

The sweat and strain of weightlifting is like meditation for me

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When I think of meditation, I picture an image of serenity — a wide-open room, a person sitting cross-legged on a mat, eyes closed and mind relaxed. Meditation, to me, conjures up peacefulness, calmness, quietness and stillness.

Which is why the sight of bulging biceps, dripping sweat and a barbell slamming to the floor doesn't exactly fit with that picture. But looking a little closer, the practice of weightlifting actually has a lot more in common with the art of meditation than first meets the eye.

To meditate is to spend time in quiet thought, as the dictionary puts it, and while the purpose of meditation is to still the mind, that doesn't necessarily mean stilling the body. Meditation, many people mistakenly believe, can be performed only through sitting quietly and clearing the mind of intrusive thoughts. In actuality, meditation can be as simple as focusing your mind on a single point of reference, even when intrusive thoughts insist on cropping up.

"Meditation can be achieved in the middle of Times Square," says Cali Estes, a psychologist, personal trainer and chief executive of the Miami-based Addictions Coach, which offers help to celebrities and corporate leaders trying to overcome drug, alcohol and other problems. "Meditation is simply the decompression of thoughts and clearing of the mind from any unwanted, negative thoughts or harmful ideas that can sabotage your success, [and] using exercise as a means to release stress and clear the mind is an excellent tool in both personal and professional life," says Estes, who uses a variety of methods in her work, including exercise and meditation.

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Brusie, left, poses with her sister, Meaghan Saelens, at the gym. (Courtesy of Chaunie Brusie)

And in a world that increasingly has people chained to desks and screens and spreadsheets and Snapchats, it may be more important than ever to free the mind by first freeing the body through exercise.

"When I am lifting — and seriously lifting — there's nothing else besides me, the iron and the goals I place around it," says Janelle Tank, 23, a personal trainer and fitness entrepreneur from Michigan who began weightlifting three years ago to protect against what she calls "self-hate" and substance abuse. "My life up to that point was . . . well, I shouldn't be here today."

After experiencing a miscarriage that left me feeling unmoored, weak in more ways than just physically, I also turned to weightlifting, and I soon realized the benefits that could be unlocked through grunting, repping and sweating more than I thought a 5-foot-4, 150-pound woman of 30 should ever sweat. There is such blissful release in the hour I spend at the gym, where I can think of nothing but the next repetition, pushing through the burn, completely focused on one task, instead of the hundreds of to-dos normally flitting through my mind like a relentless Rolodex.

Weightlifting, I have come to find, is my meditation. Breathe in, breathe out, lift, hold and repeat.

“Consciously focusing the attention of the mind is the backbone of meditation,” notes Larissa Hall Carlson, 41, a yoga, mindfulness and ayurveda expert at the Kripalu Center for Yoga & Health in Stockbridge, Mass. “Any activity can be done mindfully, [but] what turns an ordinary exercise into a potent and benefit-rich form of meditation is one’s awareness and intention.”

Carlson says that by focusing all of one’s attention on the lifting of weights, indulging in the sensation of muscles contracting and releasing, feeling the roughness of your skin against the weight in your hands, noticing the sweat trickling down your back, and by connecting breath with movement, it is possible to transform a workout into what she dubs “meditation in motion.”

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At the gym, the author writes, “I can think of nothing but the next repetition...completely focused.” (Meaghan Saelens)

And it’s that meditation in motion that fitness experts, such as celebrity trainer Kira Stokes, say can affect the rest of life. Stokes, who is based in New York, trains her clients to focus on every muscle contraction through her Stoked method, a mindfulness practice that she encourages them to use throughout the day. Her clients learn to pay attention to their breath, when to inhale and exhale with stress, and to recognize how it feels when their muscles are clenched in tension.

“You become more aware on an average day of how you’re feeling: ‘Do I need to sit down?’ ‘Do I need some fresh air?’ ‘Do I need to take a nap?’” she explains.

I guard my meditation-in-motion time fiercely. That hour is more than just “me” time; it is also a time that allows my mind to empty enough to tackle the rest of my life.

Tiffany Louise, 34, a cognitive behavioral therapist and spokeswoman for Lean for Life, part of the Lindora Clinic chain of weight-loss centers in Southern California, believes that emptying the mind, even for a short time, helps clear away anxiety and stress.

I frequently work out in the afternoon, after a full day of work and child care and running kids to and from activities. As soon as I step into the gym, I leave the stress of the day behind. I don’t worry about what I’m cooking for dinner or how much laundry is waiting for me at

home, I just hit the weights. And when I'm done, I've sweated out the stress of the day, and I head home re-energized, my mood lifted, ready to power through the demanding routine of dinner and cleanup and homework and baths for my four young children. It's like a computer restart for my mind and body.

I started lifting weights because I wanted to feel stronger at a time in my life when I felt the weakest. And it is through weightlifting that I have found my strength in one of the most unlikely of places — my own mind.