

THE SECRET TO FEELING CENTERED

No time to meditate? Weave a practice into your workday, like these folks do. You won't believe how much you'll benefit!

BY MICHELE LENT HIRSCH



THE RESEARCH ON MEDITATION'S BENEFITS

keeps pouring in—it makes you more creative, less stressed, harder-better-faster-stronger. We're at the point where *not* keeping up a regular practice (defined as 45 minutes a night, in many studies) seems like sucking in the air of a big rig's tailpipe or driving down the highway without a seat belt—Bad with a capital B!

When you meditate, your mind shifts out of conscious thinking and into quiet mode. (It's not all in your head, either: Hop in an imaging machine, and scientists see your brain light up in new ways during the practice.) By breaking your usual train of thought and calming the body, meditation regulates your insulin, slashes inflammation, arms you against the flu—even helps your chromosomes age gracefully. So, yes: It's really, really good for you.

But formal relaxation isn't for everyone. You can try so hard to master not thinking that you wind up stressing yourself out, says Bruce Rabin, M.D., Ph.D., a psychiatrist at the University of Pittsburgh. "Meditation is very difficult to do," he says. "And if you only give people this very difficult option, they're left going, 'What's wrong with me? Why can't I do this?'" Luckily, you don't have to sit still with your palms up just so. Researchers now believe that *any* activity that requires focused attention and being in the moment can count as your daily dose of vitamin M.

The trick is finding just the right task that helps you focus, says Julian Ford, Ph.D., a professor of psychiatry at the University of Connecticut. Leisurely pursuits, like gardening or sketching, can certainly do the trick, but workaday endeavors

can put you in the om zone too. Ideally, the undertaking will shift your focus from the minutiae to what's important, such as having a beautiful product line come June or getting that coveted promotion in January. Think of it as the practical vehicle for turning down the noise in your brain by tuning in to what you value in life. Then you'll fall into a rhythm and distracting thoughts and worries will be blocked out, Ford says. "To get into the flow, focus close attention to what you're doing on a moment-by-moment basis, while also considering the larger meaning of the activity in your life."

Which to-do will successfully send you to a placid place? For inspiration, we asked six rising luminaries how they quiet their minds and in turn rev up their health—all while still on the clock.



Adelle Waldman, author of *The Love Affairs of Nathaniel P.*, New York City

MY MEDITATION: REVISING

When I write a first draft, I am going by feel and instinct, grappling in the dark. I vastly prefer revising. That's when some kind of transformation occurs, something that can feel almost magical. I become, for a few weeks at a time, subsumed by the book. For days on end, I feel not only too distracted but almost too porous for regular life; I can't do much but work on the novel. I'll put a pot of coffee on and then get so absorbed in what I'm doing that I'll forget all about it for hours. I'm just lost in my inner world and the world of the book. And

in this state, I am able to see the whole book clearly, almost feel it, as if it were a living part of me. Extraneous sentences jump out at me. I begin to sense, in a visceral way, a natural order and shape that the novel seems to want—it feels almost as if it has a will of its own and it's my job simply to pay very close attention. Radical changes, like moving a scene from one section to another, occur to me, and make sense immediately. It's thrilling. I don't think I could stand to be in such a single-minded state always, but I do treasure those periods of total focus.



Skylar Brandt, ballerina with the
American Ballet Theatre, New York City

MY MEDITATION: DANCING BY HEART

When you get thrown into a new piece of choreography, you have to spend the appropriate amount of time learning the movements, learning the music, learning even the feeling of the piece. At first it's unfamiliar, so you're not in a meditative state yet. But then you practice it over and over again and the movements get into your muscle memory and it all starts to make sense. At that point a switch goes off: Now you don't have to think about which step is next. In fact, you don't have to think at all. You can completely let go and start enjoying it. That's when it starts to feel like meditating. And once your body knows the routine, you can start to play around with it. You develop the emotion you want to portray without any worries about the movement. You give it your own flavor. There's a moment after a lot of practice when you rehearse the whole thing and realize, *Wow, I didn't have to think about it at all.*

“When you practice over and over, you don't have to think.”



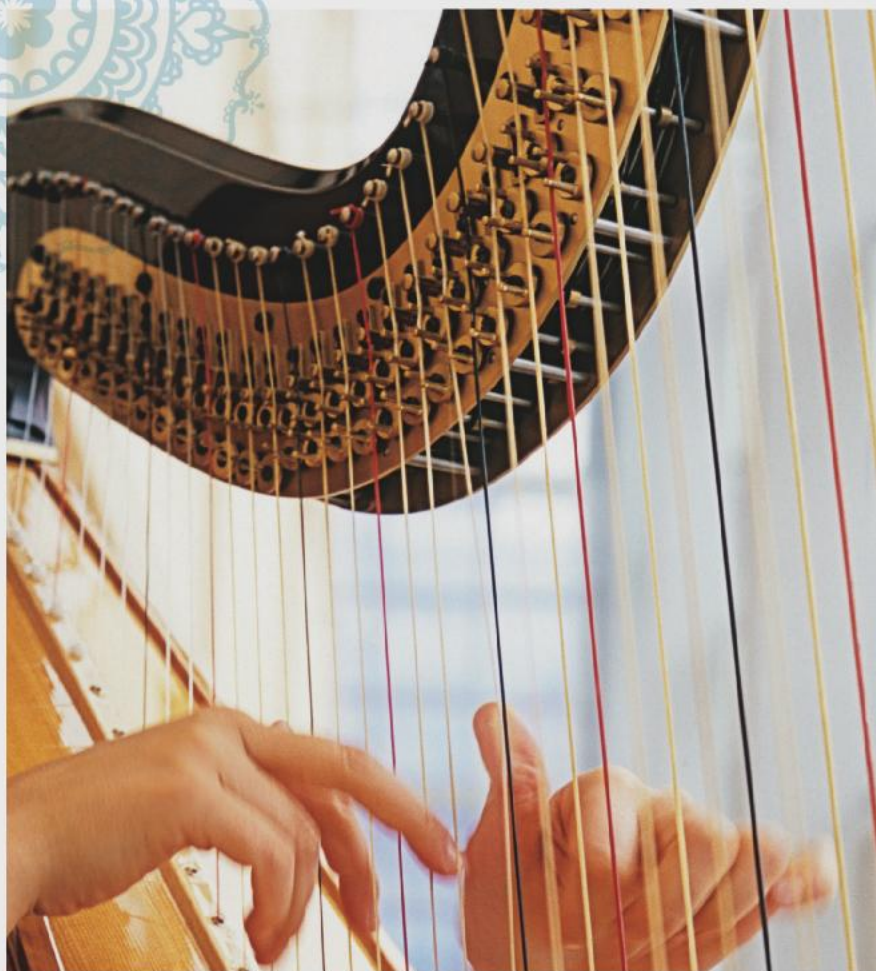
Naomi Pomeroy, *chef and owner of Beast Restaurant, Portland, Oregon*

MY MEDITATION: SORTING PARSLEY

I have a few things that relax me when I cook, usually monotonous tasks like picking herbs. Of all of the herbs, parsley is the most satisfying. First you take off the ties. Then you look at each leaf: Is it worth serving? Is it brown? We use a lot of parsley at

the restaurant, so part of the reason it soothes me is the quantity. If I pick just one bunch for a few minutes, it won't get me in a meditative state, but six will. And because parsley is pretty hardy and you can't crush it, it works best to calm me—versus, say, tarragon,

which is delicate to sort through. It also helps that parsley is so green, so vibrant. I think if it were beige, it wouldn't relax me the same way. So it's the color, plus the repetitive motion of sorting the leaves. On a hectic day, sorting parsley makes me stop.



Gillian Benet Sella, principal harpist for the Cincinnati Symphony, Cincinnati



MY MEDITATION: PLAYING A PIECE THAT I KNOW WELL

It's funny: People look at the instrument and they think, *Oh, it must be relaxing to play the harp.* And it is—but there are so many elements that need intense concentration and practice for many, many hours. So, I'm not always calm when I perform. There are some very stressful moments, because when you're playing with an orchestra, you have to be alert: What's the conductor doing? Am I keeping up? That happens especially when I have to perform a new piece that I've only been able to rehearse a few times. On the other hand, I recently had the chance to perform a piece I love—one that I know very well. When I was on stage, sure, there were still a few stressful moments, but then I got into the groove. I felt like I was a part of something bigger than myself, and everything clicked into place. When I overcome the technical aspects of the piece and fully embrace the music, it's magical. I start to forget myself and just play.

“When I fully embrace the music, it’s magical. I start to forget myself.”



Mike Pospishil, seasonal nature guide, Bettles, Alaska

MY MEDITATION: OBSERVING WILDLIFE—HUMANS INCLUDED

I first visited a small fly-in lodge in Alaska in the winter of 2008 with my family. Something clicked inside me, and I wanted to come back so, so bad. Now, I guide tours in Alaska's national parks and preserves. The views are incredible. When you can see 60 or 70 or even 80 miles in multiple directions, it's totally different from regular life. Having to force your brain to process all that majestic landscape at

once, you can almost feel intoxicated.

But my real sense of peace comes from looking into the eyes of a wild bear and remembering how intelligent and capable she is. In reality, we humans aren't smarter or better than the rest of the living world, and on an existential level, that's liberating—it reminds me we aren't as important as we think. That realization transports me away from stress.



Robert Tolar Haining, software developer at Digg, New York City

MY MEDITATION: WRITING CODE

I make software that lets Digg, an online news reader, run on iPhones and iPads, and the part of the job that gets me most in the zone is writing out the basic structure of a new app. The details are less important at that point—I don't have to worry yet about problem solving. It's this initial flow where I'm just typing out the code that will lay down the foundation. Sometimes I get so into it that I tune out what's happening in the noisy office around

me. Take the day the new pope was being selected. I was in one of my grooves, banging out the basic code that would guide me later on. I was only focusing on what I was typing. That is, until I tested the app I was building and, only because Digg is a news-related site, saw the headlines. "They selected a new pope?!" I shouted. "Why didn't you guys tell me!" Turns out, everyone around me had been talking about it, but I hadn't noticed.