Sheboygan Press.

LIFE

Looking at benefits of pairing mindfulness with exercise

Rachael Lewinski For USA TODAY NETWORK - Wisconsin

Aug. 29, 2017, 10:39 a.m. CT

Mindfulness is a catchy trend these days, but it has ancient and scientific roots. As for its use in fitness and athletics, one of the earlier well-known promoters of using mindfulness to enhance professional sports and athleticism is Phil Jackson, when he coached the National Basketball Association (NBA) Championship Bulls.

Now we see it everywhere with numerous professional athletes, such as Lebron James, Kobe Bryant, the Seattle Seahawks and Tom Brady, using it for their advantage over opponents. However, you don't have to be a professional athlete to gain the benefits of practicing mindfulness during physical exercise.

Paying attention on purpose, without judgment, is a basic description of mindfulness. The awareness that one develops through intentional focus has been long shown to improve mental and emotional health. The mind and body connection is now becoming more understood as we learn how we can affect our body by improving our mental focus and overall self-awareness. Once you learn to take that mindful, awareness-filled pause before acting, you can learn to act more from what you want to happen vs. how our autopilot reacts. Our impulses aren't always the healthiest choice or action for our bodies.

Main benefits of physical fitness

• Improved muscular strength with focus on muscles used with stronger, specific contractions

Love crosswords? Explore the Crossword page and play the new MidGrid Crossword.

• Injury prevention and enhanced injury healing

• Enhanced athletic performance through more efficient, stronger movements as well as mental focus during practice and games or events

• Improved energy for exercise by reducing stress, as well as increasing oxygen, which fuels muscles during exercise with mindful breathing

• Improved posture and balance

• Reduced impulsive overeating and giving into cravings

• Improved sleep also reducing overeating and sugar cravings

• Better adherence and accountability to exercise and nutrition programming

Suggestions for your success

• Just do it! Mindfulness may seem insignificant, but it is incredibly profound. Just a few mindful moments throughout your exercise or day can have drastic effects on your health. Consistent practice over 8 weeks has been shown to have even more dramatic improvements.

• Intentionally pay attention to what muscles and body parts you are using, how it feels, and where. Learning this type of body awareness will help you practice appropriately timed exercise that improves performance, recovery and reduces and heals injuries, causing you to become better prepared for your next workout and long-term success and adherence.

• Focus on the souls of your feet touching the ground. This mindful act during exercise will help your balance, help you focus on what you are doing, and reduce stress and distractions, ultimately improving performance.

• Inhale for more energy, exhale for more calm. Depending on the exercise you are performing, mindful breathing can have different effects on your energy, heart rate, and the feeling within your body and mental alertness. For instance, if you are running, use breath focus to help with cadence, breathing in for three foot strikes and breathing out for two foot strikes or a similar tempo where the inhale is longer than the exhale. If you are practicing a more calming type of exercise or want to relax your muscles and heart rate, you would make your exhale longer.

Rachael Lewinski is a Mindfulness Instructor at Mental Health America in Sheboygan County. She is also a personal trainer, corrective exercise specialist & yoga teacher at the Wisconsin Athletic Club in Milwaukee, as well as at the Sports Core and Yoga on the Lake in Kohler. She is a member of the Sheboygan County Activity and Nutrition committee.