic experience. (Sorta like Jesus calming the storm: Matthew 8:23-27).

The problem identified here is that meditation is being promoted in service of ego rather than being transformative of ego. Sure, a little light meditation might help you calmly focus on your ego's agenda. But the prospect of dying to self and being reborn as someone else is a terrifying one in the best of circumstances.

gsasf

yup, "The problem identified here is that meditation is being promoted in service of ego rather than being transformative of ego".

mark784936

I don't believe a single comment has come from a qualified Buddhist teacher, whose lifetime has been devoted to spiritual awakening. This may be because there are so few. The largest Zen organization in the US has 200 authorized teachers who work one on one with students, a tiny community when compared to the millions of followers of self appointed gurus in the online spiritual seeker market. The real world Buddhist path involves physical, psychological and spiritual challenges that are extremely demanding and life altering. Everything we hold onto is eventually challenged and given up. What we receive in return is a quiet, intimate understanding of our true divine nature, a reverence for the little things that bring us joy, and deep gratitude for this life we all share. And because we are human, we still act blindly at times and feel and cause pain. That is normal. However, anyone exhibiting serious psychological illness (whether a student or teacher) needs to be referred to appropriate professional care and should not reenter the path without sufficient resolution of the disorder to meet the very real demands of this life. In short, That which gives us life and takes it away is unimaginably powerful and is not to be trifled with. And yet we needn't worry about missing out. With every breath we take, we know the Divine is with us. How marvelous! How miraculous!

merganzer

The article is talking about meditation

JoD

I feel this article is too anecdotal and driven by the personality of the writer. It is a worthwhile topic, but a requires a much more scientific approach, using objective measures and significant number of participants and control groups.

OIVirginny

You can practice other forms of mindfulness. Yin Yoga (gentle, focused on relaxing the muscles by holding poses a while) helps me relax, and a short session before bed has led to much better sleep.

I've meditated but it was not for me. I like linking breath and movement. That's enough. There are some scary things deep in our psyches. Stare into the abysss long enough and it will stare back, to paraphrase Nietzsche.

tree201

There are absolutely dangers with meditation, especially if one has epilepsy. Having a teacher who understands this and who treats meditation with the respect it requires is very important.

If one needs focus and a calmer mind then practice mindfulness instead.

sznam

Too much water will kill you.

shdooley

Only if you run marathons and sweat out too many electrolytes.

teamvibe

I started meditating before it was a widespread practice in the US. I had come upon a book by Dr. Herbert Benson called the relaxation response which was published in the 1970s. It contained within a small simple meditative process. I tried it out and found immediate result in that it opened me up to powerful visionary and mystical experiences. I gained profound access to an abundant supportive universe.

I practiced every day for brief periods, probably never more than 1/2 hour at a time. I hadn't a teacher or any friends who were doing the same thing, so I did the best I could on my own.

I learned that if I wanted to live in this world of expanded consciousness, I would have to work on myself. And I did, and do.

One day, I sat in my living room and began my meditation on the couch. Immediately I found myself in the middle of the sea floating on a raft. It was quite pleasant. After a bit, I decided to return to my daily activities, but I couldn't get back to the "shore". I was well aware that I was in my living room. I was also well aware I was in the middle of the sea. It took quite an impressive effort for me to return. Once Home, I determined that I had gone too far; and in the interest of my sanity I suspended my activities for several months. I didn't return to a meditative practice until I felt more in control.

In the book of Ezekiel the prophet speaks of "running and returning". When visiting other realms, it is essential to return home to touch ground frequently.

bitOperator

I find it a bit strange that the author seems to have struck the nail on the head within the beginning of the article, but doesn't spend anymore time addressing it: Britton is at the very least neurodivergent, if not specifically autistic.

This theme actually comes up throughout the article, where they found 10% of people have adverse affects (a likely not-far off percentage of neurodivergent people and/or people with severe trauma like CPTSD).

Why are neurologists, psychiatrists and psychologists doing studies like this without considering, at the very least, neurotypes and splitting them up into groups that way? The studies should really be filtering by neurotype (and trauma) first before determining positive/adverse effects.

My uneducated guess is you'll find a neurotypical group with no past of significant trauma will likely have more benefits from short to extended meditation, while neurodivergent people (and some with severe trauma) will possibly get only limited help from it, but more often than not, it will make it worse.

As an autistic man myself, I constantly joke that I am looking for "mindlessness" activities, because if I'm not actively being mindless, I'm constantly in my head. This is from my own anecdotal experience, but my guess might be that ND and people with significant past trauma might often benefit more from physical activity to get out of their head, while NT people without trauma may benefit more from spending more time in their head.

hallmary

Reading the comments, I am puzzled that many meditators (especially Kornfield) are offended by research that explores the fact that a minority of individuals experience adverse effects from meditation. It's comparable to people who benefit from taking wellbutrin being offended by research exploring why a minority of people experience adverse effects from wellbutrin. This researcher, and the author of this article, are merely

bringing a fact to light. The fact that this serves to validate certain individuals' adverse experiences (an important result) does not invalidate all others' beneficial experiences. So many factors are in play and we know so little about our brains at this point. I'm grateful for research in this area and for the author in grappling with this subject.

MamaSquid

(Edited)

As a meditator I fully agree, and it's funny you mentioned Wellbutrin because it was terrifically helpful for me with the minor side effect of occasional grand mal seizures. Sometimes an intervention just isn't for you, even if it helps a lot of people.

onetexsun

I live with chronic pain and have found meditation to be the only way I can cope. Your experience with Wellbutrin put me in mind of my own experience with a medication akin to Gabapentin that was the only drug I ever found that relieved much of my constant nerve pain. A miracle. Except that while taking it, my brain couldn't remember that I had feet, or that anything below eye level existed. I fell twice, face plants, and ended up with a concussion, broken nose, cracked cheekbone and chipped tooth. Nothing that "works" doesn't also offer some possible downside.

Pelorus357

If one participates in the meditation "multibillion-dollar industry that is promoted as a treatment for anxiety, chronic pain, alcohol abuse, addiction, and many other ailments" then you are in the same old, same old "fix what's wrong with me" modern culture.

In my decades old practice the teaching is free and we're not trying to treat or fix anything. We're just trying to see clearly what's going on around us and in our minds. The result is freedom, and healthier relationships.

mds417

As Jack Kornfield often says (I paraphrase) you don't need to fix anything. You're weird enough as it is.

Sally

She is facing hostility because she is threatening their world view and their livelihood. I tried a meditation app but found it irritating. This was most likely due to be a driven professional in my competitive field and trying to maintain a household. A couple of years after I retired I found that I often sit in my recliner, listening to the sounds my apartment makes, petting my cat and watching the wind blow thru the trees. I also find peace in a half hour of tai chi, moving my body gently rather than the high energy aerobics I did for years. Whether it is retirement or simply being over 70, I have found peace after a lifetime of stress and striving. Rather than Buddhism, I find the Hindu stages of life more applicable to the reality of life in the world. I feel very lucky to have reached the final, peaceful stage.

HoosierGeezer

What a beautiful post. Thank you

ttnw

First yoga, then meditation - you're 2 for 2 in consecutive weeks of having writers pass judgment on the cheap westernized form of an ancient custom. What's next, I wonder.

nome

night blooming jasmine

Tonia

The author confuses mindfulness with meditation; mindfulness does not result in dissociation

KnockKnockGreenpeace

When I see someone define or discuss mindfulness, the first word in the explanation is "I." That is the opposite of meditation.

BossaNova

Mindfulness involves being present, aware, and non-judgemental. It's not about the ego. Of course, people will apply it -- or facets of it -- as they wish/are able, but this doesn't diminish what mindfulness actually involves.

jh64

I have a severe allergy to penicillin. But that doesn't mean it isn't a life saver for other people. The vast majority of people will benefit from meditation. People who don't should definitely stop.

Truckee

"Buddhist" meditation practices as interpreted by Westerners are not the only form of meditation - and is probably practiced in many different ways.

"Transcendental Meditation" as brought to the West by Maharishi Mahesh Yogi in the 1960s (popularized because the Beatles did it) and 1970s has been extensively researched, and is taught in a rigorous way to ensure "correct" practice and interpretation of events. If practiced beyond the prescribed 20 minutes twice daily, it could potentially have negative effects. Longer TM courses typically involve additional breathing and physical (Hatha Yoga) exercises to counter potential negative side effects.

J_plum

This article is written as though it's a bombshell piece of reporting, when a lot of this is common sense. (Yes, sitting alone in silence for long periods every day can do weird things to you.) There's also a weird lumping together of some legitimately disturbing and rare side effects and other, very banal issues, like an anxious person getting more anxious when they are sitting alone with their thoughts. (...Duh?)

Meditation can function a lot like a kind of exposure therapy for people who ruminate compulsively. Like other kinds of exposure therapy, it needs to be performed in a specific way so as not to cause harm. The big risk with meditation seems to be that many of the people who teach it are not licensed or certified in any way, and much of the practice happens in isolation.

brycehay

I've had a couple of those experiences. Intense meditation is not for everyone and should be undertaken with guidance and support and a deep knowledge of the path. Having said that, having a deep knowledge of how your mind works I would suggest is a life skill 101. Far more suffering has been caused by those deluded by their own minds than has been by meditation.

d_pauleen

(Edited)

Ignorance and delusion is the human condition.

A little wisdom can go a long way to relieving it.

gsasf

I find this article to be an important data point in a larger discussion on meditation. It doesn't in any way reduce the role meditation has played in my life. Her information seems well documented, real and an important cautionary tale. Let's face it, our current understanding of the complexity of the human mind is extremely primitive. I've personally never like the word "mindful"...which always sounded like "full of mind", which, to me was the problem. I can only speak to my experience. For me, the purpose of meditation is to connect deeply with "no-mind"...that which is deeper than the mind, something we all intuitively sense is there. In no way does this mean I can't use the mind, it's just no longer my master. Daily meditation practice (20-30 minutes right after awakening) has deepened my sense of being one with the natural world around me and with everyone who crosses my path. I struggled with severe anxiety and depression in my younger years, was heavily medicated and went through years of therapy. My journey with a spiritual meditation practice has been the only non-pharmacologic intervention that has deepened me as a person, allowed me to live a whole, medication free, relatively anxiety and depression free life deeply connected with the world around me in a very beautiful way. I stopped therapy decades ago. Some commenters have described a "middle way", and maybe that's what I've found.

pkz

This article might more accurately be titled

“The-Dark-Side-of-an-Article-That-Never-Defines-Its-Subject.”

Mindfulness is not synonymous with meditation, and neither term describes a single practice. Yet the article moves indiscriminately among MBSR, insight meditation, breath concentration, noting, body scans, guided apps, Buddhist teachings, and intensive silent retreats lasting days or weeks. These differ radically in method, purpose, intensity, and effect.

The evidence concerning adverse effects deserves serious attention. But adverse effects from what, exactly? Until the article can tell us what “it” is, it cannot credibly tell us about its dark side.

lauracopeland6

The goal of many meditation practices is to come to know the thoughts and stories that dominate our minds, to see our subjectivity and conditioning that prevent us from viewing the inherent goodness in ourselves and others, to feel union rather than separation, which is created by dualism, the belief that we are separate. I have practiced Tibetan Buddhist, tantric forms, Qigong, and Iyengar yoga for 26 years. These practices have allowed me to live a more peaceful, purposeful, and impactful life, as is true for anyone I have met who consistently meditates. I have wondered if watered down mindfulness devoid of contemplative study could be less effective, as I have noticed people dabble and don't see lasting change. I have also noticed that people with deep trauma and mental illness can struggle without guidance from exceptional teachers.

johnhood

I don't believe I have ever experienced a longer article in The Atlantic. And it wasn't worth it. I can't believe how many scrolls I had to use to get to the comments.

d_pauleen

Writing a comment on the Atlantic site is so fraught.

One could write an article about it and the damage done to the psyches of would be commentators.

Euripedes

Was this just 8000 words to tell me don't over do the sitting with my eyes closed?

beverlyjk

I meditate with my eyes open, which is an accepted (if not common) practice in Vipassana and standard in Zen. Both traditions have periods of walking meditation in between periods of sitting meditation. Zen retreats tend to be overall less sitting-intensive and involve periods of working, eating, gardening, etc. I used to worry about too much sitting in the dark and how that could effect my mental health but it turns out that these other activities mitigate it. Also, my retreat center has beautiful landscaping outdoors where walking is done often. It's sunny and beautiful most of the time.

mwanderson

I have no doubt at all that this article was a complete waste of time...for YOU.

Tilledbower

Right? Everything in moderation.

natashu07

The article critiques meditation as if “meditating” always means long, intense, concentration-based practice, kind used in Buddhist traditions and silent retreats, which is known to cause adverse effects when practiced excessively or without guidance. But that’s only one category. Different methods produce different effects. There are other methods: focused attention, open monitoring, relaxation based, energizing practices, and more. Treating meditation as a single, unitary practice is like treating “exercises” as one thing, which is overly simplified.

Candygram

As someone with anxiety, depression, and PTSD stemming from repeated childhood abuse and sexual assault, I have been consistently told to meditate. But I always feel like I do it "wrong." Rather than having the desired effect, I end up ruminating on my past traumas and current issues. After 30 years of therapy - and off-and-on attempts at meditating - I've discovered that all of the introspection and inwardness was harming me. Initially, it was profound to figure out where things stemmed from and work through some things. But too much time spent on this every week for years caused me to not be able to think about much else. I've found I do best with just living in the moment and learning new things. Nothing wrong with some distraction from a life with a troubled brain.

Morganua

One of the wisest statements I have ever come across... "It's important to look at the past, but don't stare."

Minerva2000

Thank you for your writing. I am a

retired psychotherapist. In general

I think it is responsible and ethical

to provide info on possible side effect

CanyonWren

"For her study, Britton split 26 participants into two groups: one that would go through an eight-week-long meditation class, and one that would serve as a control group. She brought them all into a lab to sleep overnight while sensors measured their brain waves, muscle activity, and eye movements."

This was a human subjects research project funded in large part by grants from the NIH (National Institute of Mental Health and a training grant, listed in the linked publication). University of Arizona is an R1, and as with any university, all human subjects research must be approved and monitored (progress reports, unexpected and adverse outcomes) by the Institutional Review Board. Withholding experimental results is a violation of NIH funding agreements, and the reduced quality of sleep in the meditation group should have been reported to the IRB as an unexpected or perhaps even adverse outcome. And since when does a graduate student get to decide to withhold research results because it hurts their feepees about dharma or whatever?

I realize that my opinion is a minority one in this comments section, where most seem to see Britton as some sort of scientific hero. What I see are unethical research practices and a person who appears to have made a good living off doing more meditation research and promoting fixes for problems created by her prior belief system about meditation practices.

Mobius

As a meditation teacher this kind of research is very important and helpful. We need to have discernment around students and what they tell us about their practice. A lot of very anxious people are drawn to meditation and this tends to mean they eventually are going to become anxious and neurotic about their meditation practice too. Knowing about the Middle Way and why the Buddha dispensed with asceticism is not quite enough. Long Meditation retreats are not really for anxiety. Long Meditation is an advanced practice in general and not for everyone. If you sit too much it will have negative effects.

Story: I've seen "let's get stupid" signs in zen retreat centers and can attest that is what will happen with too much sitting. It gets hard to keep a schedule because you're too used to living in the present, you lose your sense of drive from damping the ego, etc. I think Yoga asana is much better in many ways for depression and can help guide a balanced meditation practice because it involves your body and not just "mind only".

bruce_henderson

Andrew Newberg and Eugene d'Aquili, in "Why God Won't Go Away: Brain Science and the Biology of Belief," used brain imaging on meditating Tibetan Buddhists and praying Franciscan nuns and documented that intense spiritual contemplation changes brain activity. During deep meditation or intense prayer, the brain blocks information going to the superior parietal lobe—the part of the brain responsible for drawing the boundary between the self and the physical world. They write that the sense of self disappears; the neurological shutdown creates a feeling of being one with the universe or connected to a higher spiritual reality. Although not Buddhist (I converted to Judaism and study Hassidism), I have experienced this intensely myself starting in my late teens. It tore me apart with feelings of not being understood, or crazy, or being alone in the way I perceived the world and God. It has only been through study in my 50s, 60s and 70s that I have discovered I am not alone and that I now truly understand what I experienced at such a young age and what a gift it was. It now informs my every-day interactions with people and my current creative wildlife photography. If only I had had guidance, understanding and friendship back at the beginning. I think this article and the comments have once again reinforced that I am not alone.

AdamB

In the beginning of the book *A Path With Heart*, Jack Kornfield himself talks about working in a facility with patients experiencing severe mental illness. His takeaway from that situation was that the people who would benefit most from a meditation practice in

that building were the caretakers. In his view, the patients would probably be most helped by a more grounded practice like mindful gardening.

Right concentration is one spoke of the eight-fold path.

If you lift heavy weights or run a marathon without any training, proper nutrition, adequate sleep, or community support, injuries are to be expected.

Practice is meant to be medicine over the long-term, and the Buddha was clear we should each be a light unto ourselves. It takes time to see the fruits of meditation, but if you're ten years into a practice and you think there's something harmful about what you're doing, you're probably right. I think a good teacher will empower their students to find out what is conducive to the alleviation of suffering for themselves no matter where that journey goes.

This comment has been deleted by the author.

Landoflogic

Truest comment of the day

CanyonWren

And there's research grant funding a-plenty available to study it, and what appears to be a very comfortable living to be made off creating problems for other people, and then "helping" other people solve problems they created for themselves.

Who knew? Certainly not this neuroscientist. But then I've always failed at meditation, even in the context of Iyengar yoga classes. Reminded me of enforced naptime in Montessori kindergarten: "I'm bored! Bored! When is this going to be over so I can go paint or play with clay?"

Everyman

The author badly underplays an obvious alternative explanation: meditation may not be creating psychiatric illness so much as unmasking vulnerabilities that were already present. That possibility appears only late in the piece, almost as an aside, despite being crucial to interpreting the alarming anecdotes. People with latent anxiety, trauma, dissociative tendencies, bipolarity, or psychotic vulnerability may fare poorly when mental defense mechanisms are quieted. That does not make meditation harmless, but it radically changes the causal implication. Burying this distinction makes the article more dramatic, but less intellectually fair.

fz1jacklyn

I have a meditating friend. Her husband has terminal lung cancer. She says very strange things in front of the "one she loves." He is weak, fragile, and has no appetite. During visits she beams and says "Meditation helps so much. I feel **absolutely joyful** everyday." I find her to be disassociated and in denial.

CAH

I think that says something interesting about the type of people who enjoy meditation.

BoxingFluffy

No, it only says something about that meditating friend whose husband has lung cancer, not about anyone else.

Raul_Gabriel

All of us deal with grief differently. Maybe she has accepted the inevitable passing of her husband and is already working through her stages of grief. Maybe she is putting on her happiest face to make her husband feel better about leaving her. Show some empathy to your "friend", mate.

CtGa

(Edited)

I think there's a fine line between meditation and harmful rumination. Compulsive behaviors come in many forms, and like the proverbial frog in hot water, they can sneak up on us.

I believe moderation is as much a learned trait as any other physical or mental habit, and that it takes both maturity and discipline to master it.

It's interesting that this article appears on the same day as Ian Bogost's article on the virtues of wonder and the detriments of "maxxing." Ironically enough, it takes a bit of practice to pause the reel of perpetual introspection and ostensible self-improvement.

tre730

This article was revelatory to me though admittedly, a little disturbing. My own experience with meditation hasn't been consistent, but it helped me greatly at a certain time in my life to see my situation as it really was and own up to my responsibility to accept or change it. The people at the Tibetan Buddhist center I attended were helpful, kind, focused and calm; the teachings open-minded and unpressured. I'm not in denial of the negative experiences, I just haven't seen it and question if this article isn't a little sensationalized or biased to the subject's bad experience.

PetuniaToes

This is such a great article. I'm a sporadic, 10-minute meditator and pretty bad at it when I do it. I'm glad I got to see another side of all the hype. In my experience, a long walk is more mentally helpful anyway.

rick196747

This article is deeply valuable in highlighting the detrimental effects of overuse and reliance on any silver bullet technique and the proponents who see nothing but this one antidote to all of humanities problems.

Meditation can and does have beneficial uses. And like most everything on this planet, has side effects when over used. It makes perfect sense to me that a brain subjected to long periods of under stimulation would develop bizarre symptoms.

This article is also wonderfully suited to expose both the devoted practitioner and righteous agnostic, identities. Two deeply invested positions arguing for their side of one coin and missing the point.

DBJ

"Britton has straight blond hair, blue eyes, and a muted affect." The article could have been at least 1/3 shorter without unnecessary biographical trivia and narrative gimmicks.

Ryanr

I thought that the writing was superb. If I wanted to know about possible negative side effects of meditation, I could just ask ChatGPT to give me a summary. There's something deeply anchoring about putting oneself in Ms Britton's shoes and walking with her and the narrator. It's not clinical it's very human and touches my soul.

DBJ

Good for you. But you're setting up a false dichotomy between dry AI-summaries and bloated non-fiction prose pieces like this. The truth is, the article would have been better without superfluous gimmicks. There is a time and a place for trivia like this, and this article wasn't it.

Salty

Something that I think is being somewhat missed in our reactions to this article is the knowledge that we are gaining about how chemicals within the brain work with mood, and that we can consciously manipulate these chemicals in the brain. If we can meditate ourselves into a state of paranoia or pain, then at least we have proof that there is an effective mechanism for manipulating our own brain, the goal is to define the desired positive effects and design meditation to help each individual to achieve them.

boringalice

(Edited)

Yes, exactly. I'm not a routine meditator but I did find casual study of Buddhist philosophy as well as a foray into the search for the brain mind connection to be informative and helpful during a very difficult period. I can control my bp and pulse rate to calm myself and settle my thoughts. It's helpful. I wouldn't want to attend a retreat any more than I would want to eat an entire chocolate cake with a gallon of ice cream. It has

always been my experience to seek only the guidance that is useful and to leave the rest. Interesting to see what will come of more study and research in the connection between meditation and willful manipulation.

artemis

notable that meditation can have risks, yes. but as the article points out, they have been well known in actual Buddhist communities for a very long time now. if you meditate too much and get scared you're losing your sense of self, maybe that's a problem with the American meditation industry, because you should really know by then that no-self is kind of the point a decent amount of time. cherry-picked and romanticized Buddhism is not a cure-all, but maybe we should have known that. does not mean it's inherently dangerous and not worth doing

Gigi1999

I ruminate and obsess far too much already, and attempts to “clear my mind” only exacerbates this. I prefer any creative process-either art or even just following a recipe which has my hands and mind engaged. In “the flow “ as I’ve heard this referred to. Calms me like nothing else.

Outside_Observer

This researcher sounds like anyone who delves deeply into religion. It's interesting she did not look into those who spend hours in prayer. Based on my experience she would have found something similar.

Attempting to escape the everyday in your quest to attain enlightenment, however you define that, almost always results in some kind of false sense of reality.

Just think about it for a moment. Spending hours a day sitting still in prayer or meditation is not living. It's a form of escapism.

The kind of meditation that works well for most people is sitting still and focusing on stillness for a few minutes at a time. 5-10 mins 2-3 times a week after gentle exercise is

known to be highly effective. Much more so than prescription meds trying to tackle ordinary depression and anxiety.

The risks this researcher highlights is akin to saying 'don't exercise, because marathon runners get injured a lot'. Well, yes; marathon runners do inflict a lot of damage on their body. But most people who exercise regularly don't run marathons. They practice gentle, effective exercise that provides huge benefits for body and mind.

I think it's a shame non believers will listen to this researcher and now never try it.

nickribush

Another thing, apart from over-generalizing about meditation, the author (and Britton) don't seem to understand what mindfulness actually is. There are four foundations of mindfulness, as in the book of the same name (<https://wisdomexperience.org/product/four-foundations-mindfulness-plain-english/>) and this approach appears to be seldom taught, which may explain why many attempted "insight meditation" practitioners cross over to the dark side. Their "teachers" don't know what they're doing.

Kalchas

The question was raised: to what extent do preexisting problems form the basis of severe experiences in meditators? This line is telling: "Britton said adverse effects can crop up even for people without prior mental-health conditions." How does she know that? Might be that about 8% of people who retire to cultivating their plants and chopping wood also have psychotic experiences.

Teju26

As far as I know, meditation is A practice to develop compassion for what is. Meditation is not a self improvement project, or a stress reduction practice.

mwanderson

Even so, 'as far as you know' has no bearing on how people who stand to profit present it to their customers.

livingdeeply

(Edited)

Buddhist meditative practice has three aspects: morality, meditation, and compassionate wisdom. These are sometimes likened to the three legs of a stool. Likewise, the Buddhist tradition encompasses three main divisions: the Theravadan, the Mahayanan, and the Vajrayana. So-called mindfulness meditation is based in the Theravadan school and focuses on attenuating "mental afflictions." Its ideal is the arhat: one who has attained that outcome. By contrast, Zen meditation, the most prominent school in the Mahayana branch, focuses not only on zazen, or seated meditation, but also on the cultivation of prajna, or compassionate wisdom. Its ideal is the bodhisattva, the one who hears and responds to the sufferings of the world. To reduce "meditation" to one dimension of Theravadan practice--the psychological--while minimizing the moral foundation, the cultivation of selfless wisdom, and the social dimensions of the practice is to turn it into a form of introspective, self-help therapy. Little wonder that those who approach the practice in this spirit, and without the guidance of an ethical, well-trained and well-informed teacher, can and have been injured. But the "dark side" to examine is not that of the Buddhist meditative tradition so much as its exploitation and distortion by a capitalist, consumer culture in which, as Allen Ginsberg once put it, anything can become a commodity.

gboren2

I take issue with the title of the article. In Buddhism, mindfulness is a healthy state of mind and meditation is a tool used to achieve it. If the article were about the negative effects of excessive exercise on one's health, would the title read "The Dark Side of Health"?

Chanchanchan

The problem is confounding "mindfulness meditation" as a self help technique with Buddhism, which is a religious and spiritual practice and requires the direction of a qualified teacher. This article doesn't make the distinction either. You can't lump everything under "Buddhism", a diverse religion with different schools, traditions and practices. I'm not sure what exactly she was teaching or practicing, or people were practicing with an app, but it wasn't Buddhism.

rebecca_mary108

Thank you for bringing this up. It's clear the author doesn't have enough historical information about how Buddhism came to Europe and the western world and how meditation was secularized and removed from its context in the process. Meditation is only one part of the Buddha's Noble Eightfold Path, considered as something more advanced. As I understand it, it is important to train first in ethics, generosity and kindness. Without these supportive factors in place, and qualified teachers (which many American lay teachers are not) who understand how to navigate potential pitfalls, it's way more likely for people to experience harmful mental states. It's an extremely gradual process for most people to be able to practice meditation skillfully. It's so typical of our culture to extract one piece of something complex and market it as a "silver bullet".

WilliamRomp

I have meditated, most days, for 57 years. Reading this, I guess I was lucky to have had wise and thoughtful teachers. I was warned about virtually every pitfall in this essay, and I was taught to recognize their onset and *back off for a few days*. I have experienced dissociation after too many hours of meditation. I took a week off, then toned it down.

Many people seek meditation for emotional or psychological reasons, a tender bunch, so naturally, issues will arise. Others are achievers--they seek results, striving with intense passion and effort. More predictable issues. So the prevalence of problems does not surprise a wise meditation teacher. If a teacher's prescription is always more meditation, seek another.

Ms. Britton seems to be a brittle achiever. She didn't add meditation to a balanced life, she immersed herself to the point of considering becoming a nun -- on top of a driven life, never taking a day off for years, as she said. And anyone who takes to bed for a week because of a quote in a magazine can certainly be described as fragile and brittle. So *her* problems associated with meditation come as no surprise

I commend the author for pointing out that Buddhist meditation was developed for ascetic monks seeking enlightenment in a temple or cave setting, where dissociation is a sought-after result, and hallucinations are commonplace. When squeezed into a modern life, moderation is key.

lauren_gilbert_7

Fascinating. Mindfulness can be helpful but not if it turns into a cult. Same with Buddhism.

cle

(Edited)

This makes no sense. The generalizations are too vague.

susan_e_musick

Thanks for the article! I always have had a deep inner resistance to the whole idea of meditation, feeling that it was simply not for me, and now I think I know why. I've always found my serenity in physical exercise and in the practice of arts. (Once joined a yoga class and hated every minute of it because of feeling so utterly out of place, and feeling that the practice would artificialize me just as dyeing my hair or having needless cosmetic surgery would do. I dropped out of the class, and felt enormous relief and relaxation.) When people have tried to pressure me into practicing meditation, up until now I haven't really had anything to say except "Not for me." Now I have a clearer defense: I know my own vulnerabilities and understand some of the risks better.

jluth1963

Me too 🙌

AMLG

(Edited)

This research on harmfulness seems valuable and should be pursued. I think to reach the next stage of value they need to start to try to quantify the risk. Anecdotes about psychotic breaks and other bad outcomes only go so far. Quantifying the risk and trying to get to the bottom of the causes is the next phase.

The meditation community absolutely should engage with that research and support it in good faith. Undoubtedly it will be found that significant negative outcomes are very rare

but to shun the research because it is bad PR is exactly the kind of nefarious practice for we excoriate for-profit companies.

kagilman

What a delightful article. I found meditating pleasant but not life changing. What really connects for me are Forest Bathing practices. We have such a capacity for latching on to things which we then wield instead of just appreciate. A 75 yo psychologist, still love to read and wonder about all sorts of things, but consider trees & the natural world my primary teachers.

Mitzi86

Ascetic practice was always something people removed from daily lives did with others. Once again, individual optimisation is the goal for so much of this. Yet I understand the appeal of wanting to transcend any part of yourself bc it is yourself that you suffer with. It's an important conversation and worth having and bringing attention to.

Himma

It seems to me that both Khazan and Britton have an axe to grind, beyond the important and real aspects of the “dark side of meditation.” Being alert to risk and context is important in any life situation, and meditation is no exception. Britton should be commended for this unpopular stance - but having said that, there does seem to be a worm in the heart of the rose.

In the late 1970s I attended a 30-day vipassana retreat at the Insight Meditation Center in Barre, Massachusetts. The retreat involved 7 or 8 hours of sitting meditation and 4 or 5 hours of walking meditation each day. I went in part hoping it would help me sort out some pretty deep confusion I was experiencing about the increasingly cult-like qualities emerging in the Tibetan Buddhist sangha I was part of. Alas, my confusion only deepened as the retreat progressed. I spiraled into what was very likely a psychotic state.

I went down and down and down. Not hitting bottom - there was no bottom. At 22, I felt hopeless and very suicidal. Finally, I had an interview with one of the teachers mentioned

in this article. I shared with that person the depth of my despair. The response? “Deal with it.”

No help, no guidance, no kindness, no compassion.

The meditation itself was double-edged. It worsened my despair by revealing its depth, but also helped me be with it and somewhat understand it. My impression is that sustained meditation will almost always reveal uncomfortable things. No surprise - we are human!

nina599183

As a meditator, I have seen at least one case of severe dissociation /psychosis at a retreat and have no doubt that meditation has potential dangers. However, it seems that this article fails to explore in any depth the role of preexisting mental health issues which makes the thesis and tenor of the article less persuasive. I am not discounting the possibility that there may be dangers independent of any underlying issues but it would have been helpful if research exploring this relationship received more than a paragraph.

familia

If you attend a meditation retreat to “cure” or “heal” a specific problem, you are in the wrong place. A good teacher will prevent you. Not an app or any person or corporation that charge money on teaching Dharma. A real legit Dharma teaching will never charge money. Meditation is to observe things as they are. Period. This include to observe our craving to end a unpleasant sensation or get a pleasant one. Is to be aware of our sensations (mental and physical) and not react. According to Dharma, wisdom comes by experiencing this mental and physical sensations arising and passing away. Always. This awareness brings you the possibility to observe and act, not react. Awareness and equanimity. This practice of observing and experience the natural law of impermanence, can bring liberation from old attachments, cravings and reactions based on ignorance. With all respect, I found this article extremely shallow, irresponsible and written with the perspective of someone who dislike mindfulness after a course in an app. Only thing I agree is that Dharma needs a good teacher, the right conditions and the step by step knowledge to achieve the best results. The same as you need the right doctor, the correct drug and the right conditions and use of it.

MattMullen

(Edited)

I've been meditating for about thirty years. The first few years were indeed painful. Sitting in meditation made me so anxious that I would sweat and shake. It wasn't until I fully understood the Buddha's teaching that all things are empty that my mind began to settle down. Now, I am deeply grateful for the insight into Emptiness (Which is not nothingness, but rather pure change. Emptiness is what we are experiencing right now, including all of our thoughts, emotions, and sensory experiences as they come and go). Truly understanding Emptiness is a limitless treasure.

The reason people suffer, especially during meditation, is that they are grasping for something: calmness, insight, being "Enlightened", bringing down blood pressure, being more successful at work, or being a kinder, better, more patient person. All of these are "things". And grasping for them inevitably leads to suffering. Learning not to grasp is the key. But that is impossible to do as long as we see the "things" of the world as real. So I'm grateful for my meditation practice, but it is perfectly understandable to me that some people experience more suffering while meditating. The point of the Buddha's teachings is to learn how to become intimately familiar with how suffering arises and how it falls away. Also, it's important to always be gentle with yourself. I highly recommend the book Buddhism Plain and Simple by Steve Hagen. Very practical and down-to-earth. He is a wise and gentle teacher.

EmeryBright

Man, some of these meditation people seem really soft. Like, come on, you have to be able to accept some possible downsides or imperfections in your practice if you're doing something which aims to help people. That many of these people would rather not talk about or explore the possibility of negative effects throws the whole practice into more doubt than the mere fact that negative effect might exist in the first place.

trang_nguyen

(Edited)

Meditation was not invented to be a mental health fix. It was for awakening, and whether you make progress at that (which may mean very different things for the individuals and

the specific traditions), there is no guarantee that it is pain-free. It seems — at least from this article— that there is a sense in the West that meditation is a simple no-pain all-healing pill. It's not that. And there is also not just one it. There are many kinds of meditation. Just like there are many kinds of pill.

Patu

I found the studies reported in this article represented a typical range in human behavior. There is always a small percentage of people who do not do well, no matter what the subject is, or the chemical. Most of the problems seem to occur during extra long meditation sessions. Have the researchers looked into the type of person who seeks that type of escape? There might be a pattern there, where meditation is a false solution for a deeper problem. Much the same as taking recreational drugs to mask chemical imbalances in the body. I also felt that the article was skewed negative. It's new information, I understand, but, I would have liked to see more attention paid to the emotionally mature practice of empathy, kindness and not getting caught up in escalating emotional situations that meditation teaches you. An excellent benefit of the practice. I agree that meditation teachers should be aware of possible problems and listen carefully, with empathy, to their students.

AJS68

Interesting article. I read the entire piece. My view—I see both the pros and the cons. But having read through all the text, I think the piece could have been half as long and better organized. There's a frustrating level of circulating around the same basic points.

Where's the editor?

Greta

In my opinion, the way to a healthier mind (and body) is through exercise, not meditation. For those who burn out on meditation, try running, jogging, hiking, walking, and I think you may find a better state of mind than withdrawing within your own head.

simsoka

That's assuming that the point of meditation is to "feel better," and it's certainly marketed that way in the west. But the true point of Buddhist meditation is to see the mind and how we create our own distress. This can lead to the ultimate liberation from what causes our

suffering, not just deliver momentary relief. But it's not a quick fix. It's ardency over ages, and not to everyone's taste for sure

Peanutjar

This has been a remarkable set of comments, most revelatory in that the most dedicated (almost perfectly aligned with the most dogmatic) practitioners of any 'spiritual technology' seem to need to insist that their way is The Way. So few have the humility to acknowledge that what they've found and articulated is a description, not a prescription; a path rather than The Path. I could not help but be wryly amused at the trading of "holy" insults and "enlightened" one-upmanship - it reminded me of the comments sections following Evangelical and (especially!) Reformed Christian theological articles, in which the participants turn themselves inside out to believe more correctly than their fellows, on the way to refusing their fellowship and thence to calling them heretics. Of course the most vehement are those who have the most at stake specifically because of their investment (spiritual, intellectual, academic, psychological, financial, emotional, or coercive) in their particular interpretation of "scripture," practice, or gnostic revelation. So much for helping each other toward enlightenment, or peace, or salvation.

mysterybee

Some of us, not just me, see the world's dysfunction as a direct consequence of our being in thrall to a false and calamitous narrative, which holds that we should spend our brief time here like little Pac-Men, on an endless chase to acquire meaningless prizes.

Spiritual meditation, at its core, is the cultivation of a way of being in the world that rejects this narrative. Though the breakthrough, or "unbinding", may come with feelings of relaxation, reduced anxiety, or whatever, that isn't the point. Not everyone breaks through, and some may have weird experiences, but that doesn't devalue the project.

At the risk of going ad hominem, it sounds to me like the author is trying to heal her bad experience by invalidating the entire enterprise, which I think performs a disservice. Maybe meditation teachers don't highlight the "harm" because it's beside the point, not because it is "bad advertising", be that as it may. I cite Eckhardt Tolle (The Power of Now, or A New Earth) for a reference. The author dismisses this view as if it were fringe, but I think it's kind of important!

Morganua

Well. I did not get the idea you did that the author was trying to invalidate the entire 'enterprise' (interesting choice of word in light of the 'enterprise of meditation' in today's capitalist society). Just reread the last paragraph of the article. The author turns back to the Middle Way of the Buddha and says, hmmm, maybe he was on to something. I would add that many of my experiences with Buddhist retreats in our modern world were indeed similar to Evangelical experiences of my teen years. Which is why I forge my own path now, and when do I read 'Buddhist' teachers of meditation now, I simply take what I need and leave the rest.

KashMeOutside

Interesting article. Thanks for offering this. I've dabbled with meditation and found it helpful in very small doses (like 5 minutes). But I also have felt guilty for having every day thought during yoga. There is a lot of judgment built into westernized Eastern ideas.

donnamaria

Thank you. I hated meditation a half an hour twice a day of pure hellish worry condensed. I feel some validation for quitting.

progwoman

As a trained meditation facilitator, I am disappointed that the concept of the sangha receives so little attention here. After all, Buddhism teaches us to value the Buddha, the dharma and the sangha, and I often wonder if someone picking up a book about meditation, following a podcast, or perhaps coached on it at work misses the value of meditating with others with whom you can share your concerns. Over the years (more than a decade), I have found that meditating with others leaves me feeling held and less likely to panic or wander off into scary places.

merganzer

That's your experience. Otherwise you're just politely blaming the victim

Morganua

After decades of meditating and attending retreats with some of the 'greats' Kornfield, Lama Surya Das, Stan Grof...on and on...I have given up on the teachers and the 'sangha.' I go it alone now. And please don't talk about the scandals in Buddhism, both in

the West and in Thailand, Korea, Japan, Myanmar...Enough to make even the Evangelicals and the Catholic priests blush.

pvaughan

I've practiced meditation daily for 53 years. I have not experienced the kind of troubling, negative effects described but neither have I overdone it. Too busy, I guess. Something about moderation perhaps?

StuartB

Britton's book and research seem to parallel similar research done and published this year by Dr. Liz Bucar in her book, "Beyond Wellness". The first part of that book is all about "meditation sickness"...

roboandrew

"The point of meditation was never merely to relax or just 'clear your mind' but to wholly rearrange one's relationship to one's thoughts. This might make sense for a Buddhist monk pursuing the great unbinding, but not for a random Brooklynite who just wants to be more productive at work."

You're not going to get any more enlightened trying to be more productive. If you're using meditation to get something or avoid something, stop. That's not what it's for. It's for changing your relationship to your thoughts, and if you don't want to, don't do it.

You're making two big mistakes: first, your study samples are too small and you're not controlling for enough variables. We have no business determining society-wide patterns from the data of less than a hundred individuals. Your second mistake is thinking of meditation as a means to an end. It's classic Western thinking: the journey doesn't matter at all, it's the destination.

Donnybrook

I have practiced mindful meditation for a few years, but just for periods of 20-30 minutes per day, and have never experienced extended multi-hour meditation or a retreat. My experience has been almost entirely positive, but I can appreciate how some might

experience problems. For me, mindfulness meditation brings to the conscious foreground thoughts, emotions, and somatic feelings. It is how one deals with those experiencing that, to me, helps define the practice, and having some guidance from experienced teachers through study has helped me. I found that reading Pema Chodron's book, *After Things Fall Apart*, gave me a good background. The book references mediation as the tool to bring forward and meet these thoughts and experiences, rather than an end to itself.

I also found that setting intentions, and incorporating Self-Compassion, brought a warm, humanizing, and positive quality to the meditation.

MamaSquid

Well as a Buddhist I've got to say that's the challenge. How do you know you need to accept what's coming up and when something is really wrong and you need to stop? I've pushed myself too hard before, fortunately not with severe side effects, but it's hard to know when you've crossed the line. Even harder, I think, for a teacher to know.

jseadee

In the late 70s I (age 23) I signed up for the meditation program which was then the only one around, famous and trademarked. Took the course (expensive) and took seriously the mantra-assigning ceremony and exhortation to never repeat the sound aloud to anyone. I followed the 2X daily instruction, everything I was advised to do and thought it was ok. By the end of the first week, something was amiss. I became forgetful, losing things, forgetting where I was and why at several points each day. And spaced-out. Then frightened with the thought I was losing my mind (many of the symptoms of depersonalization.) The instructors at the program met with me several times and always the responses were flat-out denials that meditation, done properly, could result in these issues. They seemed convinced that I was lying about having no psychiatric issues, and kept telling me to meditate a bit longer and then, more often. The more I did, though, the worse these symptoms got. I was so humiliated by the experience, that I quit after two months. And gradually, over several weeks, I was fully present and functioning again. I knew with certainty that the meditation program was the sole source of the issues, and never looked back. And have never had any of those problems in the 45 years since. Thank you Ms Kazan for shedding light on the dark side of mindfulness. For many of us--and for who-knows-what reasons-- it can be a living nightmare.

ClarenceGideon

TM is not mindfulness. Not even close.

fitzearl1953

everything in moderation. I'm a scatter-brain. I do TM because it helps settle my mind and helps me focus. I've done it intermittently for over 50 years. Recently, I've been doing TM 15-20 minutes, 3-5 times a week. It's not like taking ambien or zanax or any other drug. It does not, per se, make me relax or go to sleep. It lets me clear the "crap" out, feel more present and puts those voices in my head to sleep. When they go to sleep, I am more able to focus and get stuff done. That makes it easier for me to sleep.

hoppy1166

How can you take a 'study' of only 26 people and give it national attention?! A tiny sample of 26 individuals is not scientific.

Meditation is a great tool to quiet the mind and reduce stress hormones. In this society of constant stimulus it is needed more than ever. Shame on The Atlantic management for allowing this to publish.

brocktm22

Thank you for bringing this to light, but the title is a little misleading. The author is speaking about the hidden side effects of meditation, not mindfulness.

4kindness

Yes. The title needs to be changed to The Dark Side of Meditation. It does a disservice to mindfulness.

apostle11

I became skeptical of the mindfulness industrial complex by observing the grifter Sam Harris. You can be a mindful meditating fascist.

BillC.

Yep. Sam Harris is a scary Zionist.

DonnaGee

A Zionist is a person who believes that the Jewish people have a right to live and self-determine in our indigenous homeland.

I don't know who Sam Harris is, but there is nothing wrong with being a Zionist.

destinyrae_99

In 2004-2005 I was part of a female only research study at the VA outpatient PTSD clinic to research if meditation could reduce cortisol levels. Short answer, yes. Meditation saved my life, as I was on the short bus to suicide. YMMV

Nimetu

What a great article. I'm a long time meditator and a former scientist, and this research is really interesting and critical. One of the key aspects of insight meditation is inquiry into how our minds work and this is absolutely part of it. Although I've never encountered any of these effects, the somewhat detached sense where many quotidian concerns become less important seem akin to these stories and frankly the neurophysiology of what's going on is very important to understand. Where there are negative effects, we should understand them. That's a huge contribution to the practice of mindfulness

I will say that meditation is just one tool in the Buddhist toolkit and that tool kit itself is one of eight different practices, along side speech, understanding, livelihood, etc and THAT set of eight is one of the four noble truths: 1) Suffering exists. 2) Much arises from wanting/attachment, 3) letting go of attachment alleviates suffering, and 4) those eight practices are good for that letting go business. In fact, that dissociation sounds like too much letting go. That tracks

I understand the defensiveness because anything non-Christian or traditional gets attacked, but really we need to *ahem* be less attached to the idea that mindfulness is the one size fits all solution. That attachment, well, will give rise to suffering when we feel hurt by the suggestion it is otherwise.

Yes, Buddha would have understood that.

LilithFlux

100% to the neurophysiology. Without repeating my above comment, I tried meditation to deal with essentially brain chemistry malfunction and had a terrible experience, akin to what many people find with psychedelic substances. For whatever reason though, psychedelic drugs-just dabbling, infrequent use- along with talking through my behavior and emotional issues with my husband (then boyfriend) was extremely helpful with absolutely no negative side effects. So it's almost like, for me, meditation was like the "bad trips" so many people encounter, but psychedelics had a positive effect on my mental health.

Brains are weird lol.

Nim

(Edited)

Years ago, I started using an at home neurofeedback device. At first I used it to boost my theta waves as I wanted to experience deeper meditative states. But I started feeling depressed instead. Fortunately, I had taken a neurofeedback training where they mentioned that increasing theta waves in someone with too much already could trigger depression. So I switched to training beta waves, which woke up my brain dramatically. I was able to do twice as much mental work in half the time.

It's possible that something like this is happening for the people who experience negative effects. If someone has an excess of alpha and theta waves, which is typical of depression and ADHD, then a practice that increases alpha + theta waves could be counter-productive. In contrast someone with too much beta would possibly benefit.

It could be helpful to study the brain activity of meditators to check for patterns of brainwave frequency and the results of meditation. You don't give insulin to someone who is not diabetic. We may still be discovering what "meditation" as "medication" is appropriate for different people with different baseline brain states.

In the meantime, there are many, many different forms of meditation and also other spiritual practices. One approach is to try a wide variety of practices while tracking very carefully which practices are actually helpful. This is the approach used by this app:

<https://fundamentalwellbeing.foundation/the-app/>

(I am not affiliated with them)

DonnaGee

This is very helpful info; thanks

PapaTom

It was gratifying to have waded through all the previous graphs to finally arrive at the last one about "middle way", which my favorite spiritual teacher called "the golden mean" and that last graph was what I had been looking for to have endured the trek through the jungle it took to get there. It's very common for seekers to overlook that one one of the Buddha's teachings; presumably as not exciting enough.

Using meditation as a means of self improvement has always seemed ironic and a bogus endeavor. I guess there may be infinite ways for us to delude ourselves and athletic meditation-striving is definitely one of them.

katrei

Going back to my training as a medieval historian -- meditation happens / has happened in Christianity as well. There are huge parallels across the religions that few acknowledge. And the side effects described here, yeah, they exist among medieval Christian mystics / monastics, as well.

LilithFlux

I'd made a comment above and didn't go into this, but I agree. I mentioned about needing to do something repetitive with my hands while meditating, such as weeding or washing dishes. I'm also a weirdo that enjoys highway driving, especially at night, for the same reason. But just "sitting" and meditating I find excruciating and counterproductive.

It seems like Christian monks had a similar take as mine, possibly extrapolating out to advice to parishioners of industriousness and the old protestant work ethic.

doug493

I was most struck by this sentence - "This surprised me because I'm bad at meditating, so I would spend entire 45-minute sessions reviewing my to-do list, my worries, and other earthly matters." In my practice the author would be a star meditator. My practice goal is to deal with those sorts of earthly matters, how we feel, what we feel, rather than pushing them aside. This means that a meditation session might not always be pleasant because we have sat in the muck of our feelings and worries for twenty minutes. But what we do find is that after meditating we feel clearer and more able to deal with the world.

As a meditator and meditation coach, I'm happy to see this article, though I fear that all forms of meditation might be tarnished by the article's placing of anything meditation into the mindfulness / Buddhist basket. Most classical meditation practices have transcendence as their goal and this often requires a full disassociation with this world, with our minds, with our senses, and with our bodies. But meditation doesn't have to be about transcendence. It can be about being happier and better able to deal with the world we live in. Mindfulness is a narrowing, a shutting down, and I prefer to think of meditation as expansion, as a flowering, an opening to the world and all of its wonders.

ancr

Anyone familiar with the story of The Beatles' song "Dear Prudence" is aware of the dark side of meditating too much at a retreat

Swimmer1963

Two observations:

The first is that I am a chronic pain sufferer due to Rheumatoid Arthritis and other issues. My meditation experience with an instructor specifically told me to practice body scan meditation (Yoga Nidra) to visualize the pain leaving my body. It never worked so I gave up - apparently that was the right thing to do!

My second comment, and one I'd appreciate the author addressing, is that among those I know who are devoted meditators, there are several who lack empathy and have, to at least some degree, narcissistic tendencies. I'm curious whether Britton and her colleagues have seen this in their studies.

crossroads

It's very important to balance the potential harms of meditation against their benefits. I did my first 10-day retreat about 35 years ago and ended up doing a runner about three quarters of the way through it. Because I saw a very small percentage of the people having painful psychotic episodes. They were simply told it was part of the practice and to persevere. "These things come up" was the phrase. In fact, they couldn't just get up and leave because they'd made a commitment to stay for the 10 days. Which is why I ran. And I stress it was just a handful of folk. This particular take on meditation is still highly popular among young westerners. I don't know if it still has this coercive element about participation.

Since that time, I've done less intensive mindfulness retreats where the motivation and mental health of practitioners is always checked carefully, and where people experiencing distress are encouraged to leave.

I've stopped doing the retreats because I usually go through a period of depression afterwards, regardless of the 'insights' and I now associate this with the western adoption of the methods. I don't dispute that in the right context intensive mindfulness and insight meditation practice is not a valid Buddhist path. But I now don't feel dipping in and out of it as I did and a lot of westerners do is the correct path. And I'm not going to join monastic life, in this life anyway.

wollsahng

dear friends,

everyone will get 'there' eventually. It's a serious business this journey towards true- self discovery. Yes, there are many risks. But everyone who is 'living' is already 'dead', so there's really nothing to lose. There really is a great treasure to unearth. Don't give up. But also, seek out authentic teachers from the religious traditions.

above all, you know yourself best, what you can tolerate, and what is just too much for right now. Take care, everyone.

antonio_m

Oh, Ms. Kazan. Pkease do not read the comments. But if you do, here is some support, excellent article!

Salty

As I was reading I was thinking that this is one of so many things that humans simply take to unnecessary extremes (the perennial example being dieting). I was therefore very happy to find the concluding paragraph with Buddha's advice against extremes.

SnowyOwl22

(Edited)

It sounds like the people who are so defensive of meditation's benefits are missing a significant point... Meditation is overwhelmingly considered to be a positive thing, and the people who have adverse reactions need to be heard too. Just like talking about the side effects of a medication is important for the patient who is told their experience isn't ok, and isn't normal, and this medication isn't for them even though it helps many.

I found this fascinating partly because my coworkers and I have a long running joke about how much I hate breathing exercises. Zoom meditation became a big thing during the Covid days, when schools were rather haphazardly trying to help us teachers with our mental health in a tough time. I'd mute and turn off my camera for those sessions, because there are few things more stressful to me than focusing on my breathing. I begin overthinking - am I breathing too fast? Too slow? Am I getting enough air? All I want to do is go back to the automatic process of in and out without conscious thought. We always found it funny that a practice that relaxed most people seemed to send me spiraling.

MamaSquid

(Edited)

First, I am a Zen Buddhist. I'm currently doing 15 minutes a day, the sweet spot is probably 30. My experience has been mostly very positive, but I find it's terrible when you're having PTSD symptoms - and the problem is that a lot of therapy for PTSD integrates mindfulness in a way that I think is really careless and bad. I find it more distressing and invasive than helpful. Whenever I have protested it's treated as a sign that I just need more healing because I'm "uncomfortable being in my body."

Paradoxically, last year I went through a spate of intensive meditation that seemed to have dialed my PTSD symptoms down to sub-clinical. Apparently this is permanent. After 20+ years of moderate symptoms I no longer have PTSD. I can't explain it, and there's the rub - we don't really understand how this works, so we've got to be careful. Britton is doing good work, because this isn't for everyone, and even for the people it's for, it's not always the right time. Fortunately there are a lot of active ways to engage in the present other than sitting still for hours. I'm disappointed meditation teachers (and therapists!) in general are not taking this more seriously. Severe effects may be rare, but they are obviously happening, and measures need to be taken to watch for signs and be prepared to help someone stop when they need to.

Dwilde

I have a more accurate subhed for this piece, if the editors want to use it. "People seeking ways of disrupting their normal lives freak out when meditation disrupts their normal lives."

Dudleycreek

Thank you for this article. I watched someone very close to me, a life long vipassna style meditator, up to three months at a time become paranoid and delusional, becoming paranoid about our relationship which was subsequently severed, there was no reasoning with her, it was devastating and I don't believe she understood she was in a deep imbalance in her mind.

jimpangborn

"Maybe he was onto something," indeed. I'm a longtime Zen practitioner, about 90 minutes of meditation a day, every day, for decades now. I've experienced many of these drawbacks but keep at it: the pluses outweigh the minuses, for me, by far. And I'm among the ones who keep mum about this dark side, for the usual reason--let's not scare off the

customers. Sorry to hear of the hostile responses to Britton's work, though. Some people don't preach what they supposedly practice.

We know these things are true. Meditation sickness has been a known thing for several centuries. The sleep problem typically gets passed off as if it were nothing, but I work constantly to counteract it. Naturally prone to the bipolar condition, I have to monitor my mood intently to keep my feet on the ground. Where I practice, we insist that the way to do this thing safely is in a group, under the guidance of a well-credentialed teacher, with regular face-to-face meetings. Would that the shucksters would follow suit.

sjbrott

A sad commentary for humility.

LilithFlux

(Edited)

It's interesting for my experience that the researcher had episodes of dissociation and depersonalization, similar to potential effects of psychedelic substances, after long stints of meditation. In my teenage years I had severe depression, anxiety and PTSD with a suicide attempt.

Several thoughts: I was put on a first generation antidepressant and had episodes of what I would categorize as significant dissociation and depersonalization, lasting hours. Not helpful for suicidal ideation. I also tried acupuncture and meditation. Interestingly, with both I experienced mild dissociation but not depersonalization, along with significant irritability.

When I met my husband, I began dabbling in psychedelics. He has an innate 'healer' quality. It sounds crazy, but he unknowingly did CBT on me during our casual 'trips' and that was more effective than anything in alleviating the worst of my symptoms. Later in life, after further attempts with antidepressants, I found a more drug forward psychiatrist who had done clinical studies, who prescribed antipsychotics off label instead of antidepressants. Those are what have fully "cured" me.

I find doing repetitive activity, specifically just with my hands, allows my mind to enter a meditative state that's rejuvenating, and I think that may be key for these people having negative effects. As I mentioned, for myself, I found trying to "sit" and meditate caused me not only irritability but also skin crawling agitation.

Chas69

It's hard to distill a fairly comprehensive article like this down to a comment that expresses what you think about it. A couple of things come to mind. One is that meditation and Eastern spiritual practices have been commodified by western practitioners and criticism becomes threatening to their economic interests, something best expressed in the article by the following, "Well, it's not good advertising" and the other is our tendency to turn everything we do into a type of religion with all its defensive and reactionary rhetoric to anything that challenges the narrative. Oh and our pathological needs to take even the simplest of things to extremes. Meditation like medication is not a panacea to the challenges of modernity. We simply weren't built for the amount of stimuli we are exposed to daily, neither meditation or medication can fix that, finding a balance is helpful but for gods sake don't turn that into a religious practice either.

ChristopherThomasWood

All good things will be attempted to be monetized. Thankfully, Eastern thought and practices haven't gone the route of faux-Christianity of Evangelical Mega-churches (come for the entertainment stay for the Gospel of Wealth)

4kindness

Just breathe and be kind in whatever you are doing. The rest is commentary.

isla

Doing extreme consciousness exercise alone in a room, whether in a studio apartment starring at the wall or on a retreat, where no eye contact or conversation is permitted, can lead to profound alienation. If one is ambitious and sees spiritual practice as an athletic competition, that alienation can quickly become grandiosity.

The antidote to this is what is called Metta practice, or loving kindness. It's a necessary antidote to pure concentration and was completely ignored in this article. Buddhism in the east is taught within a framework of moral responsibility and a social contract which requires helping others. It came to America mostly stripped of those burdens and offered as a way to get high.

I went on my first 7-day retreat during a time of grief and terrifying depression, and mindfulness practice truly rescued me. 30 years later I entered pandemic solitudes dealing with the traumas of death and suicide by my last parent, and found meditation immolating: there was no Sangha, there was just the Internet and Facebook and facemasks and a globe that was also grieving. When love and human connection are missing, the attempt to practice pure concentration can easily amplify the negatives.

After the many experiences I have had in a lifetime of seeking I would say my meditation practice is this: connect with the breath, connect with the body, connect with love, connect with others, and be at peace in the world. The keyword is connection, not detachment.

merganzer

Thanks, brilliant words. For myself, simple breathing meditation helps me get some control, at least respite, from an overactive imagination that is in a large degree due to a lonely life

WillowCFraser

This article serves to remind us all that anything done to an extreme can be harmful. The author's meditations became obsessive and harmful.

All things in moderation.

SkeeterDD

I became aware of Britton when she was a guest on the Sam Harris podcast. Sam was prattling on about how there is no self or free will when she stated "Well I'm having a

discussion with someone Sam.". My own experience with meditation was quite positive until I tried the Waking Up App with Sams concentration on achieving a state of "headlessness". It was a waste of time. Meditation can stop self destructive rumination but it needs to be approached with gratitude and hope rather than emptiness and nihilism.

jh64

(Edited)

The headlessness stuff on Waking Up is irritating but there are a lot of great meditation series on Waking Up that don't deal with that, such as the Jayasara, Jitindriya, Adyashanti and Vidamilya Burch series. And as you note Harris does feature a conversation with Britton and Lindahl on the app about the downsides of meditation which he agreed with. But these downsides affect a small percentage of people who try meditation.

cle

(Edited)

This is a clumsily written article. Meditation can take many forms, just like physical exercise. Before engaging in any meditation practice, make sure you know what you're doing. To understand basic Buddhist meditation for the beginner, consult beginning books by Thich Nhat Hanh , Pema Chodron or Anam Thubten. There seems to be confusion about the length of meditative sessions directly relating to outcome. This is not so. Some meditations can be done standing in line at the grocery store and can be of tremendous benefit. Other meditations are of longer length. One should have a good teacher helping to meditate properly. One shouldn't run a marathon without training up for it.

merganzer

Blame the victims

joannasabina

Whose's victim?

randoperson

A lot of the comments ignore the fact that Buddhist texts quote The Buddha as saying that meditation can lead to demonic states. Presumably, this means with or without a guide, within or without the structure of a "proper" Buddhist practice.

gmdca

The bottom line here in case you don't want to read this entire lengthy article: too much of anything is a bad idea and find your own peace.

oldshewolf

Like anything, meditation is useful for some, and not so for others. I have a extremely active mind, and found meditation arduous. Movement such as walking, hiking, or dance, is my preferred method of letting go and relaxing. I call it moving meditation. Music and song are also relaxing. I need to engage, not just sit there.

wjohnston

This article has the wrong title. It is about the dark sides of meditation, not of mindfulness. As one of the great Buddhist masters of the twentieth century, Dipa Ma, noted, "The whole path of mindfulness is this: Whatever you are doing, be aware of it."

Whaea

Yes, I found that puzzling too. Simple mindfulness, being aware of what my body is doing instead of being lost in a train of thought, has always been a positive for me. It's acted as a circuit breaker for unpleasant thoughts.

joshg8

When my teacher's taoist master asked him why he wanted to study meditation he replied "I want to know who I am." The master laughed and said "are you sure?" Meditation can force you to confront your own demons, but the best schools of meditation teach you how to release and resolve those feelings and move on.

Dylanlelapincool

Interesting stuff. The main takeaway for me is the not earth-shattering one that moderation and balance are crucial in this as in everything. And while supporting evidence from other cultures is cited here, I do wonder if the rather extreme character of so much of US culture makes Americans particularly prone to this. Britton herself seems

to have a very extreme personality, lurching from ridiculous over-commitment to meditation in her own life (no wonder it had negative effects!) to being a central figure in highlighting those negative effects. I met so many people like that in some aspect of their life when I lived in the US. There's some truth in the stereotype of the coke-head sex addict turned evangelical Christian and so on. Even the characterisation of PhD study here, as some sort of sentence to misery with the hope of reward, echoes that extremism (I did a PhD in the US, and never felt that way about it. Some of my fellow students did - but if it makes you miserable, why do it?). No wonder US politics are so messed up.....

CriticalThinker10

Wonderful article. The reaction of her mentor and others sounded a little cult-like.

That said, I've meditated for close to 50 years but I don't do it every day and I certainly don't do it for 4 hours! More like 20 minutes couple of times a month. And I change up the activity - breath monitoring, focusing and body scanning. Never in the same session. And there are many, many times that I fall asleep and have a nice little nap.

It just sounds like an industry now that is competitive and prescriptive and controlling. I never did a retreat or read multiple books.

There is a lot to the idea of a "middle way". I think that is key.

Paperdoll3

Like many good things, some people turn them into businesses and some others then turn them into rackets.

Songcrafterliz

Um, hello...Buddhism has THREE pillars: Buddha, dharma and sangha. To put it succinctly if not completely, Buddha refers to getting in touch with one's own "Buddha nature" which is generally what meditation is about. Dharma refers to the teachings of Buddhism. And sangha is the supportive community of other practitioners.

These three pillars are also called the three "jewels" of Buddhism, but in my own practice I like to think of them as the legs of a three-legged stool. Monastic practitioners may choose to go deeply into meditation while having little connection to the larger community, but most of us practitioners are "householders" — yes, that's actually what

we're called! — and there's no reason for us to “specialize” in meditation at the expense of dharma — and especially sangha! Community is very important to me, and I couldn't practice without it!

Some householders meditate a lot and others do not, just as some non-monastic Christians pray frequently and others less so. That's much less important than having a balanced practice that works for the individual. Of course meditation alone fails for most people, for the same reason that sitting on a one-legged stool sends one toppling onto the floor!

LauriD

So well put! I like the three-legged stool analogy.

lizpagan

Whoah. I need to look into this more. After consistently meditating for several years (even tho I felt I wasn't any “good” at it) and attending a few Zen sesshins, I had a prolonged period of the worst anxiety I'd had in my life. I stopped meditating, switched meds, and now I'm pretty much on an even keel. Coincidnce? This definitely deserves more research.

denfield

Did I just read about halfway through this extremely long article without once seeing a single reference to the amount of time people were spending meditating? Is this article seriously trying to imply that the typical 1 to 5 minute meditation after lunch to relax and focus is going to cause deep psychosis? Seems more like Clickbait than a serious discussion.

BoxingFluffy

Thank you for your comment. After I had a traumatic experience, a therapist pointed me to Andy Puddicombe's app Headspace, which provides 10-minute guided meditations. Ten years later, I am still using guided meditations every morning. I'm not a Buddhist, I've never been to a meditation retreat, but my ten minutes of stillness help me calm my monkey mind to begin the day.

SillyGirl

The number of people here with profound survivorship bias is astounding. Saying you have worked through the shadow side and come out just fine is exactly saying to the people who haven't "You're just doing it wrong." Bully for you that you didn't experience psychosis. Maybe stop patting yourself on the back for avoiding what was unavoidable for others.

League_of_Shadows

As with most westerners approach to what I call “spiritual tourism”, we take a colonialists view of deeply rooted ancient practices and simply extract the “good parts” without the other elements of the full tradition to complete the practice (similar to yoga). These are entire systems with movement/exercise, diet, stories, nature immersion, teachers and sangha(community). One can’t simply pick and choose to consume one ingredient of the recipe; you need the full recipe to be nourished.

Whaea

There speaks a purist. I do appreciate what you are saying, but the truth is that sometimes a simple adoption of a small practice can be an asset in one's life, without adopting a whole philosophical and culture package.

scubasteve1972

As a fairly experienced meditator and health care professional who treats a lot of psychiatric disorders, I was bothered by the clear bias in this article. This is a nuanced topic with very many facets, and to lump all meditation and even all mindfulness practices together and claim causation when you've mainly demonstrated strong correlation is a little reckless. At the same time, the author and the subject raise a lot of valid points about "the mindfulness movement" as it has gathered steam and attention over the years. The idea that it is completely harmless, and that it's a panacea that we should all be taking for every affliction is simply wrong. So, I thank the author for shining a light on that prevalent belief in our current health and wellness culture.

Candecast

As usual western thought takes an eastern practice, throws a lot of capitalistic ideas at it and turns it into something it was never intended to be. Meditation isn't a self-help or self-improvement practice, it was never meant to be that. If you meditate right before you go to bed and you don't fall asleep, guess what; you're not tired! It's not about results, it's about awareness.

merganzer

I guess you didn't read the article

Internationaleconomist

Thanks to Olga Khazan for an excellent article. Congratulations to Willoughby Britton on her courageous and principled pursuit of the truth despite the pressures to conform. Speaking from personal experience, and after much study of Buddhist and Hindu doctrines, practices, beliefs, and meditative practices over decades, and exposure to some schools in America of breath control and mindfulness, as well as an in-depth background in psychoanalysis, psychology, and neuroscience, I would like to endorse the warning of the risks of meditation and focusing exclusively on the present, the dangers of concepts such as "no self" and the attempt to transcend normal human experiences and emotions to reach an "eternal sunshine" of tranquility. The iconic slogan of the United Negro College Fund is: "A mind is a terrible thing to waste." Those who consider meditation just a harmless and probably beneficial add-on like yoga practice or Pilates should think again. Minds are tampered with at risk, sometimes serious risk. Disassociation and depression are dangerous; psychotic states may be uncommon, but can be produced by puttering around with apparently innocuous bootstrapping or following the training of so many books and videos and teachers of mindfulness. Above all, do no harm, as the Hippocratic oath requires - least of all in attempts to treat your own psychic or emotional distress. By all means, keep an open mind, but not to "karma cola" in all its manifestations.

Stargate

The subjects of this article seem to be taking meditation to an extreme. Most people don't have time to meditate for 3 hours per day.

Jung told a story of one of his students who just seemed too normal. Jung pushed the student to uncover his neuroses. Instead the student uncovered a psychosis. Maybe heavy meditation is uncovering preexisting mental illness.

Casual meditators like me benefit from meditating to reduce stress and avoiding becoming consumed

larry_silvestri

"All that is very well," answered Candide, "but let us cultivate our garden."

Streetdog

Only to be reminded by Master Pangloss, " This is the best of all possible worlds!"

DonnaGee

Oh, no. We are definitely on the stupid timeline. There was a glitch in the matrix, a disturbance in the force..

Somebodyouthere

Fascinating article that resonates with me -- but for a 'same same but different' aspiration than mindfulness - namely, yoga. When my job assigned me to India for 4 years one of my big goals was to finally start/learn yoga. Despite having the "best teachers", I never hurt so bad in my life! I decided to give it 6 months (all the classmates advised me not to stop) - but at the end of 6 months, I still hurt and called it quits. I've been somewhat ashamed ever since. Until now.

UsernameUsernameUsername

Some of these findings fit with my experience, namely, how activating meditation is for me at this point in my life. This wasn't always the case, but my last round of meditation practice ruined my sleep. This confused me, but I paid attention and stopped formal meditation. I've meditated on and off for over 25 years and it's been helpful at times, but I have learned to practice mindfulness in other ways: doing the dishes, walking the dog, or just being quiet. Also, in the readings that I've done over the years I've come to the conclusion that certain Buddhist schools are just as harmful and reliant on theism as certain types of Christianity. I appreciate Stephen Batchelor's work in secular Buddhism for this reason.

AHF

(Edited)

Different types of meditation are different. This framing seems as useful as saying "food is good for you" (or bad) without naming the food in question. Maybe I should add I've been meditating daily for 52 years.

Lashena

This article made me feel both angry and vindicated. When I hit puberty, I started manifesting my mother's and grandmother's Postural Orthostatic Tachycardia Syndrome and fibromyalgia. Basically my autonomic nervous system is broken. I also had at that time undiagnosed ADHD and endometriosis. Obviously, having multiple invisible illnesses and slowly transitioning from honor student to a "lazy" person and a "liar" triggered serious depression. But that type of depression can't really be helped by antidepressants (learned that the hard way) since it isn't a chemical imbalance. They CAUSED chemical imbalance. I can't tell you how many times I was told by doctor after doctor to try meditation. Sitting alone with my intrusive thoughts, my racing heart from being upright, and the avalanche of pain I work really hard to distract myself from (that most doctors then didn't even believe I had). Only for them to, from my perspective, garble freaking nonsense at me. There was a period of several years where I stopped mentioning my depression at all to new doctors. They'd get so distracted by it that all meaningful efforts to address what I *knew* to be the underlying cause stopped and I'd have to start over with someone new. I know meditation is really great for some people. I know it's really dangerous to me. I'm angry that meditation pushers are so in denial/ignorant of the risks. No one thing is good for every single person.

boringalice

(Edited)

Agreed! Disclosures prior to surgery routinely state medicine is not an exact science. I have found that a little of this and some of that with a pinch of another thing is usually the therapy that helps me. I try to work on my mind and my body with a selection of treatments that I customize for my needs. There is no one thing that will restore everyone in the same way.

davidwrathall

A clinical therapist's point of view: new meditators may be becoming newly connected to and aware of themselves, their bodies, and their deeper motivations --for the first time! Especially if a meditator has experienced adverse childhood events or traumas that they currently carry with them all the time, they may need to address those injuries before continuing --and that is the point. Awakening, discovery. Many people similarly begin therapy with the mistaken goal of feeling better about the life they have (not realizing that in order to feel better they'll need to change their lives). Likewise, meditation isn't just a neutral practice: it points you towards the difficult homework that you may need to do outside of meditation.

Additionally, upon awakening no Bodhisatva ever discovered, "oh, capitalism works very well for me and the planet." One might awaken to find that there are many things wrong with our ways of living with each other and Nature.

Ketu

Overall this is a balanced article on the practice of meditating but it emphasized for me the hazards of meditating without any grounding in its spiritual basis. Buddha developed these practices in his quest to seek answers to the mystery of life and suffering.

Meditation is a tool to gain wisdom and insight, not a crutch to get through the day. Find a genuine, respected, and wise teacher that can guide you along the path. There are technical aspects of meditating, but without an experienced and wise teacher, the spiritual and wisdom aspect, the other side of the coin will remain missing.

dhammadoc

What gets no mention here is “why some and not others?” Meditation in its usual form is not therapy. At the same time the practice can surface underlying feelings about self and the world which, if explored wisely with a qualified therapist, can lead to the relief of much suffering.

AndroidWK

About a 5th of Americans meditate regularly? 10% of all meditators had negative experiences lasting over a month? These numbers boggle the mind. Truly unbelievable. And a solid red flag to anyone too willing to believe an article that is capable of pointing out that meditations studies are often paid for by invested parties, but sees no issue in its main subject selling treatment for an ailment she essentially invented.

An interesting piece of scientific fiction.

dms763153

This has been an interesting article to ponder. I have studied Buddhist texts and meditated for the past 30 years. It has been a positive experience for me. It never occurred to me that it might go so far as to create a psychotic break in someone. I think it says more about how meditation is framed and sold in the West as a wellness cure than it does the tool itself. Buddhism is based on the idea that our clinging creates suffering. Meditation allows a person to sit with their unique clinging to observe how this dynamic plays out for them. Doing so, over time, never erases the urge to cling but it loosens it, making it more workable. It's like a jack in a car: carrying one around can't insulate you from flat tires but it's helpful when you get one. As soon as meditation is framed as a solution that insulates you from suffering it ironically creates the very clinging that can lead to more of it.

aecljm

This is a fascinating article, and as I read it, I tried to keep two things in mind. One was that the downsides of meditation for some people shouldn't lead us to downplay the benefits for most people, and vice versa. The other was to keep Britton's rich personal story from affecting my perception of her research results. The brain is such an amazing, sensitive, and still-mysterious thing that negative impacts from meditation seem neurologically plausible.

I don't meditate, but I do something adjacent to it when I run long distances. Many who do this share similar mental health motivations with meditators. I can identify with Ms. Khazan's self-assessment of her own personality. Her description of meditators who learn to observe and tolerate discomfort in pursuit of long-term growth would be familiar to any ultrarunner. Now I'm curious if Britton's findings might apply more broadly to other activities beyond meditation.

gaylefromtexas

Anything to excess.

eldon

This is a fun essay. I practice mindfulness when I focus on breathing while I'm skiing steep terrain or riding my mountain bike down or up a challenging single track among other things. Mindfulness is great when I need to focus on a single task. I've never been able to sit still for even 15 minutes and focus solely on my breathing or how each part of

my body feels. I like mindfulness and focusing on the moment and I think it's a good thing as long as it fulfills a purpose for me other than just sitting around.

Imp57

While I'm not surprised that there's the possibility of negative reactions to meditation practice, what the article doesn't fully explore is the important distinction between "causation" and "correlation" or association. Just because some individuals have negative experiences, it doesn't mean that the meditation practice caused them. Causation requires explicitly showing processes and mechanisms through which meditation results in the adverse reaction. Correlation/association can happen without meditation "causing" it but possibly due to another factor that connects meditation and the adverse reaction: for example, temperament, early life adversity, other psychological factors (note I didn't say psychopathological factors), even epigenetics. In typical science, these factors are controlled for before concluding that something "causes" something else.

So I'm not surprised that some meditators have negative experiences; I'd be surprised if they didn't! Anything...everything...could be associated with unintended consequences. But it doesn't mean that there's a causal relationship.

BNS

author does state that the research couldn't definitively prove causality. but yeah it was a quick side comment.

cpayne59

This is true. Of course the same may be said about the benefits.

dopderbeck

The article refers to "studies" but all I see referenced are some qualitative surveys of small sample sizes. As to those, it seems like about 10% of people report serious adverse experiences. None of this seems particularly earth shattering or beyond the noise we might expect.

joannasabina

For perhaps the first time since I've subscribed to The Atlantic, I've read an article that shouldn't have made it past the editorial board. The text is a collection of dangerous stereotypes that say more about the author and her subject than about the subject. Please correct yourselves.

wsparry

I've been to 6 ten-day silent meditation retreats, and they can be intense. But i've also been introduced to many people from southeast asia at these retreats, and attending these types of silent meditation retreats is very normal for them. I've attributed the distress from meditating to the western culture that is so competitive where we focus on striving to advance and to be the best at everything, which is completely counter to using meditation to find equanimity, you start asking the question, what am I striving for? everything is fine the way it is. So I think there is a problem with Westerners meditating but it's not meditation, it's a problem of Western culture.

After attending a few ten day retreats, i retired from my career because I just couldn't do the competitive corporate america thing anymore. i was lucky in that I was in my sixties and had enough money to do that. But the meditation retreats certainly raised the issue with me as to what compromises I was making in life I had given up myself and my integrity striving for a better income and a better home. the meditation retreats did what it was supposed to do, which was to make me realize what's important in life, to find my true self again, and stop chasing some american dream, which is what really brings us to anxiety and depression. the subject of this article did what we do in American culture, which is not to find equanimity, but to go to the extremes: if a little is good, a lot must be great

Magician

Art, music, theater, friendships, reaching out to help people, learning new things, exercising at the gym, and a bit of work...

All these things focus the brain in a way that saves me from my own despair over uncertainty. Meditation never did any of that for me; it only irritated me.

betterlate

I'm reminded of the admonition when you hear hoofbeats, think horses. Plenty of red flags in the psychologist's life to suggest mental health was a concern. Meditating for hours on end is also pretty concerning. To avoid what? Not surprising that people whose contact with reality may be somewhat tenuous are drawn to long periods of self absorption.

d_pauleen

What motivates the meditator is the key.

CapeChris

There's a Buddhist story about a about a sitar player who was discouraged with his meditation practice and went to the Buddha to ask for instruction.

"What happens when you tune your instrument too tightly?" the Buddha asked.

"The strings break," the musician replied.

"And what happens when you string it too loosely?"

"When it's too loose, no sound comes out," the musician answered. "The string that produces a tuneful sound is not too tight and not too loose."

"That," said the Buddha, "is how to practice: not too tight and not too loose."

pete_ap_kline

I did a lot of meditation in India and Sri Lanka when I was young —probably too young; I'm 78 now. At that time it was a given that intense meditation reduced the need for sleep. The Indian and Sri Lankan teachers who taught me did not attempt to charge for their teachings or put any pressure on me to join a cult of any kind—although some Westerners tended to turn their teachers into gurus. I met Jack Kornfield and Joseph Goldstein, who were studying with the same teacher at some retreats in India. After much practice, including a retreat alone in a forest monastery guided by a monk I had great respect for, I concluded that Vipassana was not a hobby, but an all-or-nothing thing. I left with a profound respect for the dhamma that has never left me. Later, while working with bankers, I found mindfulness teaching everywhere. Mindfulness has even been taught at Davos, the World Economic Forum—it seems the super-wealthy not only want to own the world, but they also want to be super-fit and attain Nirvana into the bargain. The

growing commercialisation of the practice has struck me as outright pretentious, vain and cynical.

dragonfly

(Edited)

What will improve my sleep tonight is this article. I read it at 12:30 am after my shift and found it to seem interminable. One can be mindful without meditating. Perhaps the article should have been called, "The Dark Side of Meditation" instead. I've meditated before and never had adverse effects. But, I was never an extreme meditator. Anything taken to extremes can potentially be a cause of deleterious outcomes. Like green tea may be considered healthy, but if I drink an extreme 10 gallons of it in a day then I would probably die. Also, how can they rule out completely that there wasn't underlying mental illness and that long meditation was the catalyst for it to become apparent and symptomatic?

littmanallen

The whole idea of meditation is not to sleep. In fact, falling asleep is considered to be "slothfulness," at least according to what I've read. So, on some level, it appears to me, meditation is a bit like training one's self NOT to fall asleep. Not a surprise, then, the result. When I want to take a nap during the day, and fall asleep in a limited time frame, I usually listen to a sleep meditation or sleep hypnosis tape or video, designed to suggest and encourage me to fall asleep. That works.

Kristiyama_Gucci

This reminds me - Shinzen Young once told a story of when he held a meditation retreat. He got a coffee company to sponsor the weekend, and he was a bit perplexed when the westerners thought it was soooooo funny to have coffee and meditation together. To him, coffee and meditation together made total sense. Also genuinely one of the worst articles I've ever read in the Atlantic.

carolynshauck

Great article! So glad you are calling attention to this.

elasha

Two, Buddhism is all about "We." It's about severing your identity, which, in the civilized mindset, feels like psychosis. That's why it's important to look at the sangha as sacred.

Meditation is not like learning a sport. Your question about mindful walking is important to discuss (not debate), but meditation leaders are trying to explain phenomena beyond words. They're not there to give you the answer. This isn't 6th-grade math. They might not have it. The reason they don't want to debate is not because it's threatening. They know debate is pointless. Debating leads to another competition of who wins in the hierarchy: who's right. It has no intention of getting to the truth.

I've always wondered why the teachings, especially the tantric teachings, were esoteric. Now, I can see clearly why. But teachers have been loosening the requirements lately, likely because the world is about to be completely destroyed by civilization and its mindset.

But I think you need to understand the limitations of science in controlling spiritual experiences. It's outside of the scientific methodology. Demystifying the truth is temporarily destabilizing, but leads to liberation. Or you can just continue to experience massive anxiety, depression, anger, jealousy, and pain caused by civilization. Please, don't demonize (again) the means to the end of suffering for the rest of us.

Jefferson

I will turn age 90 in a month and am in good health. Buddhism has always fascinated me, and I've studied the field and practiced meditation for many years of about 20 minutes most days. A few years ago, I gave up the practice and, as a former professional singer, began listening more to classical music and observing nature. It works for me. Thank you for a wonderful challenging article.

Whaea

Similar for me. I find being in nature more effective than meditation after 30 years of practice.

anchorman

“Taking care of her plants and chopping wood”, and carrying water don’t forget.

Hap

(Edited)

Funny, I saw the picture and thought, chopping wood with an ax? Couple more years, she should move on to using a splitter to save her shoulders.

simsoka

And wearing a dress!

timelinestimelyness

in addition to my other post, noting that the original teachings of the Buddha are a very solid system independent of time or culture, which are not necessarily what people are doing when they talk about mindfulness and meditation, but modern culture is a very sick culture and while western Buddhism has many good things to say about it, the tendency toward cherry picking And a sort of hodgepodge spirituality to fit our very sick culture is really the problem here. I'm really sorry to say the very true cliché that trying to adapt to a sick society is not being healthy, and in many instances, that's what people are doing when they try to kind of super impose these things.

samew34752

Probably only surprising to materialist westerners that intense spiritual exploration can bring a dark side.

filmore

hmm, never heard meditation can be bad for you. But I gather 15 minutes a day or whatever is fine; just don't overdo it. Great article, but awfully long.

MidnightJudges

After years of being a very level and even keel person, I began meditating so as to increase my attention span and decrease random distracting thoughts.

It was effective.

This next part could be coincidence, but when my job became difficult in unprecedented ways, I experienced a level of stress I thought not possible for me. My brain was churning nonstop on work problems, just grinding on them over and over again. I lost a lot of sleep. In the short term, more meditation often helped me dial down the feeling of high blood pressure.

I do not blame meditation for this as I cannot prove it would have been better otherwise, but reading this article, the results of the testing is consistent with my own experience.

I stopped meditating 6 Months ago and I've been sleeping like a baby. Coincidence?

LillyLady

I've taken meditation classes over the years. The longest period I spent was 45 minutes when I was much younger. Now I find myself doing meditation in abbreviated form, five minutes or so, a few times a day. This way has helped me with my anxiety and energizes me.

forresjm

I have come to see that mindfulness, not unlike psychedelics, has a dark side that becomes more prevalent when popularized as a cultural commodity. As a religious or spiritual pluralist, I have witnessed benefits from mindfulness, meditation, and contemplative prayer when embraced as ends unto themselves. With the ascendance of what I'd call the "mindfulness industry," these practices have been corrupted when they became means to other ends. In other words, as soon as capitalism begins to promote various iterations of mindfulness into something transactional, the transformational potency of those practices recedes. To the extent that mindfulness has been successfully marketed to consumers, its efficacy is undermined and, in my opinion, the ill effects catalogued in this piece are inevitable.

PLWatts

Meditation was developed thousands of years ago as part of a spiritual practice that's ultimate aim is to eliminate the practitioner's identification with their own ego and with the

idea that the sensory world is True in the capital T sense. That has pretty profound implications when it's co-opted by modern western audiences whose ultimate aim is to "maximize" themselves. I mean, sure, it can decrease anxiety when practiced casually because you are less generally reactive and less identified with your emotions. But if your ultimate purpose is to strengthen your ego and perform better in the world, then at some point, things are bound to go downhill.

To put it succinctly: if you are practicing seeing the ego as false and the world as illusion with the purpose of being better at getting what you want in the world, at some point, crisis is inevitable.

robthedeem

In Sōtō Zen, practitioners engage in zazen—"just sitting" meditation. The instruction is remarkably simple: sit upright, breathe naturally, and when thoughts arise, let them pass without grasping or rejecting. The practice does not aim at achieving a special state or gaining knowledge; as the Zen teacher Shunryū Suzuki taught, zazen is not a means to enlightenment—the practice itself is the realization (Suzuki 1970).

jim678868

(Edited)

Don't live to meditate, meditate to live. Having negative experiences from meditating hours at a time should not be a surprise to anyone. I have been meditating for 20 minutes a day for several decades and I have never had a single negative experience.

ynotneb

(Edited)

Clarification:

You do not need to be a Buddhist to practice insight meditation (Vipassana).

Aryasure

Britton appears to struggle with a lot of mental health issues and projects many of her own problems into her work. The bottom line: extreme beliefs and behaviors typically have negative outcomes.

Mandale

this was largely my experience in my second year using the Waking up app. I was very determined for two years, and by the last 6 months I started having a lot of depersonalization/dissociation episodes. I had a baby this year and my meditation practice dwindled because I largely haven't felt pulled to do it anymore. I still am on the app, and check out things, but meditation isn't the center of my life like it used to be. It's also become clear to me that meditation is not so much a practice so much as it is life itself.

Ultimately my thoughts are that all of the no-self discussion is quite romanticized and imagined to be all bliss in all the apps, books, retreat centers and community's out there. The problem with that rhetoric is that it assumes that when the self is gone, there is someone there who will remember it all. No self means no one there to apprehend what is happening. So it is no wonder to me that the practice can become threatening in the ways described here. Few teachers will acknowledge this.

If you or anyone reading is currently wondering if meditation is bringing some questionable side effects, I would recommend Loch Kelly, and Steven Harrison who is an author. Both were helpful for me

OpenWaterAnthro

Good science research tests a theory, like why not reacting to negative thoughts, emotions and temporary physical discomfort while meditating reduces negative or harmful reactions in daily life. That's the Vipassana theory (Theravada Buddhism), found in the Satipattana Sutta, but absent here. And the article could have provided current neuroscience theory/theories that help readers understand psychosis instead of anecdotes or small study results.

DifferentiatedEnergy

Meditation, from my understanding,

Is so diverse that it's sort of silly to try

To define it. And so in the end it

Becomes a personal experience.

And its benefits can only be acknowledged by the honesty (difficult enough) of the individual himself.

VKK

Do any of the quoted studies have a control group? Was there any randomization? Was there accounting for pre-existing mental illness? In the West, people with mental illness are disproportionately drawn to contemplative practices as a way of alleviating their suffering. Without a rigorous control group, all this article is bringing up is anecdotal information which is essentially worthless. Meditation is arguably far less 'harmful' than the harm done by psychiatry/psychotherapy to the general population.

Nimetu

One did, but these are qualitative studies that are typical of documenting that a question even exists. Even Darwin went collecting specimens before embarking on trying to explain what was going on

DoctorAlan

Fascinating. I intend to share it with several friends.

Readingbear

I am amazed by this thoughtful article -- it explains things I did know. I do want to suggest, my experience or shift is from meditation to prayer. I'm being mindful and not trying to be blank. I'm reaching out for union and help, especially for others. And the much put down intercessory prayer makes me feel close to, well, everyone. I feel connected by prayer. Meditation often made me feel "unreal" which is weird and hard to explain. Anyway. Pray!

Cobweb.Henry

Jewish meditation has entered the chat! It's a lovely practice and balances the benefits of both meditation and prayer. I assume other traditions have analogous practices.

paulmcintyre

Paraphrasing Larry Ward, one issue is the commodification of mindfulness, as in 'America, the business that tried to be a country'. Meditation is not medication. Dr. Davidson's quoted comments are important - best to have some supervision, hopefully by someone more interested in the meditator than in meditation. At least in the Buddhist tradition, mindfulness meditation is a starting point for developing insight, not a sleep aid. And the Dalai Lama has clearly said that if science proves Buddhist views about reality to be wrong, he'll let go of Buddhism...

MBainSouthwestNebraska

As with all things, the timeless advice of "All Things in Moderation" (aka Ne quid nimis, Pan metron ariston, Ma, Majjhima, Zhongyong) seems apropos to the meditation issues here as it has been to most all things for thousands of years.

MB

ljwalker53

(Edited)

I tried meditation in the late 1980s. I was having personal and financial problems and was highly anxious (about them).

Maybe it was serendipitous that I saw this as a way to look within to help with my problems, because I became super depressed, paranoid, and felt afraid of my surroundings (having difficulty going outdoors, getting into cars, and feeling as if my neighbors thought of me as crazy or sick).

I struggled with this for about three years, before I started having flashbacks and vivid memories of childhood sexual abuse, starting when I was 10.

Afraid I was losing my mind and becoming suicidal, I asked my partner to reach out to her psychiatrist and find out if she could and would recommend somebody for me to see. She did. I made an appointment for the earliest date I could be seen, and am forever grateful that I did.

I did not know about adverse effects of meditation and have kept my story to myself until reading this article. I knew when I began experiencing severe depression, paranoia, and fears I had never before experienced (that I could recall) that something was very wrong, but it took me three years to get the help I ACTUALLY needed. It was NOT meditation.

What I finally arrived at after having these experiences is that the meditation triggered something in my brain that opened a doorway to the memories of my abuse. I have never had any doubt that it was the meditation that set this off. And I am grateful that I found the help I needed because of it.

Elaine123

Amazed at all the snitty, cutting comments on an article about Buddhism! With some trepidation, I will add (as someone who struggled with Vipassana for 30 years and attended quite a few 10-day silent retreats), that the Middle Way on this subject has been ignored for too long. MOST people will find benefits, but some will have either little benefit for enormous amounts of time invested, or actual harm. The latter side of the coin has been ignored and discussion squelched. About the commenter who said that the Buddha taught all comers, he was renowned for customizing his teachings for his audience. For householders, he basically only taught generosity and kindness. Monks/nuns and those who aspired to be them received the full treatment - a completely different track. For them, the ONLY goal was to avoid accumulating karma that would lead to rebirth - everything else (such as generosity and kindness) was in service to that. A direct contradiction to much of western mindfulness which promotes itself as a way to optimize this life (impossible for tanha not to creep in, the unslakable thirst that leads to rebirth). If you want a better handle on what the Buddha really taught 2500 years ago, read *The Making of Buddhist Modernism* by McMahan, and anything by Thanissaro Bhikkhu, especially *Buddhist Romanticism*. OK, let the backlash begin... :-)

rocknevents68

(Edited)

You see what you want to see and you hear what you want to hear. How could anyone steeped in Western thought and psychology see things any other way? Let's say this is psychosis, let's call this depression.

Certain Indian tribes see a man singing to himself, announcing he talks to God, then accepting him as a holy man, and letting him roam free. Western minds would label him a person with schizophrenia and lock him up. We CREATE that man - the schizophrenic. The Iroquois Indians create him as a holy man. Somebody else might create him the Messiah. "Whatever it is an individual creates as his experience he is responsible for." The critique of meditation is the responsibility of the accuser.

Today's generation, removed from those days of Psychedelics, meditation and est, thinking with an obstacle, a lack of exposure in Academia not a problem during the 60s.

If you can not see or touch it, eat it, or have sex with it, it is not real, without realizing one's own thought is not real by that standard. I suggest reading "est, Tools For Life, Transformation, And The Western Mind."

In one of the Castenada books, the author tells his shaman while weeping, I am chained to my reality, I cannot let it go." That is what we have in this article.

d_pauleen

This perspective makes a lot of people very uncomfortable.

Joel819335

You rightfully point out that there is no "sham" for meditation, no placebo.

That makes understanding of these adverse effects very difficult. It makes causal determination almost impossible.

I'm not saying that meditation doesn't cause adverse experiences, it's just that it is perfectly possible that many of the people who seek meditation are people who already have experienced disturbances or who undertake meditation in an effort either to calm them or to head them off. People who meditate are not a random sampling of the population. They have a reason for doing it and often the reason is something that

distresses them. Separating that pre-existing distress from issues due to the meditation is not possible with any of these methods.

segwaymaureen

(Edited)

Being mindful requires you to pay attention to your life and your surroundings. The trauma we all hold within ourselves then comes to the surface and wants us to face it. This is what creates the anxiety. I have found that you must move the trauma out of the body through movement (yoga) to avoid these negative effects of mindfulness. You also must allow in the pain of that trauma. The allowing creates the healing. Then the next trauma surfaces... It is part of the process. The outside world doesn't understand it and operates differently so going through the process is in itself a painful process.

jasontrask

I actually believe Ms. Britton's research. But it's one-sided. She should also look for the people it helps.

When I was in my 20s, during a brief period, I was taking LSD frequently. After a few weeks, I began to get unbelievably paranoid. I could only trust people I had always known--my siblings, parents, cousins, etc. I visited a psychologist but did not trust him, so I didn't return. Part of me knew my paranoid thinking was crazy, but that did not stop it from happening, nor did it stop my fear of it. Soon, I recognized that I was the only person who could help me.

A friend taught me how to meditate. Whenever I began to feel myself swirling toward paranoia, I began meditating. If paranoid feelings arose when I was home, I would sit on my cushion and count my breaths from one to ten. If I was walking, I would count my steps from one to ten.

After a couple of weeks, I could keep myself from completely falling into a hot whirlpool of paranoia. By then, I had begun to notice that the type of thinking I was doing, though not actually paranoid itself, was moving me in that direction, and I would meditate.

Within a month, I was still meditating every day, but seldom was I doing so to keep myself clear of paranoia.

That was 45 years ago, and since then, I have been meditating daily without any paranoia of the sort I experienced back then. I have done a number of silent 10-day retreats, without negative repercussions.

I feel meditation saved me, when nothing else could.

colmhellstorm

There is also a dark side of physical exercise. I sprained my ankle this spring, which really made my summer suck. My neighbor exercised so much, he did serious damage to his knees. The author should do an article about the downsides of exercise next. No doubt it would be equally illuminating...

Balletelaine

Thank you so much for this article!

I was able to meditate very effectively but never experienced the benefits. It tended to exacerbate anxiety. I stopped doing it! I found physical exercise to be a better tool!

This article validates my experience! More importantly, it reinforces the fact that we are physiologically different & should accept the fact that what works well for some may be ineffective or even damaging for others. This is recognized as normal with drug treatment. It is simply part of the human experience! We would be better served by seeking tools that work for us without negating benefits for others. And—Be OK with it!

CookieMonsterBleu

This article should be published on the front page of the New York Times because it illustrates the basic functional premise of the human brain: "you are what you experience", meaning our ability to function (and think, grow intellectually and developed complex actions) depends on "sensory experiences" that get associated, stored, memorized and turned into actions (thoughts and movements). This is absolutely

necessary at all times of the day and our lives (except when we sleep, which is a critical part of our brain maintenance).

I often wondered why people just "accepted" this practice without critical insight (and testing)...I attributed it to the not wise acceptance, and practice of "rejecting the routine" and "accepting the exotic", along with periodic boredom which afflicts all highly functioning adults

There still exists a need to "feel special" in Western Societies, esp the US

Kudos to the author and her partner (and the others who pushed to study this) as well as The Atlantic". Oh well, now the "Snake Oil" salespeople in "alternative medicine" will have to find something else...watch out world!

BuddhaBids

"interesting" 🙄

Alfalpa

So the question is: does meditation only induce the negative effects in people who were already predisposed to some sort of medical or physical breakdown and it merely triggered what might have been an eventuality, or does meditation induce those events in otherwise completely healthy individuals?

jojoforest

I came to the conclusion that meditation was not for me after attempting meditation on and off for a long time and assuming that it was all good for most people when in fact it was making me feel more anxious. Moment by moment was not pleasant. I was already too self conscious and it was not helping my neurotic tendencies. The emptiness was too empty. I needed G_D and not nothingness. So interesting to discover this article.

angeli

as a teacher of secular meditation, it is my understanding that 20-30 minutes of practice is sufficient. In addition, when I teach I always advise the participants that if they feel distressed stop immediately. Sit up. Step away immediately.

It my opinion as a trained professional counselor that the teacher is responsible to prepare participants on the positive and negative aspects of meditation.

soko_dancer

Meditator of several years here. I'm fortunate not to have experienced major adverse effects from my practice, which has included multi-day silent retreats with hours of meditation. Mostly the impact has been positive, or at least neutral, with the exception of a few baffling encounters with younger monks who might benefit from more sensitivity in their teachings on death. Of particular interest to me here are comments from Jack Kornfield and I wonder about the wider context in which they were made. He seems to want to maintain distance from Cheetah House here. My hope is that prominent teachers will take it upon themselves to be educated about the full spectrum of meditation practice and its implementation in our wider culture. It is their responsibility. Retreat centers come in many flavors and it is of no surprise that many of them lack the structures to truly support people confronting mental health crises. All of that said, there is still good here. Though the article takes a reactionary tone for the sake of stoking controversy--any good journalist toes this line--I think the message is important for teachers to acknowledge and respond to.

wordherder

Mindfulness has done everything to help me. Meditation did nothing but hurt me. I do wish the difference between the two had been distinguished properly by the author.

Saul

The subject threw water in her teacher's face and slapped him? Sounds like she gets her own koan!

MamaSquid

Ha! Makes me look at those old stories differently for sure.

Domino

I've tried meditation but was unsuccessful. Now I think that was for the best.

Commenter1

All meditation is a form of mindfulness, however not all mindfulness is meditation. The title of this article is misleading.

Mindfulness, is the general concept of being in the present moment and mindful of one's inner states and external events as they occur, and not being constantly focused on the past or the future.

thmdpa27

I am having trouble finding a context for this article. I am a psychiatrist; I took the tiny introduction to Transcendental Meditation in 1972, while in college (for the outrageous price of \$40). I have not been a mediator for most of my life. I have never had a bad experience with meditation (didn't know until reading here that that was a concern).

I do have experience doing medical research, and I respond to phrases regarding "research" with certain expectations: that any acronyms are preceded by the full written form, that "research" refers to systematic inquiry regarding a given hypothesis, and that the researcher's bias does not interfere with the findings. Of course, in the scientific work with which I am familiar, sticky relationships with religious ideas don't need to be sorted. I do understand that the discussion presented in this article exists within the context that meditation research is usually discussed. I remember an article, however, from the 1970's, in either "Science" or "Scientific American", describing physiological research on volunteers practicing TM, that showed impressive changes in cardiovascular activity (decreases in pulse, blood pressure, and breathing rate), and discussing implications of these changes. Here, I don't know how many different activities are even considered under the term "meditation", nor do I find sufficient information to be able to discern the risks/benefits of TM and other forms of meditation. I would like to know more.

JCole

Thank you. This may turn out to be the most important piece you've written.

Lorrainemcc

Meditation is a bit like medication, the dose is critically important and it depends on who's doing it.

Britten comes round to this way of thinking towards the end of her article where she says 30 minutes is about the right amount of time.

I have been meditating for 50 years and find it a 100% entirely life-supporting practice if taught by someone who knows what they're doing.

It speaks volumes that Britten, with PTSD, meditating three hours a day, not taking a day off for decades, is clearly going to be in for a rough ride.

She openly states that there are too many positive studies on the benefits of meditation so she decides to get published writing about the adverse effects of meditation, until the funding runs out.

I'm glad she has become more grounded living in nature.

As a meditation instructor I feel the world needs meditation now more than any other time, and it is profoundly disappointing that the Atlantic gives oxygen to this research which is biased and anecdotal with inconsequentially small studies, compared to thousands of peer-reviewed articles featuring the enormous benefits of meditation.

TDOhio

I think your conclusion to this article Ms. Khazan -- it is simple, sensible, and possibly Zen-like. More is not always better. The middle way can have less negative side effects. Albeit not as many high-highs, but also much fewer low-lows. My father was not a meditator and often played it safe, as best as I could discern. But he lived a productive, pleasant, and rewardingly successful life. I do recall however, his words to me about "partying" and "new experiences" when I went off to college roughly 55 years ago . . . "moderation is good." He had something there as well!

LostHoosier

I'm one of the people who struggled, likely due to a mix of childhood abuse and C-PTSD. Buddhism is a myriad of lists, as are meditation techniques. Some ground you, like a body scan, and Yoga, if the intent is to focus on the mind and body. If a meditation retreat

does not allow for running up a hill, taking a hike, or a place for yoga, don't go. Lastly supra-normal powers are a thing, although my interpretation of it is far more subdued than others who read the same Sutta. Most of us, even non-practioners are open to that reality. Once I opened up and accepted this, I found meaning to most things that arise, including dreams. Eventually I found there was never a reason to be scared of them.

Nopenada

This is very beautiful and those last two lines insights I will be taking into my own practices

stevearam221

I see the value of meditation and medication in many cases. But I think my Christian life practices are very powerful for good health. The Bible tells me to meet regularly with fellow Christians and sharing my life with others at church, looking for ways to be encouraging to them has been very healthy. The Bible says to practice thankfulness. The Bible gives many guidelines to build and maintain healthy relationships. I fear that many people suffer greatly from not knowing how to get along with others or how to maintain long-term relationships. The Bible wisely warns against overly indulging bodily impulses in gluttony, drunkenness and sexual promiscuity. It commands times for rest. My wife and I read a chapter of the Bible together each day and discuss how we can better apply it to our lives. That's a wonderful bonding practice and we grow in life wisdom through it. We find a sense of life purpose in trying to serve God as best we can. And the Holy Spirit has spoken healing and encouragement to my soul many times. I encourage people to focus on daily life practices such as these.

greta_rose

(Edited)

The problem with the Bible (or any patriarchal religion) is that it also involves a lot of morality, which allows the potential to use it as a form of judgment (as, clearly, many have throughout history). Many people (like me) prefer spiritual practices like Buddhism because they do not concern themselves with conferring morality on other people's behaviors or decisions or just way of existing.

4kindness

Yes. That why my Christianity has be enlightened by Buddhism and mindfulness, especially Thich Nhat Hanh. See my comment below.

4kindness

As a Christian, I practice just breathing and welcoming the presence of God. I use this as a re-minder:

Breathe.

The Lord is near.

TheDowagerQueenBeastly

Whatever works!

PineyTheElder

I found Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT) to be a useful tool when working in a high stress job filled with unpleasant clients who made unceasing and unrealistic demands. I sought nothing more or less than coping skills -- a way to gain perspective and keep my sanity by stepping back from the sturm and drang. MBCT filled that role. Now that I am retired, I still find it useful.

<https://www.simplypsychology.org/mindfulness-based-cognitive-therapy.html>

<https://bookshop.org/p/books/mindfulness-based-cognitive-therapy-for-depression-john-teasdale-phd/9de3dfafbb8a9301>

(Used copies of the 1st edition of the Teasdale book can be had at reasonable prices from sellers like Abebooks, etc.)

But with all that said, the best and most reliable practice of all -- one I have followed religiously since 1969 -- is as steady diet of the Allman Brothers Band, preferably on vinyl. The Eat a Peach double LP helps me get through anything.

Go to the 2:00 mark on this video and let Jimmy enlighten you:

<https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=-68iTvhWNB0>

PineyTheElder

(Edited)

https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=_Q5FOprjtoI&feature=youtu.be

"Ain't Wastin' Time No More" -- written by Gregg Allman in the wake following the death of brother Duane. Heartfelt resolution, sage advice, and hope for better days. Best medicine ever.

TheDowagerQueenBeastly

(Edited)

I used Dialectical Behavioral Therapy (DBT) for a similar situation. Mindfulness without meditation to handle overwhelming or distracting feelings.

Oddly, I learned about it from a fun urban fantasy novel called "Borderline" -- I'm not borderline, but the protagonist and author are, and DBT is almost a character in the book. I was reading it as I started a very challenging new job during Covid with half-baked training and an unhelpful supervisor. I desperately needed the job, so I couldn't just quit. I began trying what was in the book and it helped, then found a therapist who taught it and pointed me to an excellent book on using it. Got me through.

"Borderline" by Mishell Baker

"The Dialectical Behavior Therapy Skills Workbook" by Matthew McKay, Jeffrey C. Wood, and Jeffrey Brantley

ShannonRose

I am really surprised at this article. 'Everybody' knows that if you meditate too much, you get spacey.

mskee

Not into meditation, but just intellectually curious about so many things. This article, and so many others, is why I love The Atlantic. I never know what may pop up that I just want to know a little more about. Happens every day with The Atlantic. Thank you!

Bethannkelly4

The elephant in the room (and maybe others have already posted about this?) is that Buddhist meditation is a practice passed down for thousands of years within the Buddhist tradition from MAN to MAN. They're so proud of this lineage. I recently took a meditation course offered by a community college and as the professor (of Buddhist faith) was guiding us (a class of nearly only women) to let go of our thoughts, I found myself thinking, um, maybe this is what MEN need. Women are pretty new to having the time and privilege to have our thoughts and finish them in the first place... you know, on account of having to care for the guru's children and meals!

Lotus

Throughout, Kazan shares lots of opinions as though they are facts, fails to provide concrete citations to back them up. What she presents about meditation, and her assumptions about Buddhism are incorrect, or, at best, have no accurate context. Which brings up the issue of writers relying on AI. Readers should be aware that many news outlets encourage writers to use AI. As a retired therapist and someone who has consulted within the AI community, the use of AI in writing is perilous. Writers need to be very careful how they phrase AI queries, and if the intent is to be "objective" the query must present different perspectives AI needs to take into account. Writers often expresses bias in their query, which will be reflected in the result. Further, AI is programmed to provide

agreement and sympathy toward the query; it's programmed to indulge any biases expressed in the query. In fact, a writer can even ask, up front, for specific bias on a topic – students often use this feature when asked to write a pro or con position on a topic, or when prepping for debate team, model UN, etc. We have no idea if Olga Kazan used AI for this article, and if so, how she structured her query(ies) to AI. But I suspect, given the blatant bias expressed throughout this article, AI may well have been a resource for Kazan. The only way we'll know is if The Atlantic required it's writers to disclose their use of AI for any article they submit for publication.

CtGa

On the one hand, you say that the author of the article "shares lots of opinions as though they are facts, [and] fails to provide concrete citations to back them up."

On the other hand, you offer a long-winded, evidence free opinion smearing the author based on the bogeyman of the day -- AI.

Just as an exercise, go to Google Scholar and type in the query "adverse effects from meditation." You will be surprised, I suspect, at the sheer number of papers, articles, and books in the academic community noting and documenting the phenomenon.

mhi

I found this article exceedingly useful and timely since I've been planning on beginning serious meditation to improve my sleep. Now - until I can review some of the literature on meditation's effect on sleep - I will try meditating a little, say 15 minutes max a day, and see how it affects my sleep. I have an oura ring which I use for analyzing my sleep. Also, I have a sleep disorder (periodic limb movement disorder) for which I take medicine and the medicine has resulted in substantial augmentation.

wdunlay

Context matters. At this point in the evolution of consciousness, the human ego has become so destructive that it is wrecking the planet. Meditation offers the possibility of de-emphasizing the ego, "to die before you die", by letting go of false or secondary identities, to experience oneself primarily as consciousness. This is a big deal! The ego

doesn't want to die and will resist. Of course the process will be problematic. Evolution is always difficult. But humanity must choose: evolve or die. Meditation encourages evolution. And, yes, moderation matters.

derek_sacramento

It's uncanny how well some of these descriptions track my early-adulthood experimentation with psychedelics. Ultimately, reconciling the nothingness that exists over the edge of the cliff with the practicalities of navigating society (let alone modern society) is challenging. Done successfully, you may operate with a profound sense of perspective that can keep you balanced and focused on what's most important. But you can't unsee the edge, and even knowing that it's there can be deeply unsettling and disruptive. Approach with caution.

RSilvers

For some reason, I finished this article. It is one of the weakest from the Atlantic in three decades or more, reminiscent of Kevin Hassett arguing that the Dow should be at 35,000 when it was at 10,000. Is it about Britton? About meditation research? Conflicts of interest?

That the author discloses that she engages in meditation only some 2/3 the way through is a rug-pull that this is now gonzo journalism.

Who uses meditation? Who should use it? For how long? Is it addictive because if not, why does it seem that those experiencing adverse consequences continue? No answers to any of these questions but we know that Britton took criticism from the guy who inspired her so seriously that she holed up for a week. That indicates some unhealthy emotional trait.

Very disappointed. In the article and that I spent 30 minutes reading it

cloverrabbit

THANK HEAVENS someone is finally talking about this!!!!

ekran

(Edited)

I don't meditate regularly (only for brief periods of time when I feel like it), but this article reminds me of a disturbing incident from over 15 year ago where I fell into a deep meditative state while praying for a lady who had recently died of cancer and her family (I didn't have any kind of meditation practice at the time). Out of nowhere I started to feel like my soul was leaving my body. It truly felt as if my body could possibly shut down if I wouldn't bring myself out of that state, so I immediately stopped. The feeling instantly went away and has never returned. The incident wasn't traumatic, terrifying, or anything like that; just unnerving. Based on that experience, I can imagine how continuing to meditate through something like that would lead to long-term dissociation and other negative effects. Everything in moderation...

melissaannsays

The body is wise: listen to whether and when meditation is welcome and healing.

As a person with complex PTSD, meditation - being present in my body - was ****intolerably painful**** for ~15 years. I refused vehemently. Little by little, somatic mindfulness practices combined with other therapies like DBT changed that. Now, I can incorporate meditation for 5-30 mins a day, occasionally more and it helps my anxiety, concentration, and level of reactivity! It has been a part of my healing after all.

May the research continue to understand when, whether, n how much meditation benefits people with complex trauma, especially.

SomeoneSomewhere

This is a validating piece for me. I have struggled with anxiety for as long as I can recall (not constant but never far away). Meditation was constantly pushed on me. No matter how much I explained that it worsened my rumination tendencies or physical/body obsessions, I was just told I wasn't doing it right. It's wonderful that it is positively life changing for some who practice. It is not, however, a cure all for everyone.

glands

One has to wonder if the people who had the most severe "side effects" had major problems to start. When I was a medical intern, one of my colleagues planned to go into psychiatry. I shared with him my impression that the pre-psych people tended to be a bit "odd." His answer: "You can hide a tree in the forest." As an endocrinologist for the past 40 years, I think we have it easy. A patient may describe symptoms, but we can do an exam, and then run tests (labs and imaging, when necessary) to diagnose, treat, and evaluate progress. With mental/psychiatric issues, it's all subjective, with a host of unverifiable theories and practices, some of which might help, and others which might cause harm. Remember that the best shoe is the one that fits your foot.

Johnny

A bit of balance. Maybe a little Daoist philosophy thrown in, like the idea that "Extremes are never best." Meditating 3 or more hours a day, or a dozen hours a day on retreats, is not being balanced. Nor is riding a bike for five hours every day. It is intensely using only part of your mind and body. That may be why she finds time immersed in nature so refreshing. She is connecting with the universe with all her senses and mind and body rather than restricting her awareness to a narrow experience. Sensory deprivation experiments have repeatedly shown some of the things this article talks about- psychosis and dissociation. And that is only done for limited times in the studies. I would say we could all benefit from being more broadly connected with the world through our senses and to other people rather than isolating. And that includes spending a lot less time on your computer and phone, as we are now discovering.

BossaNova

I appreciate your spotlighting balance and connection. And we can all use a little Daoism.

vprubin

Great article! It often feels like meditation is recommended rather flippantly in general wellness fields as a safe way to relax and promote self care. Those who give medical and mental health advice should be more careful. There likely are people, many of us, who should not be encouraged to meditate on their own without personal guidance, especially for more than a few minutes a day. Additionally, after hearing about these meditation retreats, it sure appears that those who go should be given some sort of intake assessment to be sure that the retreat is appropriate for them. I wonder if many of those who had adverse psychotic experiences during or after their retreat may have already been experiencing significant psychological distress. Someone who feels especially

overwhelmed or mentally unhealthy may be more likely to seek out a meditation retreat as a potential treatment!

MCRNDonnager

I enjoyed this article, but I am honestly disappointed that so many of the PhD psychologists Ms. Kazan references have violated basic foundations of the scientific method. They have so obviously abandoned scientific objectivity and replaced it with religious conviction and belief. I looked up a few of the studies mentioned and it took maybe 5 minutes to find serious errors in methodological design and multiple sources of bias. It just isn't possible to be both an objective scientist and ideological crusader. Unfortunately it seems the field of psychology has too many of the latter.

mike_sullivan

Excellent piece—an important corrective to the hype surrounding meditation. But every powerful medicine carries risks, and Western culture tends to treat promising practices as all gas, no brakes. My own practice has been genuinely transformational, yet meditation has no standardized dose. It should be approached with good teachers, self-awareness, and care—the Middle Way was taught for a reason.

michael_miller54

Meditation is a variable that can sometimes fit your situation and help. A psychology therapist recommended the mindfulness based stress reduction program which started me on a path towards meditation. For me the longest meditations are 40 to 50 minutes and usually I do less. The concept of living in the moment and viewing thoughts that show up as just thoughts and returning to focus on the breath has afforded me daily opportunities to give my mind, its anxieties and sometime negativity a break. It helps and is often a relief from anxiety and stress - that is enough for me.

cbriandpat

My "middle way". Sitting on my back patio with an adult beverage and a cigar. Responsible time out of mind.

bronte_roberts

Meditation and mindfulness are not the thing. The title is misleading and should be corrected.

TPE

I think you mean they're not the same thing, and I agree! The title is inaccurate and sadly misleading.

Greenjeans1

The author writes: "The Buddhist scholar and teacher Gil Fronsdal told me that although he doesn't think meditation causes adverse effects, retreats may exacerbate preexisting psychological problems." Gil has it right, in my view. Meditation traditions attract a wide variety of people, but it shouldn't be surprising that meditation will not be right for everyone.

pbpundit

(Edited)

Well yeah. If you're meditating for 3 hours at a stretch it's going to get trippy. Try 3 to 11 minutes a day. Enjoy the benefits. If you're not a monk, there's no reason for the extremism. Chill & enjoy!

Wifey

Is it possible some tried meditation because they had some mental issue in the first place? That your data base is skewed.

Sorta like we have some mentally ill vets not just due to military trauma but they sought the military to sort them out.

hughesusan

Having practiced meditation off and on for many years, I found the research shocking, provocative, and scary. I find it hard to believe some meditation could cause so many harmful effects, but that could be because I always felt calm after a session, no longer than 30 minutes. Perhaps those hurt by meditation had no insight into themselves. Or, even pressed on nerves in their bodies, or tensed their muscles, and triggered problems by staying still for the meditation session. The defensiveness and superior attitude of meditators was annoying, too. The last paragraph made me think of the old saying "everything in moderation."

Eenyumeeny

Isn't this a problem with all scientific fields? The people studying it are by nature believers. The gatekeepers—the panels that select PhD candidates and review research papers—are by nature believers. It's difficult to go against the grain in any field because people are quick to bring down naysayers.

A lot of current distrust in the medical fields stems from this rigid arrogance. Doctors dismiss patient experiences. We aren't supposed to weigh our own costs and benefits, just blindly follow the (biased) science. It's a shame because the result is that once people lose trust, they look to whacky sources.

shawth

Mindfulness is designed to get you to give up the mental coping mechanisms that keep you sane. Its no wonder then that some people then lose their sanity. These coping mechanisms keep us feeling "safe" from largely imaginary dangers, however, and mindfulness theoretically should enable us to see their illusory character. Yet for many people, including myself, the imaginary dangers keep reasserting themselves, sometimes in ridiculously unbelievable forms. I would therefore be a candidate for anti-meditation teaching but for the fact that I don't blame mindfulness for the stubbornness of my fantasies. I would rather become consistently aware of their activity in my life, and also see just how unreal they are, and abandon them over time.

Aniara

"These coping mechanisms keep us feeling "safe" from largely imaginary dangers..."

But sometimes there really is a tiger.

shawth

Agreed. But I haven't sensed any actual tigers around lately.

jkeefe121316

Meditation helps me diminish the importance of my 'self', not enhance it. I can connect to other humans and quiet my 'opinions' that create distance. I don't ask much more than that from it.

OldNavyGuy

Even in critique it seems to me that the article, while informative, has as its underlying assumption that meditation is a lifestyle technique. Later, about two-thirds into the article, it is described as the basis for religious belief.

Meditation has been used to undergird various philosophical, metaphysical, religious, and other practices. But in modern society, it has been socialized and used as a get-well scheme.

After first introducing the results of Ms. Britton's results, the article winds through a series of anecdotes and tautologies. Meditation is a mind-body technique, but in its commercialized and packaged form, more closely mimics a cult.

Thus, the first question that should have been asked, given the basic scientific method, is whether those individuals using meditation services self-select? If so, do these "side-effects" simply reveal to the individual their core psychological state, which brought them to meditation?

As a young Naval officer, I learned of The Way through Shaolin Wushu from my years in the western Pacific. This led me to the secular side of Buddhism, which is a discipline. As with any discipline, one must keep their wits about them when facing extraordinary claims. But, while there is much in the tradition to admire, there is a lot of woo-woo.

Asceticism is just one path, but one packaged to appeal to a broad consumer base. Can you be a fascist, a Nazi, a white supremacist, a Chinese Communist or a MAGA and "be" a Buddhist? No, you cannot.

jhncstvns

I wonder if adhering to a secular meditation program has unintended consequences. The sentence about the demonic states described by the Buddha made me remember that 12-step programs have steps that involve conducting a moral inventory and making amends to others before the 11th step, which mentions prayer and meditation. Perhaps we need to do some moral and spiritual hygiene before starting a meditation regimen. Jesus Christ tells us to set reconciliation as a high priority.

If we consider depression a result of unresolved guilt and resentment, then maybe people suffer "demonic states" when meditation removes the distractions that we use to keep from thinking about old hurts or the harm we have done to others.

Jered

Man's brain evolved in an environment full of stimulation and movement, much more than we're accustomed to, with a few quiet moments stolen where possible. His evolving brain certainly did not meditate.

To live in accordance with your deeper self, then, move a *lot* every day (much more than you'd like), chill out once in a while, and generally keep your mind stimulated--not meditated. And oh, the chimpanzees at work who, via money needs, trigger anxiety and depression? Remember that they, too, are navigating the same economically beneficial but psychologically alien world Man has mostly unintentionally constructed. Cut all the chimps some slack and watch what happens to your anxiety.

d_pauleen

I suggest the quiet moments watching the stars move through the night sky and the sun rising and setting each day had at least as much to do with evolution as movement. Or perhaps it was the time to reflect that made the activity meaningful.

Jered

Something to that. Except whenever I find myself anxious or down, the most effective remedy, at least in the immediate sense, is exercise or engaging work (exercise especially). More generally, though, sleep is the most effective. This tracks with my

paleo-brain thesis: Before electric lighting and the discovery of caffeine, Man likely slept more, and more deeply.

The popularity of meditation is likely a result of terrible sleep, too little daily exercise, and unhealthy diets that cause the energy of body and brain to be out of whack (watch what sugar and refined starches do to your anxiety levels). Couple that with a competitive labor market and hierarchical business organization that ultimately channel social frictions and sociopathies onto everyday people and you have a recipe for brains that endlessly long for escape, whether in the form of daily meditation or constant weekday pining for the relief provided by the weekend.

How to counteract the situation? Widespread kindness is a good start.

leviddavis

Wow, this article is so “synchronistic” for me. I got off my first seven-day silent meditation retreat just yesterday. During the retreat, I started sleeping less and less until in the last few days I was only getting about two hours a night. I felt extremely energetic – almost to the point of being concerned it was mania.

I also experienced a strange confusion trying to walk home. Nothing looked familiar, and I kept getting lost. Even the map on my phone didn’t make sense to me. The only way I found my way was by reading street signs.

There were a lot of positive benefits as well, however. I feel a new connection to the people around me and a deep sense of calm and contentment. This morning I woke up at 4 AM but then was able to go back to sleep for an hour or so and I’m feeling much more clear..

My take away from the retreat experience and then reading this article is that I need to be careful with my meditation practice. Any kind of medication is harmful if done in excess.

franwrussell

I did TM back in the 1970s & occasionally since then, never for longer than 20 minutes at a time. I was working days & going to law school in the evenings, so it was pretty good substitute for an afternoon nap. Lucky me, apparently. Meditation proponents who tell people experiencing dissociation, confusion, depression & other problems that the solution is *more* meditation should be arrested for practicing psychiatry without a license.

VJK

In about 2003 a work colleague taught me some mindfulness techniques. I remember being a bit surprised about how often she checked in to make sure I wasn't having negative reactions. It seems she knew what she was doing.

d_pauleen

(Edited)

I think this guy has it right,

“But, he added, people with serious psychiatric disorders should meditate only under the guidance of a mental-health professional who also happens to be a meditator—advice that would probably come as news to the many thousands of people who meditate by using apps at home.”

The place I meditate specifically states in writing when a person applies for a course that if you have psychiatric issues this course is not for you.

That this author spent a week in bed when criticized by Kornfield points to a state of mind that might not benefit from meditation.

The problems are poor teachers, misguided students and the role of money and profit. Meditation is not the problem.

Fattismatt

From a scientific viewpoint, a hugely important question not addressed in this article are the baseline characteristics of those who seek—in Western cultures—to undertake rigorous meditation training vs. those who have little or no interest despite having some

rudimentary knowledge of what it is. In other words I suspect there is considerable sampling bias in the studies described. My guess is that individuals who seek out intensive meditation interventions have—before they ever begin the training—somewhat higher than average rates of mental health issues , interpersonal and other adjustment difficulties, and higher than average levels of dissatisfaction with themselves and/or their life circumstances. Such “pre-treatment” differences could largely account for the negative side-effects observed later on. Perhaps not, just an educated guess. But it’s easy to suggest a correlation between any intervention and certain outcomes, but much more difficult to prove a replicable cause and effect relationship.

BuddhaBids

There have been a number of recovering alcoholics and addicts who are in and out of my meditation group, who treat it like a twelve step meeting. Sometimes I'm the short discussion period afterwards I wonder if I've wandered into an AA meeting.

grobarka

Thank you for this article. I've been interested in Buddhism for over 10 years and have experimented with both meditation and Reiki. Overall, I am resistant to any form of organized religion, but was drawn to Pema Chodron's books during the covid lockdown and found comfort there. While I have dropped many of my meditation and Reiki practices, I do occasionally find them useful, notably when I was having my badly broken wrist reset. I was able to dissociate enough to not experience the pain of that manipulation.

liwa

Any introspective practice taken in earnest is a path whose benefits come over time. I trust that people that stay on the mindfulness path do so because of its benefits - however challenging at times. It's unfortunate that some people approach it 'scientifically' like the blind men touching different parts of the elephant.

Marybeth22

I have lived with anxiety and periodic depression most of my life. Many recommended mindfulness based meditation to me. I tried to engage in these types of meditation, but I found they all made me more anxious. In 2020, I decided to try Transcendental

Meditation - which is quite different, as one focuses on a mantra and one doesn't try to ignore thoughts, but lets them happen naturally and then returns to the mantra. This form of meditation works well for me, better than any other treatment recommended for my anxiety. Over time, I've also been able to eliminate alcohol from my life (alcohol was the worst of the anxiety "treatments" I tried!). I still will use a particular SSRI medication when I experience depression if my symptoms include intrusive suicidal thoughts, but for the most part TM - two sessions, about 20 minutes each - works for me. I wish this article had differentiated TM from MB meditation. They are quite different

Nimetu

Um, garden variety meditation isn't about ignoring thoughts at all. It is noticing them arising and then when you notice your mind has wandered returning to breath or whatever your focus is. Sounds very similar to mindfulness meditation in fact.

And I had a teacher who was very clear: "if you're having psychological symptoms, talk with a psychologist. That's out of our league".

cgsnail

"I believe that reading and writing are the most nourishing forms of meditation anyone has so far found. By reading the writings of the most interesting minds in history, we meditate with our own minds and theirs as well. This to me is a miracle."

— Kurt Vonnegut, *Palm Sunday: An Autobiographical Collage*

In the 1972 movie "The Ruling Class", Peter O'Toole's character, the paranoid schizophrenic 14th Earl of Gurney who believes he is Jesus Christ, explains how he knows he is God with the famous line: **"Simple. When I pray to Him, I find I am talking to myself."**

I vastly prefer western modes of intellectual engagement. Compulsive self examination rarely produces much of any worth.

paularen

(Edited)

To me this is one sided, like writing a thesis on all the reasons never to invest in the stock market. True enough it's not for everyone...

Unfocussed, yes then fatigue can set in resulting in sleeping -not practice of focussed mindfulness so of course no wonder sleepiness nights. Or, excuses, no will power and distractions, just so to opt out. Like walking up a hill is not comforting, yet for most it's a healthy way to exercise and get ones heart beat to increase its beating while not overdoing it. This article just seems like a nouveau way to get attention by focussing on the very few, for which it is not, for whatever the reason(s). One can deduce this to so many other good deeds gone bad....like drinking too much water, too ambitious, over caring, etc...

Firelog

It needs to be said. Whether pharma drugs, illegal drugs, meditation, we are altering brain waves. But meditation is superior in that you are not injecting a foreign substance.

PaulKC

As someone who has extended experience both with meditative practice (not specifically Buddhist, but very similar to mindfulness), and with Psychology and psychological research, I'd like to offer a couple of thoughts.

First, as said by many, meditation has many purposes and many outcomes. These are not separate from a host of other factors, so they are not identical from person to person.

Secondly, giving full credit to the 52 person research study which was thoughtfully designed, it does not prove that meditation does not result in improved sleep. Specifically because it doesn't control for all those aforementioned multitude of variables, and it would be extraordinarily difficult to do so. (That said, it is an interesting experiment, and replication studies would be well worth it.)

My hunch, based on personal experience and work with anxious folks on their sleep, is that the calming and awareness factors of meditation lead to relaxation for many, and improved sleep.

jim_podolak

A Buddhist teacher once said, Best not
begin, but if you begin you had better
finish.

Firelog

(Edited)

It's interesting. First of all, doing anything to excess will have side effects. And like any
mind altering experience, one time can be a frightening trip for some.

I meditate, daily, but in short bursts. And that can leave me feeling experiencing the
moment, and content. But it's harder to feel the highs or lows. Maybe that's due to
expectations. Can't feel the high of achieving the mental goal nor the sting of defeat of
failure. The ironic part, that's why you meditate, to flatline more.

The anxiety and depression is a different beast. Because it's not contentment. I don't
know.

4kindness

The title of this article should be The Dark Side of Meditation.

NEYankee

(Edited)

Too much of a good thing applies pretty much for everything. Just listen to Steely Dan

jh64

I meditate approximately an hour a day. About a half hour in the morning right after I
wake up and a half hour right before I go to bed.

It has been one of the most beneficial things I have ever done. My wife and adult children tell me they can see its positive impact on me.

Some observations. I've never gone to a long retreat, nor practiced long periods of uninterrupted meditation. I can easily see (as this article points out) how intensive meditation over long periods could create major anxiety for some people who already have mental health issues.

I avoid any mindfulness teachers who have clinical backgrounds in psychology etc.. They often bring a shallow, cold and clinical feel to the practice.

Although I am not a Buddhist, I recommend Theravada Buddhist monks or nuns who approach the practice with some spiritual feel but not too much dogma. Theravada doesn't focus on following a "guru" or teacher like the non-Theravada traditions such as Tibetan Buddhism do, which can have major drawbacks if you get an unscrupulous teacher. Avoid pseudo-cults like Kadampa.

If you want to try it, I recommend the free guided meditations on the Viveka hermitage website or the meditations of Jayasara, Jitindriya, Adyashanti and Vidyamala Burch in the Practice section of Sam Harris' Waking Up app. Waking Up comes with a fee but you can get a free 30 day trial.

I also personally recommend lying in bed while you meditate. No need to sit cross legged.

Nils

this feels like an essay looking to validate its own assumptions.

jscottanderson

I want to thank the writer for this article. By reading it to the end I found my every concern addressed. The Buddha Dhamma came as a huge revelation to me, life changing, but each of us brings something unique into the experience and my experience is an insufficient explanation of someone else's. As I read I recognized how I had misunderstood the experiences related by one friend in particular who suffered with bipolar disorder and who had a seriously negative experience in a Buddhist meditation retreat.

SarcasticFringehead

Here is my two cents worth of insight into meditation.

Meditation is really about one thing only: seeing your True Self.

That's one name for it. It has many names: Atman. Soul. Presence. Consciousness. Awareness. Original Face. Headlessness.

My favorite term for it is the "aware space that it capacity for the world." I believe Richard Lang coined that one.

Once you direct your awareness back on itself, and it recognizes itself, even if it is for a fleeting instant, you have arrived.

Meditation, teachers, religions, become unnecessary once you recognize "home."

ewterry

At the end of the day, when you strip away the clinicalese, "mindfulness" is just intentionally ruminating and obsessing over emotional states. Meditation is semi-conscious, semi-hypnotic ruminating and obsessing. Hard to believe that either of these have downsides...

mwanderson

Don't think on it too much, lest you hurt yourself.

Alfalpa

Apparently that's what it becomes, but I thought it was supposed to be a state of no-mind.

London

(Edited)

This makes a lot of sense to me. I've tried meditating on and off over the years and find it makes me restless, over-stimulated and agitated. I prefer hatha yoga, a walk outdoors, painting a picture or some other activity as a way to calm my body and mind and feel balanced.

Henry2411

One thing I have found helpful when meditating and feeling psychological distress, is to open my eyes, observe the life force surrounding me and identifying with it. Wind moving tree leaves and grass, observing bugs, birds, animals, clouds or the warmth of the sun. I am one with life. That brings an objective reality to focus on, rather than digging deeper into subjectivity, which can lead to negative experiences. Nature is a grounding force, the center of gravity, and is found and experienced in meditation.

dicreaven51

I am grateful for the last paragraphs of your article where you brought up the "middle way." That Buddhist concept was in my thoughts as i read this article. I meditate moderately with intention, to become more present and centered. It usually enhances my day to day life but not always. If it is not useful i would not do it, but i pray rarely and it feels spiritual for me to strive for balance. I have limitations. A day long meditation would be overwhelming for me. I have my middle way and i endorse that each of us discover that for ourselves.

B_C6977

This is so crazy, I think I might have had my own negative side effects from meditating! Nothing major, but definitely short dissociative episodes. **That being said, I was dealing with a great deal of depression and hopelessness at the time and it helped me find

my own form of enlightenment through lots of Zen Buddhist writings. Was it a good tradeoff? I think so. I rarely meditate nowadays. I do try to always remember Śūnyatā and how it applies to the immateriality of my daily life. This helps me not spiral or get more anxious at critical times! [TLDR Yes use meditation with caution]

ronaldbelcher

Meditation was never meant to be a panacea for every human psychological problem. It is a way to quiet endless thoughts, reduce automatic unhealthy emotional responses and hopefully help experience the world more directly without intervening thoughts and emotions. It can help with symptoms of mild anxiety and depression (aka, the human condition) but not cure or prevent symptoms of mental illness. The fact that it was "sold" to people as something else reflects our capitalist tendency to make money off of anything and everything. Witness the sale of useless wellness products and fake treatments like Reiki. It also reflects our cognitive bias to overgeneralize and use a one-size-fits-all approach to complex issues. People who experience more troubling thoughts and emotions are looking for help and are more likely to seek out meditation as a treatment or cure. These people may seek out meditation more than others but it will not cure their march towards more serious mental health symptoms. Please stop expecting meditation to cure all human ills. It was always a false expectation.

tippytop

I would be interested in a study comparing seated meditation and a more

body-mind style of yoga. Either can be an opportunity to observe our thoughts, but in a different way.

Bede

This reminds me of the so-called "study" that showed that flossing one's teeth was actually detrimental to oral health.

When a single scientific study conflicts with common sense and centuries of proven practice, we need to throw out the scientific study.

Cobweb.Henry

But it doesn't contradict "common sense and centuries of proven practice." The article clearly states that the literature has contained indications of potential issues for centuries. It's really helpful to read all the way through articles.

Myusername2

This article just confirmed that I will not be renewing my Atlantic subscription 😞

FeliciaVG

(Edited)

I found this article really interesting primarily because it only discussed the Buddhist aspect of meditation. Buddhist are not the only ones that practice meditation.

Other traditions practice meditation. Meditation is practiced in Judaism, early Christianity, Hinduism and Islam. So maybe the issue of meditation isn't about the practice itself but how it's practice in the different traditions. I would love to see more information or studies that delve deeper into the differences in the way meditation is practice based on the tradition.

Willjp

I am wondering if there are any studies of the percentage of people with psychotic breaks or severe adverse effects from recreational use of psychedelics, and if the numbers are similar to those quoted in the article. I realize it would be difficult and probably have to rely on a lot of self reporting. From my own perspective and use it would seem to be similar.

michael_carbary

You're ultimately cracking the illusion that the life you're living is an illusion and not the ultimate reality. That can be an uncomfortable and potentially terrifying journey, but ultimately worth it, but I suspect not everyone is ready and deeply vivid and uncomfortable dreams and fragmented sleep are a price you pay. One benefit is learning to really let stuff that is ultimately minor go. There's real peace in that, but the journey is not easy.

gregnowell

....a third began experiencing “messianic visions” about the “need to sacrifice myself in some way for the benefit of saving mankind”...

Whoa, everything in moderation is the cure. Meditation has done wonders for my life, but it's only a 20 minute meditation that's needed.

TPE

Ms. Khazan, might you have disclosed your personal struggles with meditation/ mindfulness (you misleadingly use the words interchangeably) up front rather than at the end of your article? A little self-reflection could have produced a more balanced article.

orionoir

an off-hand comment, 'meditation is practicing to be dead,' made the practice more accessible. were i suicidal there might be a downside to this practice, but in ordinary life it's been a helpful way to relax and perhaps remind myself that sooner or later i will in fact be gone.

way back when, as a narcissistic athlete, i worked at lowering my heart rate. when you're in endurance shape, of course, your resting pulse tends low, but with a certain amount of trial and error you can get it lower. did I get into the 20s? 30's a barrier.

with any kind of deliberate slowing, you are in some sense moving closer to death. once again, i think that's a good thing, but not to be undertaken if you're thinking of jumping from high places.

and so with trying to slow or stop your thoughts: if you were to achieve that, how would you know to restart them?

rmjbckom

I've always enjoyed your work Olga but this was your best article to date 🙌🙌🙌

jreibling

To me recognizing “no-self” does not mean:

- forgetting that you are a person;
- feeling that your home belongs to someone else;
- becoming emotionally numb;
- losing your bodily boundaries;
- being unable to drive or maintain relationships;
- becoming detached from reality.

It means noticing that, when I search present experience, I cannot find an additional “I” sitting behind my eyes, directing everything. There are sights, sounds, bodily sensations, thoughts and intentions—but no separate observer standing outside them.

That insight should ordinarily make experience feel more immediate and intimate, not alien. It can lessen self-consciousness while leaving personality, memory, practical identity, planning and relationships intact.

As I read this I’m reminded of my total confusion when first trying to understand “the illusion of the self” and related concepts that Sam Harris covers in his Waking Up app. I finally got it after the umpteenth time of “looking for the looker”. I felt relieved and empowered. I don’t have to fixate on past negatives. Leaves room for enjoying moments of joy I otherwise would have missed!

jodyh97

I’ve taken up Buddhist practices and teachings over the course of the last 10 years, working with highly experienced teachers who have guided many students for decades. I’m not one to meditate daily much beyond 45 minutes though in retreat meditations are more extended. I haven’t experienced the negative effects described in this article, but I could see how it might happen. I read about half of the article and couldn’t continue because I doubt the depth of the author’s knowledge of the many schools of Buddhism and the different interpretations of different aspects of Buddhism. Those interpretations are often hotly contested. This is a limitation of journalists in writing about a topic like this. As a former academic, I think there are also comparable limitations facing academic studies. Both study deeply their topics and even so delusions abound.

crestedbluejay

Meditation is a journey without a goal and to market it, as something other than an opportunity to get to know yourself and develop compassion for yourself and others, is

wrong-headed and wrong-hearted from the start. I tired of it, long before reading much of the article.

agarwal

Meditation is not for everybody - just as running is not for everyone. It requires a way of being and say if one were to talk about Vipassana then it should not be practiced by all and sundry.

Implicit in Vipassana is the concept of past lives and future lives, without that grounding Vipassana is potentially useless and dare I say, harmful.

There is a certain level of discipline that is required and one has to be very careful while practicing Vipassana.

I think most folks would be better off using conventional western clinical interventions.

Fjanat

Interesting read

It seems the research on the meditation effect on us fallen into a trap that we do not live in a vacuum. So active mindfulness may ease the environmental stress but keep us grounded in reality that we are not on island. Medication may help some clinical symptoms. Also many religions advocate for solitude during your daily life but it lost its purpose.

JJFlowers

I am a spiritualist, a lifelong yogi (my mom gave me yoga books to help with my gymnastics and while yoga went the way of all things, yoga was forever) and I teach pranayama and metta-meditation. First, and primarily reality is a creation of our consciousness. The hard problem isn't just hard, but rather it is impossible, because consciousness does not originate in the brain. The brain receives consciousness. Unless, someone out there can explain how a clump of cells holds the memory of your mother's

perfume, the directions to the supermarket or a thousand different trees? That our consciousness, our thoughts, emotions and beliefs create the reality that shows up explains much of these scientific studies, confirmation bias, the replication crisis in science. So if this scientists sets out to discover harms in meditation, she will no doubt find this.

Are there harms in meditation? You bet. You are opening up your body, your energy system to unseen forces in the spiritual realm and unless you have protection and guidance, watch out.

msslustig

I joined a zen Buddhist church when

I was 18. I enjoyed the meditation

so much that I began increasing the

days and hours until I was

Meditating four and five hours a day!

I found myself disinterested in everything else

Else. I stopped meditating.

Paperdoll3

It's pretty easy, one could get used to that, apparently even addicted.

MakerOfSalads

On podcasts like “Buddha at the Gas Pump,” Rick Archer (who has a multi-decade background in meditation through a Hindu/yogic tradition) interviews LOTS of practitioners, academics, experiencers who describe achieving a non-dualistic state (dissociative) through meditation or Kundalini awakening. Frankly, this seems the goal for many serious practitioners. And for many of those interviewed, this non-dual/dissociative state can bring great enlightenment. For others it results in “spiritual Emergency” and psychological breakdown. It’s a pretty openly discussed phenomenon on this long-running podcast with thousands of interviews. Meditation is

greatly helpful for many/most, but like statin drugs or metformin (both great treatments), won't be tolerated by 10% of the population.

nickribush

The problem with this article and, it would seem, Britton's work is that they talk about meditation as if it were one thing. In Buddhism, there are thousands of different meditations, so which one do they mean? Not much space here but years ago I wrote this: <https://www.lamayeshe.com/article/meditation-tibetan-buddhism> and this: <https://www.lamayeshe.com/article/meditation-against-drug-dependence>, so no need to make those points here. Furthermore, meditation need to be practiced on the basis of at least the five precepts (look them up), that is pure morality. Finally, there's the crucial question of motivation. Ideally, a meditation session should be motivated by bodhicitta (look that up too) or at least the wish to benefit a future life. If it is done seeking immediate results, happiness in this life alone, by definition that is a negative action, so no wonder some people at least experience negative results.

Polo54

I agree.. so over generalizing in this article

willfreedom

What is up with the terrible photographs in this piece? Why would you center the subject so aggressively?

Reggy

I really appreciate this article and the work of Dr. Britton. I'm empathetic to the push-back she's received at the hands of the "meditation industry," and thank her for her continued work.

I've been drawn to all of this from a very early (10 years of age) age, and for the last 40+ yrs, I've practiced and taught Tai Chi and meditation...I've only realized the "amplifying effects" on inherent personality traits and my native "neural wiring," that these practices have had in my own life, over the past 10 or so years and I've made the effort to be clear with my students, in terms of some of these potential "adverse effects."...Analogously, water and oxygen are both great and necessary for life, but too much, at the wrong times, can kill you!

PrairieVillage

So many want the answer to unanswerable questions.

dcacom

INTRODUCING MINDLESSNESS

We have all heard of *MINDFULNESS*, the mental discipline that allows you to “live in the moment.”

Now we can be introduced to *MINDLESSNESS*, the psychological slack state that permits you to “live out of the moment.”

It’s easy. These five simple exercises are a good introduction to mindlessness:

FIVE STEPS TO MINDLESSNESS

Put your hands, palms down, on a table. Push down as hard as you can. Is the table pushing back?

Look up in the sky. Where do clouds go when they are not there?

Imagine that an orange and a pear are circling each other 5 feet above the floor in your living room. What kind of a sound do they make? How long will they continue their motion?

Watch a favorite opera, like *La traviata*, from end to beginning (in reverse) and concentrate on the cast’s faces. How would you feel if you always spoke backwards and nobody could understand you?

A recent survey showed that most people do not understand at least a few road signs. Pick five of the following symbols and explain the meaning of each when used as a traffic sign. Do you think they should be black-on-yellow (advisory) or black-on-white (mandatory)?

Ω 🏠 ❖ ⚔️ ☒ Ⓡ Ⓢ

BuddhaBids

I'll save you time: woman who's a bit mentally unbalanced looks into woo and calls it meditation. I don't consider anything Kornfeld espouses to be Buddhism.

gloD

It seems the real scientific study Britton needs to adventure into is the science of depression, anxiety and mental illness, all of which may have been present in her subjects before they began these long sessions of silence and mediation. What's already been proven, that mental health improves with supportive fellowship and physical exercise, has been taken away from the subjects of her studies. This article left me with a bad taste. Academia does not seem aligned with any good spiritual teaching, something about the ego.

Mcanic

You don't see the ego in some of these 'spiritual teachers'? Doctors are recommending meditation to those with anxiety, depression, and mental illness, so I'm not really sure what point you're trying to make.

I_am_annoyed

Buddhism is vast, Insight and Theravada are not the only forms of practice and lineage. This article was not clear about that, at all. Super frustrating.

v_v

Meditation induced psychosis is going to become bragging rights in a certain set of people.

In all seriousness though, as a psychologist I love how mindfulness provides a detailed way to be. Instead of all that distracting, suppressing and ruminating we're usually doing.

batyalee58

Interesting that most comments are addressing Buddhist practices and ideologies. Transcendental Meditation (TM) uses Hindu teachings. I learned it at age 15 in 1973 and attended many week-long and weekend retreats thru 1984, where we were told that any unpleasant experiences were just the body and mind's way of releasing stress. There were definitely people who were experiencing some weird stuff who probably should've been told to ease up on the time spent meditating. But they were making a lot of money. It was irresponsible of them and very much part of a cult, tho I do still find benefit in doing the basic meditation on my own a few times a week.

realitymanagement

Is it possible that hallucinations in AI might be triggered by something resembling meditation? Or, simply a lack of external stimulus?

WTK

Does a circuit board possess Buddha nature?

scottmo

(Edited)

Great article. I'm a Buddhist who meditates 15-20 minutes daily. Meditation helps me maintain equilibrium in my life and helps me keep things (good and bad) in perspective

As other commenters have noted, meditation taken to extremes can certainly have negative effects. This is true for other healthful activities like exercise, eating or drinking.

One glass of wine per day is perfectly safe and healthy for most people. A whole bottle per day is generally not. And some people are allergic to it and should avoid it.

You nailed it at the very end of the article when you referenced the middle way taught by the Buddha. Meditation is a tool, not an end in itself. My meditation practice helps me try to live according to Buddhist principles like the eightfold path. It is available to all who are interested. Like any tool it can be abused.

MattB

10 minutes in the morning before work was useful to settle my "monkey mind" (Yongey Mingyur Rinpoche). Sometimes at night it helps calm the chatter so I can go back to sleep. That's about as far as I want to go with it, after that it can move to land of magical thinking.

jluth1963

I really appreciate the counter balance in this article. I have ways of relaxing, breathing exercises etc, and I get to decide how and what I do. I'm not interested in having anyone "guru", "teacher" or whatever, tell me what I should do. And, I radically accept that. 😊

GdsMario

Sounds like a huge waste of time. Better plan might be to just go outside and take a walk every day and talk to a few people!

Nimetu

If that's what you took away from it, maybe follow the pile of links showing that for most people it's far from a waste of time, and much less of a waste of time than sitting in a church being berated by some preacher, say

fred787

(Edited)

Ms. Khzahan, I have a small edit for you. Instead of the following five sentences which you created, "You don't enjoy meditation? *Good, you're not supposed to enjoy it.* You say it doesn't work for you? *Well, you're just not doing it right.* The answer to every problem with meditation seems to be more meditation," how about the following (which has been my experience):

"You don't enjoy mediation? *Good, don't meditate!*"

tony_guarisco

Did you study "Mindfulness" or TM?

They are not the same!

dpatter2

In 2021, Britton, Lindahl, and colleagues published an article on the adverse effects of meditation (<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/35174010>). Their concluding sentence in the abstract was "Meditation practice in MBPs (mindfulness based practices) is associated with transient distress and negative impacts at **similar rates to other psychological treatments.**" Stated otherwise, adverse effects occur, but with a level of risk no greater than with other mental health interventions. Participants in this particular study of mindfulness based cognitive therapy (MBCT) had pre-treatment "mild to severe levels of depression and persistently high levels of negative affect." Despite "the transient distress and negative impacts", the study found overall treatment efficacy with large effect size improvements from baseline to posttreatment and at week 20 follow-up.

It is too her credit that Ms. Khazan sought out and offered voice to a wide range of perspectives from the community of mindfulness teachers. However, the tenor and direction of this article would likely have been different and perhaps a bit more balanced if she had included the major findings of the above referenced article.

kevinomahoney

This was helpful to me.

As someone who has seen a lot, I still want to see more.

chuckjines

Joel Kramer and Diana Alstad's 'The Guru Papers' shreds many of the authoritarian practices of Eastern Religion/philosophy'.

Buddhism doesn't escape their keen eye. Their criticism is scathing.

RoyFCarpenter

So everyone commenting is against Britton. Hmmm. Methinks the lady doth...

DanFrazier

I don't meditate but it sounds like meditation might actually be causing problems for some people. But it seems difficult to disentangle problems caused by meditation from underlying problems that might have prompted the meditation in the first place, or from concurrent problems like the use of mind altering substances, that might be especially common in people who meditate.

If you spend hours essentially motionless and if you eat very little, it stands to reason that you might have trouble sleeping. After all, you were not getting any physical exercise while meditating, and your body will not even have the normal workload of digesting food.

I'm pretty sure that people with PTSD commonly experience dissociative states, so some of the dissociative experiences attributed to meditation may in fact arise from other causes like PTSD.

Likewise, tics are associated with autism, and star-like visual bursts may have other causes unrelated to meditation.

wsparry

This is an issue with the studies. People seek out meditation for a reason, often it is because they have underlying psychiatric issues that are not being addressed, and they think meditation is going to cure them. So some number in the group of people they're studying came to the study with underlying issues, which needed to be documented to understand which of the participants had been blessed as healthy by a psychiatrist. And which ones hadn't. The meditation center I go to requires everyone to fill out a form and one of the questions is, are you suffering from any psychiatric issues? If people are and claim they aren't, then it's really on them, not the meditation center, which tried their best. They offer daily counseling with the instructors who are very aware of the signs of people suffering and have sent many people home with the advice that they reach out to a medical professional.

The subject of this article clearly has an obsessive compulsive disorder. everything they do they seem to do to the extreme. there's clearly some psychiatric issues there that need to be addressed.

Meditation is designed to bring people back in oneness with themselves. It is not meant to cure psychiatric issues.

joannegardiner1919

It would be interesting for researchers to do a

Literature review of ancient Buddhist texts to

to study what side effects were found, their prev

prevalence, and what was done to mitigate

them. As with acupuncture, there is much

wisdom and insight in ancient texts

tongasslady

It could be that people's ability to visualize affects their meditation experiences. Some people have no ability to visualize, known as aphantasia and others have an extreme ability to visualize, known as hyperphantasia. Most people's abilities fall somewhere in the middle.

rgille

I've been around people who meditate for years, and I have literally never heard of anyone having a "bad" meditation experience. Though for some people it doesn't seem to do much. But I also don't think I know anybody who has pushed their meditation practice to the extent some of the people written about here have. I've always said about meditation, if it helps you do it, and if doesn't, don't. Maybe that applies in the context of this article too.

amdg_procco7

(Edited)

I found this article very helpful. I wonder if the act of deep meditation for some opens them up to what Ignatius of Loyola would call the "enemy." Christian contemplative practice, used by many religious orders such as the Discalced Carmelites and Cistercians does not lead to psychological issues that are described in this article. There is one commonality mentioned in the article. Buddhists monks and nuns meditate in community as do Christians monks and nuns. Lay people such as the subject of the article were sometimes engaged in this practice alone. Perhaps this is where the real danger lies, or for some, there needs to be more spiritual protection when undertaking this practice.

mp5557

Everything in moderation. To approach any practice/religion/prescription as a 'fix' or 'cure', is unwise. And there are parts in here that suggest the practice of mindfulness and meditation somehow equate to passive resignation in one's life or a loss of one's identity. They inform each other. Jon Kabat-Zinn repeatedly acknowledges that a mindfulness

practice doesn't remove our need for striving, it enhances it, sharpening our ability to accomplish and move forward. It's just that the striving might now be bred from a place of acceptance, rather than fear or shame.

WhoWhatWhere

I never meditate before I go to bed and never after 7 p.m., for the very reason cited in the article. TM practice tells you that the deep rest that meditation supports eventually, usually after six months to several years, requires fewer hours of sleep. Personally, if I am not tired, and I am getting two hours of my day back, I call that a win. TM recommends 20 minutes in the morning and 20 minutes in the afternoon.

rocketowlstudio

Years ago I did a meditation retreat. I was told it was a yoga retreat and I practiced yoga. When I got there it was just yoga meditation. I hated it. I went into one room where people were just doing their own meditating before the official group meditations were taking place. Suddenly a woman came up to me and said I was sitting in the men's section of the room. Well after being told that I just decided I'd rather leave the room than deal with that bullshit. Then we had to get up at 4:00 am for the first group meditation. When I got there everyone was waiting to see what meditation we would be doing. The name was announced on a screen with the chant's word. Everyone applauded at the choice. I thought the applause was weird, but I went for it and did the meditating chant with everyone. After about a half hour my head would drop down a bit because I was falling asleep. A woman came up to me and asked me to leave because I was bringing down the energy. I was more than happy to leave and go back and sleep. The only thing that I found uplifting and spiritual was walking the beautiful grounds. I left the next day and was very happy about that too.

RavRedd

The few studies (though not a large, randomized, cross-over studies from multiple centers) inferring the negative aspects of meditation, and also the anecdotal experiences are debatable.

Mindfulness has been extensively studied by fMRIs, and published in many peer-reviewed journals. So to prove these (negative) points, the studies ought include fMRIs, psychological analysis prior to being included in the studies, and other outcomes, ideally from multiple centers.

DonnaGee

From the article, it sounds like Britton's and others' initial inquiry into the negative effects has opened the door to larger, deeper, and more expansive research, as you suggest

RavRedd

(Edited)

MBSR - Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction - developed by Dr Jon Kabat-Zinn (from University of Massachusetts Medical School) in 1979, was shown to be significantly beneficial. Subsequently, MBSR was independently studied by universities from other countries, and is now being recommended in many situations, as an evidence-based intervention.

Therefore, even the findings of Britton ought to be studied from independent researchers, as pointed by you.

SillyScreamingSavage

(Edited)

I always found intense meditation with an emphasis, on the breath, for about 30 minutes before going into combat while on the point position - to provide a quick focus when chaotic action exploded - accompanied by a pleasant disassociation from the cares and consequences of my immediate actions - which on multiple occasions kept myself and my teammates alive. What the article listed as some potential negative effects of meditation, in some settings can foster quick execution of critical well trained actions that may allow you and others to survive. There are situations when a walk on the “dark side” of meditation is the preferred path to travel.

Combat Freeze Frame

There is a place where numbers fall
with life and death summed on the wall.

Where slow time sifts thru the hour glass
and freeze frames show what soon may pass.

Where all the paths leave flowing wakes
that trace life lines each choice you make.

There is no fear nor hope or joy.
Power and will you must employ.

d_pauleen

Zen and the Samurai.

SillyScreamingSavage

Exactly so, and the unrelenting focus required, coupled with the need for immediate effective action untainted by second guessing, applies in any life and death crisis situation. This has been known for centuries across many civilizations. For some of us, we can prepare to slip into this vital state where our full capabilities are realized, through meditation. The paradox remains, if you are distracted by fear over whether you will die,

then it is less likely you will have the concentrated focus required to take effective actions to foster your own and others survival.

“The battlefield is a place of standing corpses [the walking dead].

He who is resolved to die will live; he who hopes to survive by luck will die.”

The quote comes from the classical military text, Wuzi, by the ancient Chinese general and military strategist Wu Qi.

LauriD

I am moved by the photo of Britton, who looks extremely sad. She began life with such motivation and curiosity, asking such profound questions, among them "Who is looking out of my eyes?" So I am reluctant to judge or criticize her work, and won't. One thing that I don't hear a lot of in her article or in the comments section- at least what I have read and I intend to read it all- is about having a qualified master of a lineage of meditation and teachings to guide the practitioner. This is extremely important, in fact, vital. Many masters of Buddhism were concerned when these teachings began to spread widely in the west that a, they would be distorted, b, they would be commercialized, made into a product, or c, they would be taught by unqualified teachers. And in fact, many of these things have happened. As many commenters have said, the motivation for having a meditative practice is very important. It's not really to become more relaxed, though that may happen. Usually it's to discover something about oneself and the nature of existence. Otherwise it's not serious. And going into practices like these without a guide is risky, as she said. These are practices and disciplines and studies that people have followed for thousands of years and have developed ways to approach that are not harmful, but they are rigorous. Thank you for the article. "Spiritual emergencies" are a thing, and those who have them need rescuing.

HannahRose

Of course meditation is not a good fit for everyone. Nothing is. During meditation teacher training, we learned people with PTSD and other disturbed mental or physical states can experience flooding and other negative side effects when meditating. Caution was advised. So, I'm not surprised by some of Dr. Britton's finding. Being curious about research methods and findings, serves us better regardless of discipline, especially when those findings challenge our pre-existing beliefs.

Misconceptions about what meditation is and isn't is confounded by our western bias for over-valuing achievement. As a culture we focus too little on qualities such as kindness, being caring, generous, thoughtful, compassionate. We often approach meditation with this same achievement orientation. We think "I'm a bad meditator" if our to-do list or persistent negative thoughts come up. We're not "good" at meditating if we don't achieve a sense of calm, bliss, or other positive states. Meditation is not about "achieving" a particular state. It is about noticing what arises when we meditate. It trains us to see and accept what is, even and especially when trying to bring about change. We sit and realize our self-thoughts are harsh, hurtful and unhelpful and notice when we get caught in their grip. Only then can we pause, breathe, loosen their grip, and let them pass. Change begins with noticing what is. Relaxing? Sleeping better? Possibly, but working to achieve those outcomes in antithetical.

SWBausch

I need to carefully read the article. My summary response to "reduced sleep" is "who says deep sleep or a lot of sleep is best?"

In the Bhagavad Gita, the prince Arjuna is referred to as Gudakesha, the conqueror of sleep, by his friend Krishna, as a compliment.

Krishna describes the three modes of material nature: Goodness, Passion, Ignorance, or Sattva, Kama, Tamas, respectively.

Sleep is in the mode or ignorance. Yes, we need it, especially as conditioned souls. The Vaishnava philosophy suggests an adult pursuing a life of meditation and Goodness requires no more than six hours a night.

Children, the ill, and laborers require more sleep, of course. But a healthy saintly person freeing themselves from a life of materialism most likely does not.

A perfected soul requires little sleep.

Alokin

Would like to know what Sam Harris thinks of all this.

deqm

This is And extremely irresponsible piece of so-called journalism my God this woman was disturbed from day one then meditated three hours a day that is hardly the typical meditation diet of millions of people who have been demonstrably helped by meditation. Olga seems so desperate find a cynical angle on everything she should not be allowed free rein at this August establishment.

jluth1963

I don't read this as a 'cynical angle'. I read it as a counterbalance to the idea that meditation is good for everyone. It actually is not. And I have worked in the mental health and addiction field where meditation along with mindfulness has been touted as essential for recovery. If, meditation works for you, great. Maybe (tongue in cheek here) meditate on why Olga's article troubles you so much. 'She should be not allowed....' Really?

Cobweb.Henry

Agree entirely with this response. The original comment seems a bit ... unpunctuated, in both the literal and metaphoric senses.

ericjurgenson

I do wish that someone somewhere could actually explain what meditation is. It is always so ill-defined and amorphous that I cant help screaming placebo. these people need to get a life.

To be sure we need relaxation to recharge our creativity, as my mother has always admonished, but anyone who thinks they are getting somewhere by trying to blank out their mind for hours a day is simply wasting their life.

beverlyjk

Meditation is not about trying to blank out your mind.

Skyman

Okaaaay, but ericjurgenson's question was what **is** it about?

Decca

My non-expert take is that it is more about focusing the mind. You usually have something you try to keep your mind focused on - whether external or internal or awareness of thoughts - you try to stay focused on that rather than having your thought/awareness pulled into distractions. It really doesn't have anything to do with relaxation though people may feel more calm.

my2cents

The word actually means "to become familiar with." There are many kinds of meditation--mindfulness is just one. It's often used as a simple bridge into other types, like analytical meditation, single-point, calm-abiding, etc. The secularization of mindfulness and the marketing it as a method of stress relief is a serious diminishment of its potential to help and can result in harm, as the article says.

vivianap

For me, one of the main topics here is how capitalistic society and more broadly speaking the "West" appropriates traditions and practices from other cultures and turn them into profit, stripping them from their original context, meaning and value. I'm not arguing for the restrictions of such practices but more for a well-rounded understanding of what they are. This article also made me think of the other one about the decline of yoga, which was for most nothing more than a trend.

Northeastener

She makes huge assumptions, uses a small research study as some type of expertise and then charges as if she has a “secret method” to help people. She is a trauma survivor but she is also a “capitalist” denigrating Buddhism for bucks.

CtGa

(Edited)

Go to Google Scholar and type in the query "adverse effects from meditation." You will be surprised, I suspect, at the sheer number of papers, articles, and books in the academic community noting and documenting the phenomenon.

The oft-repeated claim in this comment section that there is scant evidence of adverse reactions to meditation is likely due to the rarity of articles addressing the topic in general interest publications. Academia, on the other hand, appears quite familiar with it.

(And I'll add that there is no indication that Britton is getting rich from her assistance to others, as opposed to the actual purveyors of westernized meditation and mindfulness practices.)

Cletis

Fascinating and well done.

Felfel

title is misleading.

catladie11

I guess I'm lucky that my worst experience with meditation was that it just didn't do much for me, LOL.

shalinibahl

Britton's work took courage and the field needed it. But this piece blunts its own usefulness.

Mindfulness and meditation aren't synonyms. The title says mindfulness; the reporting is about meditation. Mindfulness is a three-part training — ethical conduct, attention, wisdom. Much of what's documented here is what happens when you keep one leg of the tripod and sell it as a technique.

Meditation isn't one thing. The cases span Tantric practice, silent retreat, an 8-week clinical program, and ten minutes with an app. Reporting adverse effects across all of them is like reporting the adverse effects of "medication."

The sleep claim rests on an aphorism. A quick search reveals meta-analyses finding meditation improves sleep quality. Readers deserved to know the evidence is mixed.

And there's no takeaway — you finish knowing harm exists, and nothing about for whom, at what dose, with what safeguards.

MBSR courses screen participants. If someone reports distress or works with a therapist, we talk first. That isn't airtight of course. Also sessions run 5 to 40 minutes, sitting, walking or lying down, and difficulty is named in advance rather than explained away. None of that exists in an app.

That's the real story: a delivery system with neither the traditional container of teacher, ethics and community, nor the clinical one of screening and monitoring.

Also, meditation wasn't only for monks. In the Pali canon the Buddha teaches kings, merchants, householders and soldiers.

BabsPHL

"meditation, a multibillion-dollar industry that is promoted as a treatment for.... many other ailments, can sometimes, for some people, cause severe and lasting side effects"

another big money maker for "influencers" and bloggers is exposed for the frauds it's selling!

Cinnabar

This is an extremely interesting article because around 1984 I bought a book on meditation - it was a really new thing back then. One of the first paragraphs started with concentrate a flower, to see the textures, etc. Then it said if any of this makes you feel

bad, anxious. etc. then stop immediately. Then it went on to say you can try an different object but don't do flowers again. Still if the new object makes you feel bad stop. I wish I know the name of that book. It looks like we forgot a lot of what was once known.

tanglewoodtree

(Edited)

The article never really addresses a glaring issue--the lack of controls. It mentions the lack of a placebo, but that is different. Britton's first study had controls of a sort, but with a sample size of 13/group, it would be hard to believe any "finding" from that study. There is a selection bias going on (most likely), and this long article didn't address it at all. The data on mindfulness being potentially harmful, as presented, is not at all convincing. Hopefully the literature on the adverse effects of mindfulness is much better than this article regarding appropriate controls.

dansarah0

Something I would like to see is a description of exactly what the meditator is supposed to be “doing” with their mind. Are there varieties of approaches to meditating? And what is happening neurologically during various types of meditation? I think there are ways of studying all that. It seems to me that as sentient beings living in a material world, the most important need is to figure out what is true about that interface between material reality and the vastness of what we may be experiencing mentally.

guspapadonikos

Παν μέτρων ἀριστὼν, meditation can be thought of as extreme introversion, life runs on equilibrium.

djp1

(Edited)

Thought-provoking article. Although the “Varieties” study it is centered on is not the kind of controlled study that could scientifically demonstrate that engaging in meditation actually caused the reported difficulties.

dpurdyhv

I believe the key to understanding these phenomena is buried 3/4's of the way through the article when the author notes that, '...retreats may exacerbate preexisting psychological problems.' Indeed, we all bring a lifetime's worth of associations — both good and bad — to everything we do, including meditation. I've come to believe that these liminally conscious associations comprise our habitual sense of self. It can be a helpful or hurtful habit; but it's only a construct that can obscure deeper truths. Meditation can help us decouple such habitual associations. And, I can see that experiencing this form of 'non-attachment' might be deeply unsettling. However, exploring our ground form of being to find subtler truths is well worth that sense of displacement.

After a decade as a young Quaker, then a decade using a mantra-based meditation practice from the School of Practical Philosophy, a couple of years meditating with Buddhist-adjacent practitioners from The Interdependence Project and, finally using mediation in an improv class that I taught for 6 years at NYU, I find this article and the research at its core to be unconvincing.

From a decade of study of neuroscience, it's become clear to me that the brain's so-called Default Mode Network - what some call the Narrative Network - is a blank slate where human perception and reflection combine to create a construct of how we make sense of reality. That construct helps me to understand my decades of meditation experience.

timeliness

if you really study and practice the original teachings of the Buddha with a good teacher, none of this will apply and it's all good. Meditation is one of the main parts of it. It's kind of an integrated thing and if you have a good teacher, you will understand it really does transcend modern world versus ancient world, culture, etc.

Bondosan

Nichiren taught chanting Nam-myoho-range-kyo as opposed to meditation. I highly recommend it.

buddhability.org

l_evans

“EVERYONE KNOWS that if you meditate enough, you stop sleeping.”



sampson_dk

I practice centering prayer, a practice that so resembles meditation that I just usually say, "I meditate." I often have trouble getting and staying asleep. Recently, I've realized that when I am having sleep issues, my smart watch congratulates me on my lengthy daytime nap. That "nap" also shows on my tracker at the very time I was practicing centering prayer. I now limit my prayer to 10-20 minutes and sleep quality has improved. This article seems to reinforce what observed.

Yadayadahot

My learning is buddhist awareness is about the human condition.

ctiani

It's interesting to hear these symptoms discussed here, in the context of meditation. Loss of sleep and the feeling of electric shocks, this is what I experienced before a hospitalization for psychosis, I still take medication for these symptoms which return if I stop, the other symptom is a feeling of euphoria and contentedness as well as loss of appetite. I wonder if this is what the objective of meditation really is, to be enlightened is to be psychotic.

Gtclarker

Dear Prudence. (Inspired by true events)

Jepstein

Western woman experiences ego death - chaos ensues.

When you open your third eye all you will see is Satan

ghiker

Was there a control group referenced in these studies? A good topic for a meta analysis and more study for sure for sure.

Mcanic

Literally stated in the article. No way to placebo meditation.

Whaea

Wow! Over 800 comments and quite a few people triggered by the sample I have read. No mention in the article of Transcendental meditation which came to the west in the 60s and was apparently designed to the western way of life. I meditated for 30 years and then I gradually stopped. I wondered what life would be without it and I found it wasn't any different. However, when I first started, in my 20s, I found meditation and other mindfulness practices most helpful in dealing with anxiety and gaining mental stability.

elasha

There are a lot of problems with the research as well as the conclusions drawn in this article. I could write up an extensive critique if you want, but in summary. Buddhism is about awakening to real reality, a reality that is foreign to us in the civilized mindset. Meditation is the method to get there. When you're taking the veil off of what's real, it's painful, but ultimately leads to liberation.

For example, I have had a lifelong desire to deal with racism. My Southern family was insanely racist and sexist when I was growing up. It wasn't until I studied the black histories published about whiteness that the veil was lifted for me. It gave me a lot of anxiety that I had actually thought, beyond awareness, that I was superior because of my skin color and culture.

I not only felt extreme pain over my ignorance, but also became anxious about the safety of people of color. Meditation is doing the same lifting of the veil, which is why it's so important to have a sangha when you do these things.

You're just flat-out wrong in many ways. One, Buddhism was documenting how indigenous people existed before colonization. The entire tantric movement came from people of the forest outside of monasteries. The Buddha's moms were from those people, which is how he got access to the mindset and was motivated to leave the palace (aka civilization, the Aryan civilization, patriarchy).

Polo54

Excellent points... the research cited here was largely anecdotal and not consistent with standard peer reviewed studies

thonig

For me, it's the "one size fits all" application of meditation that feels problematic. While sitting for hours at a time appeals to some, it doesn't to everyone. And the semi-somnolent vibe and social conformity of the meditation subculture have always struck me as problematic. Ditto for the "non judgmental philosophy" of Buddhism. When my boss started promoting meditation sessions at my Silicon Valley office in the mid-aughts, it had the whiff of another "how to get ahead" ritual. I tried the group sessions once or twice, and then stopped. Nonetheless, years later, I grew to appreciate the apps. The occasional guided 10-minute sit is pleasant. I'm not sure if this article supports "meditation in moderation," but after reading it, I feel more comfortable with my choices. (Louise Y, subscriber's spouse)

lorrainesp

<https://www.nytimes.com/spotlight/10-minute-challenge>

Can you spend some uninterrupted time looking at one piece of art?

eric64

Thonig, looking at art is a snore - the real mindful magic is medium loud Norwegian Black Metal, give it a try!

NetZero

I prefer spacing out over meditation.

WRKnechtPh.D.

Well, thanks for doing exactly what critics of statistically flawed studies so often criticize -- cherry picking one individual's case, and spooling it up into a giant critique against something, in this case meditation.

I've been meditating since 1973, and it's produced no fearful effects. At least none as fearful as, say, having to watch donald trump turn American democracy into oligarchy. Now THAT is something that disturbs my sleep !

DrDAH222

So you are one person. That is called a case study and proves nothing. I have no attachment to meditating or not, but this is interesting and worthy of independent well-designed study.

BNNYLVY

Why I am not a Buddhist

Evan Thompson

<https://yalebooks.yale.edu/book/9780300264678/why-i-am-not-a-buddhist/>

OpenMindedSkeptic

REEFER MADNESS!

Beatriz

I enjoyed reading this article as it brings forward a different perspective to meditation as a way to expand our knowledge of it. However, as a clinician myself, I will argue that Briton's reflections on the negative side of meditation miss the reflection of emotional, psychological make up of her participants, making her study an incomplete research but a fertile soil for her business...

RonBot

Does 45 minutes of focused Christian prayer (which has some similarities to meditation) present similar risk ? When Jesus was asked how to pray, he presented what is now called "The Lord's Prayer", which is about a minute in length. I'm not sure if there are other teachings that have the idea of extended mindful prayer in the Bible.

4kindness

From the Psalms:

Wait for the LORD; be strong, and let your heart take courage; wait for the LORD!

Be still before the LORD, and wait patiently for him.

Be still, and know that I am God!

For God alone my soul waits in silence, for my hope is from him.

genXfemale

I wonder about the cofounder of drug use, especially since the percentage of people having bad experiences was higher at retreats, where I would suspect you'd have a crowd that is more open to experimenting with drugs. People don't always like to admit to drug use, even psychedelics. It would be helpful to know if the surveys asked about that.

DCLawyer

Interesting that almost two decades before 2020 we have this clear example of an academic researcher putting politics over ethics and truth. Suggests “Woke 1” goes back way further than pandemic.

mh36

Everything in moderation.

Too much of a good is apparently bad for you.

YBC

In Chinese, it's called "走火入魔". It's a bit difficult to translate. "走火" means that body's energy flow reverse itself, or going the wrong way; "入魔" means that one's mind loses rationality, connection with reality, etc. In martial art novels, there often are characters who went into this trap, and they are not that different from many examples cited here. I read another very long investigative reports years ago on the same topic - days after I returned from a 10-day retreat. I believe that these are all real, and having so much "faith" in meditation to think that it will be the magic "cure all" may itself be the seed for such bitter fruits. Still, I plan to go to my 5th 10-day retreat soon. I like to detach a bit from daily hustle (and phone) for a time period, and the best experience that I had (and why I kept returning) upon my return from a meditation retreat is a strong sense of clarity. My decision making was easier and faster, and my connection with family felt so much more intimate (hard to describe here). Unfortunately, that clarity faded after a time period as life got busy. In the past I thought that's because I didn't practice enough... but maybe that's not a bad thing at all. One thing that Buddha always warned against is "attachment", and "aversion". To only preach meditation's virtues seems like a form of attachment.

MaryKathleen

Enjoyed the insights in this article very much. I have never meditated, but have recommended this kind of (subdued) therapy for a stressed-out daughter.

At its end, I was humbled by two of Life's Lessons:

How we have so much to learn about brain/body.

How touching nature and its gifts is an immensely satisfying relief from everyday neuroses.

andrew_clifton

"Heleen Slagter, a cognitive neuroscientist at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam who studies meditation, says that part of the way the brain gives rise to our sense of self is by predicting how we will interact with the world in the future."

I know what all the words mean; but I have no clue what this sentence is getting at. Is it merely trivial: my current sense of self is that I am hungry, and so my next interaction with the world will be to stop off at the coffee shop and get a cheese scone with my latte? I don't meditate: but there are certainly nights when I lie awake wondering if, given the current political climate, there will even be a future for our species.

MrNews

Reminds me of the agnostic dyslectic insomniac, who lies awake at night wondering if there really is a Dog...

mskathryns

This is old information. Very dated, I am disappointed in the Atlantic..

jscottanderson

Buddadasa warns about this in his teachings, although he characterizes it as a sort of way station. His teachings on the Dhamma are very accessible and were very helpful to me when I first encountered the Dhamma.

<https://www.buddhanet.net/biobudas/>

kcp

What a waste of time reading this. Summary: 'Nothing in excess.' Nothing new about this. Too much navel watching. Now, go enjoy life.

allilo1

I'm a little surprised someone was willing to write this article.

1. behavioral health research is far from reliable
2. doctors are inordinately vulnerable to group-think, as much or more than academics
3. not listening to patients (who tell doctors XYZ "empirically" validated treatment does not work for them specifically) should give rise to a legal cause of action, given the degree of intellectual malpractice at issue.

can we blame the chaos-agents who won't vaccinate their children? they have the wrong worries but the have right level of panic and outrage.

Phatikos

The biggest mistake made by those who at outset exposure to Buddhism is to simply take it for granted that Buddhism is just another religion. And with religions we look for one thing: comfort. Religions are drawn to be a cure for the ailments of life, being comforts when things are difficult, or solemnity when things are easy.

But, the first thing that the Buddha tells us is this:

Life is suffering.

This doesn't mean sometimes you will suffer, or that the suffering you experience is a temporary distraction. It says that ALL of life, every small and bit of living experience, IS SUFFERING. It is defined and experienced as such. Even those things we think are pleasurable or even ecstatic are simply different forms of suffering.

Secondly, why is life suffering? Because every time we see it we divide it, and every time it is divided it destroys itself. It becomes a falsehood. It is truly matter and anti-matter of reality.

This means that all our efforts to use religious dogma as a way of lessening our suffering is doomed to fail. It is until the very end of a long and difficult trek of trying and failing over and over again that it will all collapse and we will be left with nothing but the nothingness that never tried. Be ready for that moment.

This is why the best advice to a follower of Buddha is simply this: Kill the Buddha.

rjmarlowe

(Edited)

Did I miss where correlations were found with differing methods of meditation ? As well as commonalities among people suffering adverse effects, beyond those already suffering from common (severe and not) neuroses ?

I would find such detail most useful !

That such adverse effects exist is believable, and would be more useful with more specificity.

dleschyn

I have found meditating daily in moderation very helpful for stress and anxiety. After a retreat a few years ago, I did experience involuntary movement. I found myself dancing and moving in very specific and interesting ways spontaneously. It did not really disturb me, but made me curious about the mind and body connection. When I choose to, I can consciously flow into my body and give it space to take over my movements.

morpheus1041

I work daily with veterans who suffer from PTSD, some of which is related to combat exposure, some related to sexual trauma. I'd be very interested to hear how mindfulness has been applied to this population, and whether an excess of side side effects has been observed.

rocketowlstudio

rocketowlstudio

This comment has been deleted by the author.

Morganua

This last sentence...how very Evangelical can you get? It's just nasty

Petrus

Agreed. Nasty, not to mention un-Buddhist.

buchanantwo

(Edited)

Fond memories of the comedy of the Bhagwan and his silly followers in Oregon. It was heavy, then, man. Tattered remnants of that bedazzled band remain part of our cultural and political lives.

nome

Who got all those cars?

wollsahng

Oi!

tristan175115

It's totally fair at to point out risks such as risks of self-harm or psychosis through a practice. And then we can weigh up the risks of doing the practice or not doing the practice as mentioned in the article.

But you can can't reduce uncomfortable feelings that arise through meditation to you're doing it wrong - the world doesn't owe anyone a pleasurable existence. Sure if you don't wanna do it, don't do it but it's not gaslighting to ask someone to accept what arises

CTDad

People who do things like meditating have too much time on their hands and spend way too much time thinking about how they feel. Go out and do something productive. Today I cut down a dead 50-foot birch tree and trimmed up some overgrown shrubs. Feels good to be productive.

BuddhaBids

(Edited)

I'm a top producer in my sales field and going strong at 70. I barely have time to meditate but I do it at least three-minutes a day. You sound a bit like people who say " you're not depressed! Get out and take a walk, do something!"

Oh I'm also on 2 boards of directors, have a side business, and belong to a painting group.

Think_Thrice

I appreciate this perspective. I have seen both mindfulness and meditation harm people, especially young people and I think that practitioners need to take a big step back and consider all of the evidence, instead of just their confirmation bias.

mrrumbles

I really enjoyed the article. The part about all medicine having side effects or it isn't doing anything was excellent and something I hadn't considered before. The one quibble is the very strange and gratuitous slight on pursuing a PhD. The author has not done one (as far as I can tell) and it just seemed like an unnecessary comment to an otherwise excellent article.

MomofMayhem

My father started meditating about 10 years ago. He never missed a day, and was proud of that. He was actually meditating 2-3 hours a day several months ago...

6 weeks ago he killed himself. For someone who often talked about the illusion of control, I feel him to be a hypocrite for ending his life. His last act on earth was to completely control an outcome...

He suffered with chronic pain, and in his suicide letter to me he described trying to 'transcend the pain' via meditation, but was unable to do so.

So he shot himself in the temple instead.

I've struggled to understand his choice. My dad was always such a mentally strong person, I would have never guessed he would die by his own hand. I mean one has to be insane to be able to walk that long road; to make that decision that there is no coming back from, right?

Maybe he meditated himself to suicide...

pmellish

I am truly sorry for your loss.

jrlmbm

I am a Clinical Psychologist/Neuropsychologist with decades of practice. In my clinical work, I have used a wide range of relaxation techniques and hypnotherapy with clients, practices with elements in common with meditation. From the early days in practice, I have seen patients who failed to respond to therapy or had an unexpected paradoxical response. While not common, it is hard for me to imagine a clinician/teacher of any experience and competence who has not seen adverse responses to therapy--just as there are adverse responses to medications.

As noted in the article, some people are more likely to have an adverse response. My experience found those with what we now call, "Complex PTSD," were more at risk for a negative response. Also clients with personality disorders, like, "Borderline Personality," and other conditions that may not have been initially diagnosed. The easing of conscious boundaries in the therapy experience (or meditation practice) opens people up to feelings and memories they have avoided and which they lack the skills to manage.

It was disappointing to hear the self-serving remarks of Mindfulness teachers. It is the responsibility of a teacher or therapist to develop those skills, not to judge the client/student. Clients aren't resistant or failures.

If a client has a poor response to treatment, my first question is, " What have I missed?" Then, "How do I revise treatment to be effective?"

SliceLife

What is a "non-practicing Episcopalian home"? And what is the relevance of that to this story? Otherwise a very interesting read. By the way I cannot meditate, it is SOOOO boring. Having to sit through an almsgiving at our Buddhist temple is plenty for me.

terazawa3239

As an American who trained as a Zen Buddhist priest in America and Japan, I must admit that I always believed that people with heavy psychological problems do not always benefit from meditation. I've encountered several people, including a friend, who had psychotic breaks following intense meditation, but I also knew that those people had a heavy psychological burden to begin with. There is a large group of people in the USA who promote meditation as an alternative to psychotherapy. For people with mild "baggage", this is OK. I speak from experience since I had periods of depression from childhood. Fortunately, meditation did not exacerbate the depression, but it did push some buttons at the root of the depression that had to be dealt with appropriately in counselling. I never considered Buddhism therapy; it is my faith. That said, many people who practice meditation do consider it therapy. As someone who has lived in ordinary society and practiced meditation, as well as lived in a traditional priest monastery environment in Japan, I believe that it is more difficult to lead an ordinary life and do meditation than to live in a monastery where the entire lifestyle supports the practice, and you just live it day after day without the pressure of ordinary life decision-making. There is a reason the Buddha left his family and position as future King. But obsessive practice of meditation is not good. This is why the Buddha turned away from his first style of ascetic practice.

Anglophile

(Edited)

I always get confused. I live in a small Southern town with yogis and a lovely woman who had a guru. Her guru was born in the same Southern small town and played in the school band but went to India once (and also NY). I am (I think) very liberal, but I get confused about is it not okay to wear my Native American turquoise, but it's okay to be a swami? I love yoga, but I am not hypermobile and oddly it makes me sweat and all that

Buddhism makes an interesting combination with Baptists who became Episcopalians because the Anglicans can drink.

I think this is the problem with cultural appropriation (which is different from cultural borrowing, which is how the British gave us Earl Gray tea and a good curry). I thought "The Exorcist" was a documentary when I was a teenager, but my friends were into Carlos Castaneda, and I found them both terrifying.

I have no problem sitting still. Inertia is my middle name, but yoga is hard because I am trying not to fall down and trust me, I am very, very into the moment of not collapsing. Many people tell me to meditate. I'd rather read. I think of meditation in the same way I thought of LSD as a kid: I am naturally trippy enough, thank you. I didn't get rid of one devil ready to drag me to hell for my sins to start peeling away the layers of my consciousness. But I'll bet those retreats cost a LOT.

Parsifal

In Goenka's Vipassana retreats you are not allowed to give any money until after your first 10 day retreat.

Mayhec

I had never considered that meditation could be harmful this is very important research and article

36 years ago I started meditation with an instant calming effect

I woke up that night with a throbbing head never experiencing this before in any way

It was like a brick on my head

This switches on and off like a light since.

The transcendental teacher at the time said it was due to past lives and meditative practice

This was completely alien to me having working in mental health for 10 years

I have spent the last 36 years living with this every day travelling many gurus and esoteric paths constantly reading my thousands of book

There is a lot of danger in this when thinking to know what is a past live you find that you didn't lead a good one

My experience is there is more yes.

Life to life I am though clueless.

We are born develop a personality live a life then die and that life washes away

The initial researcher in this article to me has started a conversation of what being clueless means

Thank you

