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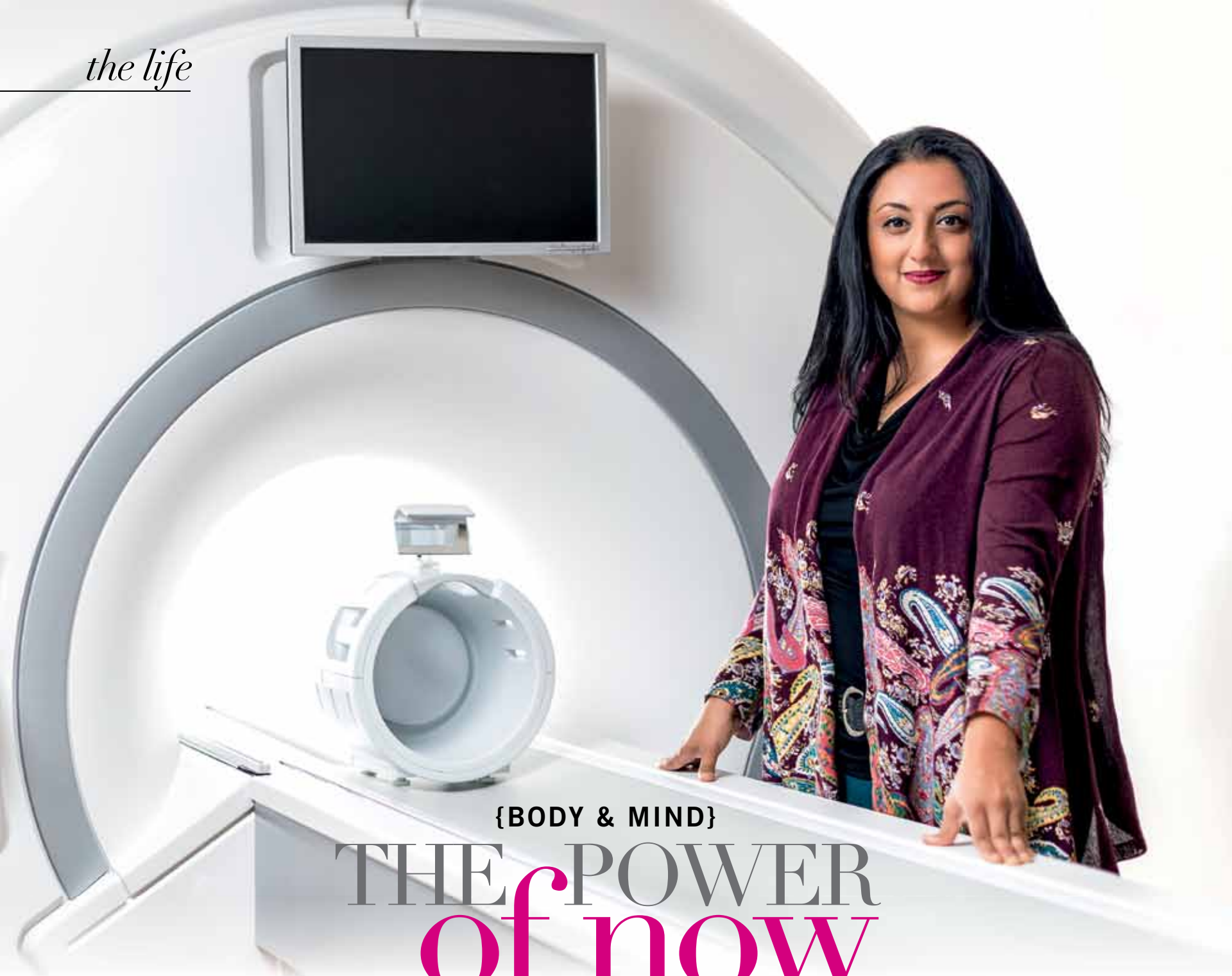
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{BODY & MIND}

THE POWER of now

Miami neuroscientist Amishi Jha explains why learning to quiet your mind may be the key to survival—and success.

There's a super star living in Miami. Not the kind who travels with entourages, demanding green M&M's in dressing rooms. Rather the kind helping spark a cultural revolution, whose work as a neuroscientist at the University of Miami is changing how the world thinks about living a healthy and successful life. Her name is Amishi Jha and her research focuses on how mindfulness (the act of quieting your mind and becoming more aware of the present moment, usually through meditation) can affect the actual physiology and function of the brain.

Mindfulness, of course, is nothing new. A concept with Buddhist roots, it's been in the national zeitgeist for some time, believed by many to be the secret to happiness, balance and health. What is fairly new, however, is the growing body of science—Jha's included—that proves mindfulness can also help build mental endurance and performance and that it may even stave off neurodegenerative diseases like Alzheimer's.

At her UM lab, Jha studies exactly how her subjects—typically people operating in high stress environments, from accountants facing tax season to Marines headed for combat—react after several weeks of mindfulness training sessions, measuring their stress, memory, attention, productivity and moods. Her early work in the field has been so promising she's received more than \$3 million in funding from the National Institute of Health and the Department of Defense, which is eager to help soldiers train their bodies as well as their minds as they face multiple deployments.

Now, the 42-year-old Jha, who UM hired in 2010 from the University of Pennsylvania, is taking her research up a notch. This fall, she'll begin working with the Miami Dade Fire Department and the University of Miami football team, not only providing training sessions and tracking the results, but performing brain scans in order to quantify the effect mindfulness has on the brain's

actual structure. And on October 18th at UM, she'll be participating in the "A Mindful Miami Conference," a symposium on how to bring mindfulness practices to children throughout South Florida. (The conference is open to the public. For details go to mindfulkidsmiami.org.)

Jha hopes the work she does today will ultimately accomplish a bigger mission. "I want people to understand that, like your body, your mind needs conditioning. If you ask anyone today, 'Could you be healthy without exercising?' they would laugh and say, of course not. Well, your mind needs to be just as fit as your body." INDULGE caught up with Jha at her office to talk more about the benefits of mindfulness.

How did you become interested in mindfulness?

It's funny because having success doesn't always mean you have the tools to manage it—and that's something from which I suffered. A few years ago, by all outward standards, I had made it. I had a faculty position at an Ivy League school, two beautiful children, a great spouse. But I was stressed out! There was a day when I had a sick child at home, a grant proposal due the next day and I was trying to give a lecture to my colleagues. I was ready to quit and take a job at Walgreens! I thought about how I'd spent all these years studying how the brain pays attention, and wondered: What's the point? Where do we go from here? So I said to myself: If I'm going to stay in this career, I want to dedicate my life to understanding how we can help people get better, stronger and feel a greater sense of wellness through training their brain. And yes, it was partly because I wanted to learn how to do that for myself.

Did you have experience in meditation before hand?

It's really interesting because I'm Indian, and meditation is part of Indian culture, and I grew up in a family where people meditated—but I never did any of it. At the end of the day, I'm a western kid from an Indian family. So my entire introduction to meditation actually comes from a completely western point of view.

"I want people to understand that, like your body, your mind needs conditioning."

How did being a neuroscientist shape your approach to mindfulness?

All those years of doing basic research helped me because I wanted to take a very systematic and vigorous approach. I didn't want this to come from a New Age or just feeling better angle. I wanted to know: does the brain change or not? Now, as a neuroscientist I know that if something makes me feel better it's because my brain is, in fact, changing. So my goal was—let me see if I can track it. And that's what we're doing now.

And what have you found?

From the very first projects, which go back to the early 2000s, when we started working with the Marines, we found that not giving the soldiers mindfulness tools during the months before their deployment could actually cause their attention to degrade. So you think you're preparing them to go into combat, but without helping them condition their minds you might be taxing them to the point where they're not optimal. For the military, especially, the consequences of that are pretty obvious. In general, when we've worked with other groups, we have similar findings: that practicing mindfulness actually improves memory, attention and mood, and that it lowers stress levels over time.

Why is focusing on the now so important to the brain's health?

The mind wandering is actually a chronic human condition. The fact is about 50 percent of the time

our mind is wandering—thinking about email, to-do lists, what happened yesterday, what's coming tomorrow. A few years back, there was a study that talked about how the wandering mind is an unhappy mind. How when we're not in the present the next psychological consequence is that we're less happy. And there's a lot of science on the negative effects unhappiness can have on your health. So not only is the present the only moment we've got, and by not focusing on it we miss out, but being in the now is also protective. It's going to help you feel better and it might actually extend your life.

How exactly do you teach someone to be mindful?

We have a multi-week program—two hours a week, for four weeks—that teaches our subjects the foundations of mindfulness practices. For example, we teach how to focus on your breath. We ask people to find a comfortable and quiet location, where they can meditate and focus on the sensation of breathing for a dedicated period of time. We teach them that when their mind wanders, all they have to do is return their focus to their breathing. We have a whole suite of exercises that are delivered through our training.

Ultimately, what do you hope to accomplish with your research?

We need to push toward a fundamental cultural shift. We need people to get this: that if we don't pay attention to our minds, and if we don't exercise our minds regularly using these types of techniques, which happen to be low cost and low tech, we *will* suffer. Especially with all the neurodegenerative diseases and stress-related illnesses that are a function of normal aging and a function of today's connectivity. If you don't want aches and pains in your body you do yoga or you take a walk every day. Same idea with the brain. If you don't want aches and pains of the mind, you need to exercise it every day.

TEXT BY BETTY CORTINA-WEISS / PHOTOGRAPHY BY NICK GARCIA

FIND YOUR FOCUS

Amishi Jha's research is based on observing the effect that mindfulness, a focus on the present moment, has on her subjects. While she leads the scientific portion of the studies, her colleague Scott Rogers, from UM's Mindfulness in Law Program, frequently teaches the subjects meditation training exercises. Here, he shares a few steps to practicing mindfulness on your own.

SIT In an upright, stable position, sit with your hands resting on your thighs or cradled together. Lower or close your eyes, whichever is more comfortable.

BREATHE Focus on your breath, following its movement through your body. Notice the sensation around your belly as air flows in and out of your nose or mouth.

FOCUS Select one area of your body affected by your breathing and focus your attention there.

Control your focus, not your breathing itself. When you notice your mind wandering—and it will—bring your attention back to your breath.

MONITOR After five to 10 minutes, switch from focusing to monitoring. Think of your mind as a vast open sky and your thoughts, feelings and sensations as passing clouds. Notice what arises in the moment, the sounds, aromas, the caress of a breeze. After five minutes, open your eyes. Do this for 10 to 15 minutes every day.