

Run, Walk, Sit

Knowing she would benefit from a meditation practice, but averse to sitting still, this athlete tries a new approach.

BY LAUREN BEDOSKY

On an unusually warm afternoon last winter, I took my dog, Otter, for a walk. It was meant to be a fun, stress-relieving outing for both of us. But while Otter snuffled happily along, I compulsively refreshed the Gmail app on my phone and fretted about work, conjuring a mental to-do list for the remainder of my day.

Like many people, I struggle to live in the present moment. My mind toggles between rehashing the past and worrying about the future. But I hadn't truly realized how much I was doing it — or the effect it was having on my life — until it ruined that particular walk.

In fact, I realized, worries creep in anytime I try to unwind. It happens when I'm out in nature, and it happens

anytime I try to sit still.

A few years earlier, I'd taken a mindfulness-meditation workshop that provided my frenzied mind a glimmer of hope for calm. The idea of mindfulness — observing thoughts, sensations, and emotions as they arise, without judging or dwelling on them — appealed to me. But I found it hard to sit still long enough to even notice when these came up.

The leader of that workshop, Ben Connelly, a Soto Zen and secular mindfulness teacher at the Minnesota Zen Meditation Center, had emphasized the importance of adapting a meditation practice as needed to reap its benefits. So, when I decided to give mindfulness another try, I contacted Connelly and asked him how I might tailor my practice

to accommodate my sitting-still-averse nature.

Moving meditation is a great entry point, he suggested, because there are things you can pay attention to, including physical sensations and environmental changes. Once you get the hang of tuning in to your movement, you can progress to less active forms of meditation that tend to be more challenging, like sitting.

With Connelly's guidance, I eased back into a mindfulness practice, starting with two weeks of mindful running, followed by two weeks of walking meditation and two weeks of traditional sitting meditation. My goal was to practice three or four times a week for 10 to 20 minutes per session. This is what happened.

ILLUSTRATIONS: LUCY DAVEY



Running Meditation (Weeks 1–2)

The Instruction: Run more slowly than usual and focus on the environment and any bodily sensations. If you feel your mind start to wander, bring your attention back to your breath. Leave your headphones at home.

My Initial Response: How am I going to make it through a run without my music? This sounds like it's going to be boring and uncomfortable.

The Experience: The first couple of sessions were rough. I kept snapping myself back into the present moment, which made me feel like I wasn't doing it right. Connelly assured me that this was normal and perfectly OK.

"Mindfulness is not about getting rid of thoughts, controlling thoughts, or stopping thoughts," he said. "That's an exhausting, frustrating practice."

I kept this in mind during my next run and simply let my thoughts come and go without judgment. I found I had a lot to pay attention to: the ever-changing flow of my breath, the activation of my calf muscles, a slight twinge in my ankle. I noticed when my breathing became ragged and my form began to falter. Instead of pushing through, I slowed and adjusted, which made the run a lot more enjoyable.

The Insight: Tuning in to discomfort — whether mental or physical — doesn't have to be scary. Paying attention to how I felt in the moment actually made the run feel like a privilege (I *get* to run) instead of a chore (I *have* to run). Other activities, by extension, also felt like privileges — my regular strength-training workouts, walking through the aisles of the grocery store, and even driving my car to run errands.



Walking Meditation (Weeks 3–4)

The Instruction: Identify a 30- to 40-foot path or loop and walk very slowly, aligning your breath to your movement.

My Initial Response: The less-intense movement might make it harder to tune in to my body. Would slowing down trigger my restless mind?

Bringing a mindfulness component into an everyday activity made me realize that I take walking for granted.

The Experience: I began by just trying to be mindful on my regular walks, as I had with my runs. But my thoughts wandered all over the place, so I decided to try Connelly's more formal practice. I started at one end of my living room and inhaled as I raised the heel of one foot. While exhaling, I stepped forward with that foot. I continued in this way for 10 minutes and managed to complete only one lap around the room. By going slowly and matching breath to step, I was able to bring more focus to my movements.

The Insight: Bringing a mindfulness component into an everyday activity made me realize that I take walking for granted. During one especially mindful evening walk, I thought, *How cool is it that my body can take me from point A to point B?* I learned that simply walking can be a point of reflection and gratitude.



Seated Meditation (Weeks 5–6)

The Instruction: Take a comfortable seated position, either cross-legged or kneeling on a cushion, or in a chair with your feet flat on the floor. Maintain an upright, "active" posture with eyes either open or closed. Pay attention to your breath and any physical sensations.

My Initial Response: Without the aid of movement, I'll be bored within seconds. Besides, I already sit so much during the day — do I really want to sit to meditate?

The Experience: I struggled during the entire two weeks. In fact, I checked my timer midway through the first session and stopped after 10 minutes during my second one. I tried counting breaths and focusing on my posture, but I felt restless. I made it through the remainder of the two weeks by capping my sessions at five minutes, which was brief enough to complete yet long enough to leave me feeling energized and refreshed when the timer went off.

The Insight: Seated meditation isn't for me — at least not yet. "There's something to knowing yourself," Connelly said when I described my experience. In other words, even if you try some form of mindfulness practice and the only thing you discover is that you don't like it, that's still helpful information.

Nonetheless, Connelly encourages people to try seated meditation. "It's intended to challenge fundamental things," he explained. "You'll find that your need for activity is something that you can begin to dissolve." ♦

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