The meditation-skin connection

A better brain?

"It's like the fountain of youth," says Lynne Goldberg, a certified meditation coach and founder of the OMG I Can Meditate! app.

New research shows that regular meditation can fundamentally change how your brain and body functions—and that can affect your skin.

"The idea here is that meditation is a training for the brain," Goldberg says. "It's a way to change the way we react to stress." Meditation training is the key, she adds. "We're literally rewiring our brains."

Meditation has long been celebrated for its stress-relieving powers, and studies have shown that regular practice can lead to significant health benefits. But until recently, researchers couldn't really measure what happened in the brain during meditation.

That's because while a pill can be tested for its effectiveness, it's difficult to test whether a treatment like meditation actually changes the brain. You can't scan a person's mind or look inside their head, Goldberg says.

That changed in 2011 with a groundbreaking study from Harvard scientists. The team turned up the front page of the scientific literature, using fMRI scans to directly compare the brains of experienced meditators with the brains of non-meditators.

The study showed that experienced meditators have smaller declines in the volume of their gray matter than non-meditators. Gray matter is the brain tissue that plays a key role in memory, learning, and regulating emotions. "The amount of gray matter in the brain is related to the extent to which we think—more gray matter is associated with clearer thinking," Goldberg says.

But it's not just how much gray matter you have that matters, she adds. "It's also how well it's organized. The brain of a meditator is more integrated, or more connected, than the brain of a non-meditator."

"That probably translates into less stress," Goldberg says. "I mean, we know that stress is bad for your brain and your body. Stress leads to a hormone called cortisol, and cortisol leads to, among other things, fat in the belly and adrenal gland."

In other words, the study provided clear evidence that the changes many meditators report—increased relaxation, decreased stress, improved sleep, better memory, and a clearer and more integrated brain—are very real.

Indeed, the study was definitive enough to attract the interest of the scientific community, Goldberg says. "The question now is, can we recreate these findings in other laboratories around the world? Can we change the brain of a non-meditator, and if we can, how do we do it?"

Research to date suggests that meditation can change the brain in as few as four weeks, Goldberg says. "The crazy thing is, it doesn't appear to take a whole lot of meditation to see some of these deep physiological changes."

"What I can say for sure is that meditation has been found to reduce subjective perceptions of feeling stressed," Cybele Fishman, MD, an integrative dermatologist in New York City, by comparing it with a placebo, and researchers can test how meditation changes the brain by using MRIs. But you can't tell some people to sit down and meditate and see if it changes their brain, she says.

"The best example is the one I have in my practice," Fishman says. "The 107-year-old poet that I see who is doing 10 minutes of meditation a day. He can't remember meeting her (the woman he's been falling in love with) because she's 100 years younger, but he can remember how he met his wife."

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Ultimately, Goldberg says, meditation is about breaking the cycle of stress and learning how to be present in the moment. "That's what meditation is all about," she says. "It's like a brain boot camp."

"The brain perceives and responds to stress in a certain way, and meditation is about changing that perception and response," Goldberg says. "What I can say for sure is that meditation has been found to reduce subjective perceptions of feeling stressed, and that's a key component in improving your health."

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