It's worth starting your meditation practice right now. Here's why.

Mindfulness meditation can improve your life — but don't just take it from us.

Focuses on the experience of the present moment, Dr. Amishi Jha had lost feeling in her back teeth due to stress.

The neuroscientist and author of the upcoming book Peak Mind, which explores how to train your attention via a 12-minute daily mindfulness program, had grown up with a dad who practiced meditation every day. Around age 10, Jha was completely turned off from it — that's when she discovered her male cousins received special Sanskrit mantras on which to meditate as part of their rite of passage ceremony. As a girl, Jha didn't.

It wasn't until 2003, when Dr. Richard Davidson, founder and director of the Center for Healthy Minds at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, gave a talk at the University of Pennsylvania, that Jha once again woke up to the benefits of mindfulness.

The numbness in her mouth made it hard to talk, so the then-assistant professor in Penn's department of psychology mostly listened.

Davidson spoke about his lab's studies on emotion and the brain, says Jha, and showed two brain images. One belonged to someone who was in a bad mood and the other was of someone in a good mood.

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my breath every day. I can do that. Let's see if it helps. And it did."

Jha asked Davidson how she could get a "negative" brain to look like a "positive" one.

His answer? Meditation.

Jha was perplexed. "It felt like going to an astrophysicist lecture and talking about astrology," she said, through laughter, in a phone interview with Mashable.

Davidson's response piqued Jha's curiosity, so she bought Meditation for Beginners by Jack Kornfield, the renowned American author and Buddhist teacher.

She then practiced meditation, via a guided CD that accompanied the book, for four to six weeks. At first, Jha's teeth were still numb. But she had an important realization: She was clenching her jaw continuously throughout the day.

"Every time I started noticing that, I could just relax my jaw," she said. "It was an acknowledgement of all the things I was not paying attention to and all the bad stuff happening in my body because of stress."

In about a month, she regained feeling.

"I looked at what the training was; it was all 'attention, attention, attention,'" Jha added.

As a researcher who studies attention, Jha's view on meditation and mindfulness drastically changed: "There's no chanting, there's no world view I need to have," she explained. "It's as plain as paying attention to my breath every day. I can do that. Let's see if it helps. And it did."

Her discovery isn't a one-off. There are years' worth of scientific research showing the wide-ranging benefits of mindfulness meditation. It isn't an antidote to stress. The practice can't erase pain. That's not what it was designed for anyway. But it can help us transform our responses so we're better able to handle the curveballs life throws our way.

There's a reason it's called a practice: you can't just do it once or twice and expect to reap its benefits. Think of it like physical exercise, says Jha. If you lift weights consistently, you'll continue to build muscle. If you stop, you can lose that strength.

We're often pretty good at handling short-term stress, but the long-term variety can wreak havoc on the body and mind. While you can't control what happens to you (the current once-in-a-generation global pandemic, anyone?), you can learn to modify your response to challenging situations so you don't add to your suffering. One way to do that is with mindfulness meditation.

Still, you might be skeptical about the concrete benefits of the practice or even consider meditation to be too out there or "woo-woo" for you. So don't take it from us, read on to learn what you can gain from a mindfulness meditation practice as backed by science.

**Improved mental health**

Mindfulness meditation can improve your mental health by reducing symptoms of anxiety, depression, and generally improving your mood, according to reputable research in a variety of scientific journals. Studies have also shown it's not any better or worse than other effective interventions that reduce distress, such as medication or exercise, but that doesn't mean you should toss mindfulness meditation out the window, says Davidson, in an interview with Mashable.

"Some of the interventions that they're compared to are medications and medications have lots of side effects," he said. "I think it's safe to assume that the side effects of meditation are much better and less deleterious."
What are the benefits of mindfulness meditation?

He also points out that meditation can be practiced at any time or location. You don't need to consult a doctor to practice it. (It's not, of course, a substitute for professional mental health care. If you're experiencing symptoms that make it difficult to function, you should contact a doctor or mental health professional. But you can certainly practice meditation in the meantime and continue to use it to supplement any other treatments.)

One related option is mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (MBCT), which was created to help those who suffer from repeated bouts of depression. Studies suggest MBCT is an effective intervention for people with depression and can even be as successful as antidepressants.

Another factor to consider with studies that look at the benefits of mindfulness meditation, many of which are meta-analyses which examine published research and quantitatively summarize its findings, is they tend to focus on short-term, beginning meditation practices. That's to say, they don't usually study those who have practiced meditation for a long time and have gotten deep into the practice.

"If you do these kind of practices for years on end, every day ... the results can be much more significant and pronounced," Davidson said.

Take this 2016 study, for example, which suggests experienced meditators deal with stress better than non-meditators.

WATCH: Let's talk about meditation. For starters, what is it, actually?

Decreased physical pain

When we acknowledge things as they are, especially in difficult situations, our resistance to them can lessen, says Dr. John Schorling, the director of the Mindfulness Center at the University of Virginia. We tend to expend a lot of energy worrying about life's challenges, which can sometimes cause more suffering than the challenge itself.

In a study published in 2019, researchers gave three groups of undergraduate students uncomfortable shocks that caused their hands and fingers to contract uncontrollably. Then one group did a four-minute mindfulness breathing training, the other listened to music for four minutes, and another sat in silence for the same period of time. The group that did the mindfulness practice reported lower pain intensity and pain unpleasantness, compared with other students in the study.

If we bring kindness to our life and acknowledge it's hard, as mindfulness meditation teaches, we find the pain isn’t as, well, painful, says Schorling. While our difficulties don't disappear, we can transform how we experience them.

Increased sense of compassion

Mindfulness meditation can be an essential part of expanding your compassion for others.

Research published in 2015 showed people who took a three-week mindfulness meditation course via the meditation app Headspace were more than twice as likely to give up their seats while in a public waiting area to someone with crutches than those who hadn't.
According to the authors of the study, this research repeated their earlier findings that short-term mindfulness meditation practices increase our sense of compassion. Based on others' research, they think this is partly because we pay more attention to our environment when we're mindful.

The study highlights one form of compassion — helping others who suffer — and how mindfulness training can help us become more likely to practice such behavior. Dr. Jud Brewer, director of research and innovation at Brown University's Mindfulness Center, who is also an addiction psychiatrist and neuroscientist, said in an interview.

Another study, published in 2017, shows the effect of mindfulness meditation on an often overtaxed group of people who we rely on not only to save our lives but to also tend to our emotional wounds — nurses. After brief mindfulness meditation trainings of six and eight weeks, the nurses in the study reported their aptitude for compassion to be much higher than prior to the training.

Reductions in implicit bias

Mindfulness meditation can also help reduce your implicit bias, according to different studies. That's the unconscious stereotypes or beliefs that you may hold about certain groups of people, which are "more pernicious and difficult to change," Davidson said.

While the evidence shows mindfulness can reduce bias somewhat, he added, practices that specifically focus on cultivating connection are most effective. One such practice is loving-kindness meditation. It involves fostering goodwill toward oneself and others, even those you've never met or with whom you've experienced conflict.

"We've got this whole problem with racism and [other] -isms. This is actually something that can start to reduce the -isms."

"Scientific research shows that when you do this sort of practice, you actually show reductions on hard-nosed measures of implicit bias and those reductions actually persist for some time," Davidson explained.

In a study published in 2013 by the American Psychological Association, participants who were not Black or unhoused engaged in a six-week loving-kindness meditation practice. Their implicit bias toward both unhoused and Black people significantly decreased after the practice, as evidenced by tests before and after the practice designed to measure and analyze their implicit attitudes toward both groups. That didn't happen with people in the study who just discussed loving-kindness meditation. Another study published in 2014 showed the practice reduced prejudice toward unhoused people.

"Societally, we've got this whole problem with racism and [other] -isms," adds Brewer. "This is actually something that can start to reduce the -isms."

SEE ALSO: 4 beginner mindfulness exercises you can do without an app
Ready to start?

Before embarking on any mindfulness meditation practice, Brewer suggests you first consider a few things.

While scientific studies can certainly provide a helpful and trustworthy preview as to what you might expect and why you might want to start such a practice, he advises not leaning too heavily on others' experiences without taking your own needs into account.

"If you see the science, it provides this blind faith where we're willing to jump in the water," said Brewer. "But, ultimately, it comes back to our own experience. What's it like to swim ourselves as compared to somebody telling us that the water feels great."

Success, Jha says, "means you're picking up every time your mind wanders: 'Ah, there it is. Bring it back.' We're redefining success as the noticing of mind wandering."

Jha adds that, when starting out, it's best to set the bar low.

"The only commitment you need to make the first several weeks is that you're going to do it," she says. From Jha's perspective, success doesn't mean eliminating errant thoughts. That's a natural state of mind anyway.

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While you can certainly practice mindfulness without meditation training, Jha doesn't believe that's particularly effective for beginners.

"We need to do something that really hones these skills by training them. Then you can apply it more often," she says. Then the chances of mindfulness meditation showing up in other areas of your life are greater.

When Brewer first started practicing, he thought it was only about paying attention to his breath.

"I beat my head against my 'breath wall' for 10 years, sweating through T-shirts in the middle of winter on silent meditation retreats," he says.

Now, Brewer views mindfulness meditation as a window into how his brain operates, so he can work with it, rather than against. By understanding how our minds work, we train ourselves to let go of what makes us unhappy. In turn, this helps us move toward the things that foster our happiness, he adds.
In other words, consider learning what the practice is all about and pinpointing what you personally want to get out of it. Or, you know, just jump in and see how the water feels for yourself.

**TOPICS:** HEALTH & FITNESS, MARCH MINDFULNESS, MINDFULNESS, SOCIAL GOOD

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