Mindfulness: The muscle of attention

Most of us spend half of our lives daydreaming

By: Nancy Werteen
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According to a researcher who's devoted her career to studying how we pay attention, most of us literally waste half of our lives daydreaming. Her research now has Pentagon officials sitting up and taking notice.

When was the last time a meeting at your office started with meditation? But Amishi Jha, director of contemplative neuroscience at the University of Miami, begins all her research meetings this way because she insists a relaxed brain is a focused one.

"I study how the brain pays attention and how we can use mental training tools like mindfulness meditation to help them pay better attention," Jha said. "I study populations for whom having peak attention is key to their success."
Football players, active duty military and their spouses, firefighters and accountants, they're all getting mindfulness training. And it only takes 10 to 15 minutes a day.

"Sit quietly in a comfortable and alert posture and focus all of their attention to the sensations of breathing," Jha explained. "When you notice your mind has wandered, simply return back to the sensations of breathing."

Jha uses MRI scans as well as brain wave recordings to measure the effects on peoples' attention before and after a month of mindfulness training.

"We're seeing that it actually strengthens this muscle of attention and has a whole host of other benefits with regards to stress reduction, performance improvement and improvements in mood," Jha said.

It's even having an impact on her research assistants.

"The idea of sitting and turning inward was very foreign to the way that I had been operating," said Alexandra Morrison, a research scientist in the Jha Lab at the University of Miami. "I have learned about integrating mindfulness into my daily life."

And the U.S. Department of Defense must agree. Jha has received $3.5 million from the DOD and donor support. Jha recently published a study showing mindfulness training protected against attention lapses by troops undergoing high-stress military training before they are deployed into combat situations.