

Words About Wellness



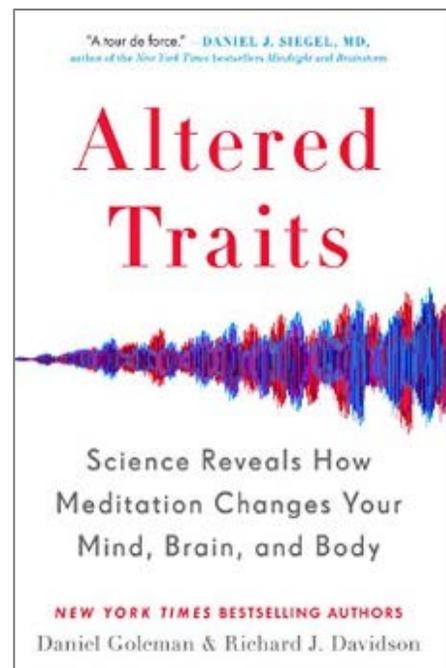
Altering Traits through Mindfulness: The Short and the Long of It

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Many of us are now familiar with the claims, substantiated by a growing body of research, that mindfulness-based practices are effective in lowering stress, improving pain management skills, and increasing wellbeing, but questions remain about how long (and how many hours of practice) it takes to achieve such benefits, and whether these benefits remain over time. A new book entitled *Altered Traits*, by Daniel Goleman and Richard Davidson (2017), both long-time mindfulness researchers, delves into these questions, and provides some interesting answers. While somewhat of a retrospective account of the authors' and other colleagues' decades-long journeys through mindfulness research, the book provides a wealth of informational nuggets to inspire our own possible journeys towards transforming ourselves via the practice of mindfulness.



The authors divide practitioners of mindfulness into categories of beginning meditators, long-term meditators (with 1000 plus hours of practice experience), and yogis – advanced adepts with often 10,000 or more hours of meditation, including multiple lengthy retreats. Some benefits appear early on: for example, the brains of beginning meditators show less amygdala reactivity to stress, and as well as improvements in attention, mind-wandering, and working memory, often within just two weeks of practice. Mindful compassion meditation also leads to early benefits, including enhanced empathy. Inflammation is ameliorated within 30 hours of practice. Importantly, sustaining these benefits requires continued daily practice over time.

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More experienced, longer-term meditators show even greater benefits – not only further decreases in reactivity to stressful experiences, but a strengthening of the prefrontal circuitry of the brain involved in managing stress. Compassion for others becomes even stronger and less biased, and there is greater likelihood of performing compassionate activities. There is a lessening of self-obsessive thoughts as well as a weakening of attachment, and greater patience. Moreover, lasting beneficial physical changes occur, such as slower breathing rate, less brain aging, and positive signs of meditative changes even during sleep. The brains of those who have meditated longest (although less well controlled for confounding influences) show little physiological differences between meditative and non-meditative states, correlating with an experience of being continually present and in a state of peacefulness, joy, and equanimity, under varying circumstances of life.

What does this intriguing body of research tell us? It seems that it's never too soon or too late to undertake this transformative and healing journey, with physical, psychological, and spiritual benefits beginning early and increasing with length and intensity of practice. Be sure to read this helpful book to become inspired and to inspire others on the path to wellness.



References:

Goleman, Daniel, and Richard J. Davidson. *Altered Traits: Science Reveals How Meditation Changes Your Mind, Brain, and Body*. Avery, an Imprint of Penguin Random House LLC, 2017.

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