



LOOK

GOOD

FEEL

BETTER

Our intention for 2019 is to exercise for how it makes us feel. So make the move to mindful fitness, says Arielle Tchiprout

Do you only think of exercise as a way to burn off calories and shrink yourself? We have some news for you... research shows that exercise alone – while amazing for your overall health – doesn't really make that much difference to your weight. So, how about shifting your motivation to the mental benefits, which are numerous and proven? Exercise releases endorphins, helps to relieve anxiety, builds self-esteem and aids sleep, plus studies have even shown it to be as effective in relieving the symptoms of depression as Prozac for some people.

But there's more: the latest trend is to further enhance

these mental benefits by incorporating elements of mindfulness into your workout routine. This can make you feel more grounded, more present and more in touch with your body. According to Tamara Russell, clinical psychologist and author of *Mindfulness In Motion*, mindful exercise is about being completely present and free from distractions, helping us become 'responsive and kind to ourselves, rather than reactive and judgemental'.

'Being mindful can give us more control over our attention and greater awareness of our emotional lives,' Russell says. And it can make any exercise you do more enjoyable. So, here's how to make your moves count for your mind...

1 CHECK IN WITH YOURSELF

Mindfulness is about doing everything with awareness, so prior to exercising, it's important to check in with how you're feeling. 'Before entering the gym, ask yourself, "What is my energy state? What do I need right now?"' Russell suggests. This should dictate what kind of workout you do. Opt for gentle yoga or stretching if you're feeling fragile, but hit the treadmill if you need to let off emotional steam.

2

Find a focus

'When you're moving, your mind has a tendency to leap from thought to thought,' Russell explains, 'But keep

present by focusing your attention on one movement.' This could be the rhythm of your breath or your feet pushing the pedals of a bike. Have a clear intention at the forefront of your mind. 'It's an excellent way of training your attention in a world where we are constantly distracted by technology, social media and advertising,' Russell says, 'It can help you take back control of your mind.'

3

Notice when your thoughts start to stray

How do you regain control

when your thoughts start to drift away from your movements to tonight's dinner plans? 'It takes practice, but you can train your brain to notice when this starts happening,' Russell explains. If you catch a wandering thought when you're meant to be focusing on the pounding of your feet against the ground, for example, simply say to yourself, 'Oh - that thought isn't the feeling of my feet against the ground,' and pull yourself back.

4

Make mindful choices

Listening to music can distract and prevent you

from being truly present, but some types of music can keep the portion of your mind that would normally be whirling away occupied, giving you space to concentrate on your movement,' says Russell. Think softer music rather than thumping techno.

5

Have compassion

'Many of us compare ourselves to others or judge ourselves for not working

out hard enough,' Russell says. The first step is to notice when these 'judging monkeys' start creeping in, and to ask yourself whether these thoughts are helpful. Commit to treating yourself with compassion and exercise will become far more enjoyable. *Mindfulness In Motion* by Tamara Russell (Watkins) is out now

'KEEP PRESENT BY FOCUSING ATTENTION ON ONE MOVEMENT'

MINDFUL RUNNING for sheer joy

I was mid-run when I realised I no longer had a healthy relationship with exercise. My calves were in agony, I was exhausted and I had to stop because I felt as though I might be sick. The worst part was that I knew before lacing up I was overtired, but I'd gone anyway - because I felt I had to.

As someone who had once loved running purely for the fresh air and endorphins, I'd somehow become fixated on the frequency and quality of my runs. I religiously tracked



them with my Strava app, checking the distance covered, average speed and calories burned. It wasn't until I was doubled over on the side of the road that I recognised I needed a running reality check.

Enter a mindful performance coach. After battling with alcohol and drug abuse throughout his 20s, Chevy Rough (who you may recognise from the 2017 BBC documentary *Mind Over Marathon*) came to 'mindful movement' as a form of anti-depressant. Now, he spreads an ethos that seemed to be just what I needed: running for enjoyment's sake.

When I arrive at Rough's north London gym, we have one hour in the diary, so I'm geared up for a long run.

Self

But to my confusion, he leads me through to a quiet and completely empty studio. He wants to talk about my reasons for running. I explain how I suffer from 'run guilt' if I don't end up going, and this, I quickly learn, is problem number one. 'It's all well and good having a plan of when you're going to run,' says Rough, 'But we only have one energy tank. If you're tired or stressed, and then you force yourself to go anyway, that's how you get injured and burn out.'

Problem number two is fitness tracking apps and wristbands. Rough suggests that measuring your runs is ego-based and that the numbers (speed, distance, calories) are just another way we validate ourselves. Really, it's no different from being obsessed with the number on the scales or the number of likes on an Instagram post.

The main physical technique to mindful running, which I put into practice in the 10 short minutes I run with Rough, is about breath. Much like in meditation, breathing is everything. I learn that when we run, we should be breathing both in and out through our nose only. This is

'I ONLY PUSH MYSELF WHEN MY BODY CAN TAKE IT'

difficult, and forces you to reduce speed.

I find this frustrating, but slowing down helps me feel more in the moment, which is what I'm all about. Mindful running ultimately means being mentally connected to your movement and fully present in your run, free from distractions. That means no tracker, no music, no phone. Just you, your body and your breath. I find

there's something liberating about running this way. I feel calm and content, and I'm reminded why I fell in love with running in the first place.

Since my session, I've been trying to incorporate mindfulness into my runs as much as possible. I'd be lying if I said I haven't touched Strava again, because I do find it motivates me – and sometimes I want to challenge myself. But the big change is that I've learnt to be kinder to myself. This means only pushing myself when I know my body can take it, and respecting my body if it's tired. And just like that, I've got my running mojo back.

Follow Chevy on Instagram @chasing19

ANNA BONET

MINDFUL YOGA for inward focus

Yoga was founded upon mental and spiritual wellbeing, so you'd think mindfulness would be part of the overall experience. But modern-day yoga, at least in Instagram form, is all about freakish back bends, pencil-sharp handstands and lean, long legs. Our western practices prioritise flexibility, fitness and aesthetics, and are more about what it can do for your body than your mind.

But it is possible to go back to basics to make yoga a mindful, inward practice, and that's exactly what I plan on doing when I visit ChromaYoga. Founded by Nina Ryner, the classes combine traditional yoga with modern multisensory methods to enhance the experience. 'Yoga is not just about physical movement,' says Ryner, 'The trend of yoga being all about the aesthetic has purely evolved from the rise of social media and it's not something that we encourage.'

Instead, the classes at her studio fuse 'art and neuroscience' by using colour, sound and scent to complement the style and intended outcome of the practice. Want to boost your mood? Try the yellow class,



'PUSH YOUR BRAIN INTO A CALM STATE OF INWARD FOCUS'

where warm light is used for 'rousing, cheerful and optimistic' responses. For energy, the famously invigorating blue light is used (but never before bed). 'All classes are designed to eliminate distractions and push the brain into a calm state of inward focus,' says Ryner. But, for an ultra-mindful practice, she recommends the pink class, in which the traditionally most relaxing style is practised in a fluorescent, fuchsia-lit room.

Pink is known for its psychological associations with love and affection to soothe and de-stress, but on entering the studio, I'm convinced I've walked into Christian Grey's 'red room'. It's the blocks, straps and pillows laid out on the mats that do it, but my instructor Dijana explains that they are there to help us hold and get deeper into stretches.

A focus on stillness is present throughout the class; we only practise a handful of postures but stay in each for a long time. 'It takes 90 seconds to release the muscle before you can start to relax into a stretch,' she says. So no flows, no tricky one-legged balancing postures and not even a downward dog in sight. Instead, the mental workout is emphasised with Dijana's focus on yoga's ancient concepts. Svadhyaya (self-study) is about analysing your reactions on the mat without

judgement; noticing how your mind wanders, but not kicking yourself about it, and seeing how you react to discomfort. Aparigraha (non-grasping) means focusing on exactly where you are in that moment, physically and emotionally; to be at peace in a pose without pushing it too hard.

It's the antidote to both Insta-yoga and our cortisol-inducing routines. 'If you're the sort of person who regularly does HIIT, pink is there to make sure you spread your energy evenly,' says Ryner. 'It's important

to make sure you're balancing your routine.'

I leave feeling so relaxed that I'm light-headed. But the effects are longer-lasting; I'm able to apply the teachings in the studio to the office. I'm focusing more on my intended outcome, putting myself in environments that work better for me (a quiet room to focus, a walk outside to clear my head) and learning that slow and steady is better for my mental health.

For more information, visit chromayoga.co.uk
CHLOE GRAY

MINDFUL BOXING for self-esteem

I'd previously believed that so long as your work gets done, family obligations are met and texts are replied to, you can live off packaged food and adrenaline and feel like you've got away with it. I'd been letting all the other stuff – healthy eating, exercise and getting enough sleep – slip through the cracks and I was close to burnout. Desperately in need of an attitude makeover, I signed up to The Boxx Method's new subscription video service, Champion Me.

Throwing punches and mindfulness, much like bacon and maple syrup, are things that shouldn't work together, but do – according to this programme. The four-week schedule is comprised of workouts interspersed with more traditionally 'mindful' activities – think headphone-free walking and meditation. 'The idea was born out of my own experience of not dedicating any time to myself and the knock-on impact that had on my confidence,' says co-founder Anna Samuels. The more she spoke to other women, the more she realised she wasn't alone in being 'on the brink of burnout'.

The spectre of the b-word is incentive enough to get me going. I sign up and log in to find one shadow boxing session a week, plus HIIT and yoga. These are punctuated with other self-esteem-boosting activities, from going on a walk sans phone to a Sunday night debrief with myself on the past week. The boxing instructor, PT Esmée Gummer, shouts things like, 'Oi oi!' and addresses her invisible audience as 'babes', which keeps the whole thing upbeat. When she tells me to exhale loudly while throwing a punch, I do – and I feel something. I dutifully build a wall of all the negative



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things I think about myself, then mentally tear it down. It's ridiculous, yes, but it feels bloody great.

'Boxing requires visualisation, focus and concentration,' explains Samuels. 'When you can't think of anything else, you have no choice but to be in the moment, giving your mind a break from anything else going on.' And it isn't just about distraction. With each jab-cross-hook-hook-uppercut, I feel a swell of pride. So far, so textbook, according to Dr Peter Olusoga, a sports psychology lecturer from Sheffield Hallam University. 'One of the main ways you develop self-esteem is via achievements, so getting through a challenging training session can be a fantastic confidence boost,' he explains. 'The other advantage of boxing is that you're learning a skill, and developing feelings of competence in something new can help you maintain healthy self-esteem.'

Sticking to every self-talk activity was hard, but having that structure in place helped. For me, the biggest surprise was how effective I found the affirmations to be. I stuck with the one I came across on the first day, 'I make loving choices for my mind and body.' I'd usually balk at this, and I didn't believe it at the start, but I had the will – and the tools – to try.

Champion Me provided a timely reminder of just how much the different aspects of my wellbeing are connected. 'Be the person in this workout that you want to be outside this room,' says Gummer, as I breathlessly swing hooks at my furious, ruddy-faced reflection. A month ago, I would have pressed mute, but it turns out that something special happens when you mix endorphins with empowering talk. Or maybe, along with jabs and uppercuts, I'm just getting better at championing me.

For more information, visit theboxxmethod.com
ROISIN DERVISH-O'KANE