Stronger cognition requires mental training just as much as physical activity

The mind needs regular mental exercise to keep it cognitively and emotionally fit, research shows.

Old-school coaches think that, to build a tough athlete, they need to yell and scream at them, run them through ridiculously exhausting drills, and prescribe punishing wind sprints after every practice. Scientists, though, believe that you can build a resiliency centered around the mind by practicing mental training like mindfulness—most coaches would choke on their whistle if you told them that.

But researchers at the University of Miami recently published a study in the Journal of Cognitive Enhancement that found practicing mindfulness—but not relaxation—can make a player’s attention span more stable and keep him from losing his attention. For the study, they followed players on the UM football team for four weeks during the intense preseason with one group getting mindfulness training—breathing exercises, body scans, and awareness sessions—while the other got schooled in the ways of relaxation: guided imagery, relaxation exercises, and listening to soothing music.
Researchers found that the players' attention degraded from the beginning of the study, no matter the training, but that those in the mindfulness group had high attendance to the classes compared to the relaxation group, and that led to a better outcome of sustained attention overall.

"Our research suggests that the mind, like the body, needs regular mental exercise to keep it cognitively and emotionally fit," said Amishi Jha, associate professor in the UM College of Arts and Sciences Department of Psychology. "What struck us about these results is that both relaxation and mindfulness helped well-being, but only mindfulness training benefitted players' attention—something student athletes need both on and off the field."

If you'd like to start your own mindfulness and meditation training, take a look at sites like Mindful or Transcendental Meditation to learn more about the practice. Or do an online search around your area for local programs that may teach it. Other benefits beside resiliency can include a more balanced life, increased clarity, and deeper understanding of emotions.