



How Mindfulness Can Make Your Workouts More Effective

Being mindful while exercising comes with big benefits. Here are five smart ways to boost your brain-body connection.

It's common to distract ourselves during a workout. Maybe you watch reality TV on the treadmill, hike with your headphones on, or rehash your to-do list as you cycle. Hey, no shame—you deserve a round of applause just for breaking a sweat!

But according to experts, dropping the diversions and adopting a more mindful approach to fitness can pay off big-time—for your body and your brain.

Mindfulness while working out is about cultivating present-moment awareness. And when we become fully engaged in the act of exercising, we not only improve our physical results but, research has found, we can also boost our appreciation and enjoyment of the experience—which could ultimately help us stay committed to a fitness routine long-term.

Here's how to focus on the here and now (especially when you're working hard.)

Get grounded.

Before your other workout pause to take a few deep belly breaths. “As you inhale, imagine that your breath is carrying particles of concentration into your body. As you exhale, notice that all the distractions and stress are drifting away,” says sports psychologist JoAnn Dahlkoetter, Ph.D., author of *Sports Psychology Coaching for Your Performing Edge*.

Bringing your attention to the activity (whether it’s boxing or rowing) can make it easier to reach a “flow” state, which is when you’re completely immersed in the workout. Once that happens, the workout’s perceived level of difficulty decreases, and you actually perform better, explains Nike master trainer Joe Holder.

You might also try setting an intention pre-workout, says Sarah Romotsky, director of healthcare at Headspace, an app-based mindfulness company. It could be something simple, like “I’m grateful for my body’s ability to move” or “Show self-kindness.”

Develop goals.

Specifically, set process-oriented goals. Say you’re running a race or trying to hit a certain mileage—those are called outcome goals; process goals are the steps you take that help you get there. These might include perfecting your technique, setting your pace, or honing your mental attitude. Process goals direct your focus to what you’re doing in the moment, says Dahlkoetter.

Just make sure you aren’t so fixated on any one goal that you can’t adapt as conditions change. Dahlkoetter puts it this way: At the starting line of a race, you need to widen your focus to manage all that’s happening around you. By the middle of the race, you can be really attuned to your form and your breathing. In the final stretch, you may need to narrow your focus: all your energy should probably be centered on putting one foot in front of the other till you make it to the finish line. Knowing which goals to focus on when will serve you well.



Try not to zone out.

That doesn’t mean you should never crank up your power song mid-workout. But there are benefits to going distraction-free. “When people are truly engaged, they are physically and measurably able to do so much more than when they are checked out,” says Bethany Lyons, founder and CEO of Lyons Den Power Yoga.

It makes sense that when your mind is wandering, your performance can suffer. If you’re mentally singing along with Beyoncé, you won’t be focused on keeping form, which means you’re probably not moving as efficiently as possible, and you’re more likely to get hurt.

Catch yourself spacing out? “Bring your attention back to what you’re doing,” says Shirley Archer, a mindful-living coach and author of *Pilates Fusion: Well-Being for Body, Mind and Spirit*. Then, check in with your body. Ask yourself, “What am I feeling, hearing, seeing right now?”

Picture yourself fitter.

Seriously, visualization is a powerful tool. Consider a 2014 study involving folks whose forearms were immobilized in an elbow-to-wrist cast for four weeks. Study participants who visualized themselves flexing their wrists during this time frame lost 50 percent less strength than their nonvisualizing counterparts. Now imagine what visualization can do for you when it comes to your fitness challenges. Before your next workout, you might envision yourself running up that monster hill on your route without stopping, or you might fantasize about pushing a heavier weight on the prowler. Athletes use this mind trick to build the brain-body connection before big events, says Dahlkoetter. “The more you mentally rehearse your plan, the more automatic it will become and the less thought will be required in the moment.”

Watch what you think.

Whatever your brain is saying, your body believes. As a result, self-talk is a key ingredient for success or failure. So instead of thinking about how hard your workout will be and how you’ll never be able to finish it, replace those negative thoughts with positive ones. Tell yourself “I love a challenge!” or “I’m going to crush this workout!” And, odds are, you will.