

Shampoo, Rinse, and Repeat

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Easy peasy instructions written on our shampoo bottles to attain shiny healthy hair. Did you know that the same instructions that are found on our favorite hair shampoo are the same ones that can be used to find more peace and equanimity in your life, manage stress and increase global wellness?

Step 1 – shampoo, take your torrent of thoughts in your mind and clean them out

Step 2 – rinse, empty the vessel of your mind and look at the world with a ‘beginner’s mind’

Step 3 – repeat as necessary

Who knew the answer to happiness was printed right there in front of you?! A few questions arise with this simple analogy such as:



How does one empty their mind?

There are many avenues with which to attempt this great feat. Some people enjoy meditation, others mindfulness, and of course the prevalent maladaptive coping mechanisms that we’re all too familiar with that help us to ‘check-out’ of our feelings and thoughts such as over-drinking, over-eating, excessive shopping, etc. Mindfulness is the art of being present and aware in a non- judgmental state and allowing experiences to unfold without the intent of changing them or controlling them. Meditation is a formal practice and is Latin for ‘to ponder’ and it can be practiced in a variety of ways. There will be homework at the end for practicing shampooing your mind.

What is a ‘beginner’s mind’ and why do we want one?

In a beginner’s mind you are engaging in experiences with a clean slate and bring no preconceived notions of how things ‘should’ be to a situation. This allows you to leave judgement behind and see things from a fresh perspective. Losing our biases opens up a world of possibilities and our old scripts of how things ‘should’ be fall away, this is a very freeing and light state in which to experience our lives.

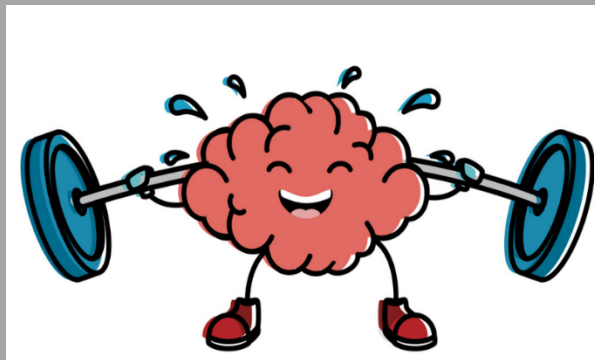
Why do we need to repeat?

Because we go back to our practiced habits. In order to change our habits, we must first repeatedly change our thoughts.

“That which we frequently think about and dwell upon, to this does the mind incline” – Nanamoli and Bodhi (1995)

Neuroscience for Dummies

When you go to the gym and lift weights the result is bigger and stronger muscles. Everyone knows this and yet few know that the brain works in the same manner. What we think and dwell on with frequency becomes stronger and more likely to be repeated, be it a negative or positive mental experience. The neurons in the regions of the brain that get activated over and over again grow and becomes stronger.



I am at heart a science geek and I love the science behind the practice of mindfulness and meditation. Let's take a moment to understand the weight lifting gym of our brains.

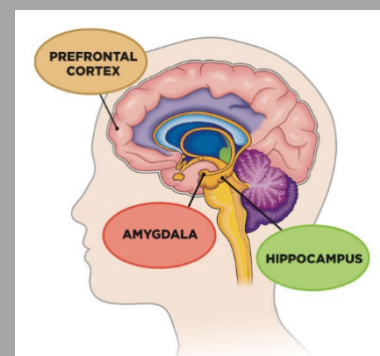
The prefrontal cortex (PFC) is responsible for reasoning and logic and other high level executive functions.

The amygdala is where our 'fight or flight' response comes from, it is very fast to react to stimuli and the very definition of stress.

The hippocampus is responsible for learning and memory.

Why do we care? Because if the amygdala goes to the gym every day it becomes very strong and that part of the brain literally grows and will wreak

havoc on our nervous system by constantly putting our body under elevated stress conditions. The same is true for the PFC and hippocampus. If we can grow the PFC and hippocampus then we can access our logic and reasoning before 'reacting' to a situation and overall reduce our stress load. Remember, reduced stress = better overall health.



The good news is that the science shows we CAN grow the PFC and hippocampus through meditation and mindfulness! This is critical to experiencing good mental health which is intrinsically tied to good physical health. Living with GBS/CIDP and variants inherently puts the body under stress and if that stress goes unchecked it can lead to much poorer outcomes than if that stress is well managed. Stress impairs memory (Wolf, 2009; Kirschbaum et al., 1993) and cognitive function (Buchanan & Tranel, 2008), creates physical and mental health problems such as anxiety and depression (Alem, Behrendt, Belot, & Biro, 2018), all of which are all the more devastating when the body is already struggling with illness. Let's get to work building resiliency in our brains to fight stress and enjoy wellness.

Homework!!!

The theme we have explored is that practice and repetition are the cornerstones to growing the areas of the brain that will lead to good mental and subsequently physical wellbeing. I invite you to focus on repetition for this exercise. Just keep going to your mental gym and growing your prefrontal cortex and hippocampus! Doesn't that sound sophisticated???

Get comfortable sitting with a straight spine. The most important thing is that you're comfortable and relaxed. Put one hand on your belly and the other hand on your chest. Take a deep breath in and feel your belly rise up. Your chest shouldn't be doing any of the work.

Breath in to the count of four seconds, hold that breath for four seconds, breath out for four seconds and hold empty lungs for four seconds. Your belly should fall and relax on exhale. Repeat this 4 x 4 breathing technique for at least 10 breaths, the more the better. Ideally make some time morning and night to do this breathing exercise. It really is that easy to start building a stronger brain. It is normal and ok if you get distracted and lose focus. Just keep coming back to your breath, the grocery list that intruded on your breathing will still be there after your practice.

About the author

Candine Blackbeard, BScN, RN, CCRN, is a registered nurse trained in evidence-based medicine. She has specialty in critical care medicine. She holds a certificate in Nursing Education for the Practice Setting from the University of Toronto and a certificate in Advanced Principles and Practice of Mindfulness from McMaster University. She is currently enrolled in a Masters of Science of Nursing degree at York University. She believes that utilizing conventional medicine with complementary therapies can help patients achieve optimal physical and mental wellness.

This article is not meant to offer medical advice but instead to introduce the practice of mindfulness, which can support the journey of wellness. For any specific medical questions, please speak to your physician.

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