

# Mindfulness: How and Why It Works

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The path that led Dan Harris to mindfulness meditation started with a panic attack on national television. It was Good Morning America, to be specific, which means it was witnessed, he notes, by an estimated 5.019 million people.

Harris spoke about his experience at the Child Mind Institute's 2015 Spring Luncheon yesterday, headlining a panel on the benefits of mindfulness that was moderated by psychiatrist Gail Saltz. An ABC News correspondent, Harris is the author of *10% Happier: How I Tamed the Voice in My Head, Reduced Stress Without Losing My Edge and Found Self-Help That Really Works—a True Story*. Panelists explained mindfulness in both scientific terms and practical terms.

“Mindfulness is the ability to see what’s going in your head,” Harris said, “combined with the ability to not get carried away with it.”

Dr. Allison Baker explained the role of mindfulness in managing anxious or negative thoughts. “It helps you step back and look at that thought as just a thought, as opposed to a reality,” she said. “That in turn allows you to have a little distance and not necessarily engage in that thought and get agitated about it, or have your sleep disrupted because of it.”

Over time it means that you have choices in terms of how you engage in or react to that thought, she added, and that sense of control is very powerful.

Cameron Craddock, the Child Mind Institute's Director of Imaging, described research he and others are doing that shows that there's a brain network—they call it the default mode network—that is constantly active when you are having

recurring, repetitive thoughts. “This is a network that is turned off when we are performing an external, goal-driven task. And we’ve shown that if that network doesn’t go off, you actually can’t perform that task.”

The research shows, Dr. Craddock said, “that people who practice mindfulness meditation over time end up being much better at turning off this network and holding it off, as well as being able to turn it on in times when it’s appropriate to turn it on.”

Added Harris: “What the good doctor calls turning off the default mode network, I call getting out of your own way. ”

Dr. Craddock described mindfulness mediation as exercising that part of your brain that modulates, or turns that network on and off. Harris used the same metaphor: When you’re practicing mindfulness meditation, every time your thoughts wander from the present moment, and you bring them back, “that’s a bicep curl for your brain.”

The reason to practice mindfulness, he noted, is that “most of the things that you are most embarrassed by in life come from mindlessness: Finding yourself with your hand in the refrigerator when you’re not hungry. Checking your cell phone when your kid is trying to talk to you. Losing your temper when it’s strategically unwise.”

Bottom line: “Meditation is a pretty common sense way to see what’s happening in your head,” he said, “so you’re not yanked around by it. “