

Mindfulness: it can mess with your head

Meditation is said to bring serenity, but there is a dark side to the new middle-class trend, **Oliver Moody** writes

Over the past decade, a secular creed has stolen across the western world: meditation and mindfulness, stripped of their origins in south Asian religions, have become endemic among the British middle classes.

Actresses, rappers, politicians and chief executives have all been lured by the promise of spiritual revival, sharper focus or just a sound night's sleep. What, though, if the price of mindfulness were madness?

The hidden risks of these apparently innocuous pastimes include mania, depression, hallucinations and psychosis, two psychologists have warned.

Miguel Farias, head of the brain, belief and behaviour research group at Coventry University, has been studying transcendental meditation and other contemplative techniques for almost two decades. In *The Buddha Pill: Can Meditation Change You?*, published yesterday, he and Catherine Wikholm, a researcher in clinical psychology at the University of Surrey, examine the scientific evidence and describe seven common "myths" about the practice.

Chief among these is the belief that it is harmless. One US study found that 63 per cent of people who had been on meditation retreats had suffered at least one side effect, ranging from confusion to panic and depression. One in 14 had experienced "profoundly adverse effects".

Other researchers found that practising mindfulness for 20 minutes a day raised levels of cortisol, the stress hormone, even though the meditators said that they felt less stressed.

Scientific literature is rich in case studies of patients who appear to have been driven into breakdowns or "dark nights" of mental torment during programmes of meditation, but there have been few experiments involving more than a handful of people. Dr Farias said that the shortage of rigorous statistical studies into the negative repercussions of meditation was a "scandal".

"The assumption of the majority of both TM [transcendental meditation] and mindfulness researchers is that meditation can only do one good," he said. "This shows a rather narrow-minded view. How can a technique that allows you to look within and change your perception or reality of yourself be without potential adverse effects? The answer is that it can't, and all meditation studies should assess not only positive but negative effects."

Since the Beatles popularised the



Emma Watson is a devotee of Buddhist mindfulness; Paul McCartney and John Lennon put their faith in Maharishi Mahesh Yogi after their trip to India in 1968



transcendental meditation movement founded by Maharishi Mahesh Yogi after their journey to India in 1968, millions of Britons have dabbled in various forms of the discipline. Mindfulness, a meditative method derived from Buddhism, has become a craze in recent years, with adherents said to include the *Harry Potter* actress Emma Watson to Arianna Huffington, the media baron, Liz Truss, the environment secretary, and Andy Burnham, the Labour leadership candidate.

People could do with casting a more critical eye over meditation, Ms Wikholm said. "It is hard to have a balanced view when the media is full of articles

attesting to the benefits of meditation and mindfulness," she said. "We need to be aware that reports of benefits are often inflated... whereas studies that do not discover significant benefits rarely pick up media interest, and negative effects are seldom talked about."

The Buddha Pill details a randomised control trial looking at what yoga and meditation classes can do for British prisoners. Over ten weeks, inmates at seven prisons in the Midlands took 90-minute classes once a week and completed tests to measure their higher cognitive functions. "Yoga and meditation significantly improved the prisoners' mood, and reduced their stress and psychological distress," Ms Wikholm said. The results suggested that the prisoners taking the classes were more disciplined — but no less aggressive.

Mindfulness-based cognitive therapy is available through the NHS to prevent relapses of depression.

What the celebrities think

Katy Perry

"For people that are so creative and have this kind of creative faucet that never turns off, it just continues and continues, it can be a little exhausting... And meditation is actually the only time I get to really reset."

me mental. I am going to start. Tomorrow. I think I get it."

Richard Gere, left
"The only thing that will get us anywhere on the spiritual path... whether

it's concentration, loving kindness

or wisdom that we want to develop,

is to dedicate ourselves to a daily practice."



Gwyneth Paltrow

"My new year's resolution is to learn how to meditate..."

My friends who do it say it's really freakin' brilliant. They say you can't know the peace/awareness/contentment until you do it. My brain drives

Russell Brand
"I'm quite a neurotic thinker, quite an adrenalinised person, but after meditation, I felt this beautiful serenity and selfless connection."

It's my own fault...but I'll be back, says Clarkson

Gideon Spanier

The saga over Jeremy Clarkson's broadcasting future has taken yet another surprising twist as he has suggested he could return to the BBC as a presenter.

"I'm not sacked, remember," he said in his first interview since his departure, speaking, appropriately, on a BBC show to Radio 2's Chris Evans.

Clarkson, who was dropped as the host of *Top Gear* in March after attack-

ing a producer, insisted he had "absolutely no idea" what his future held but he was "not going to be a milkman". He was "listening" to offers from rival broadcasters amid speculation that he could be signed up by ITV or Netflix to make a new car show to rival *Top Gear* with his former presenting colleagues, James May and Richard Hammond.

He said that leaving the BBC had left "a big hole" in his life and he was contrite. "It's my own silly fault so I can



Jeremy Clarkson at Broadcasting House in London yesterday

hardly complain. I was at the BBC for 27 years, in the current incarnation for 12 and *Top Gear* was very much my baby." He added the BBC was "a great organisation, I'm never going to complain about it".

May and Hammond left in sympathy with Clarkson. When Evans pointed out that "James and Richard can go back to the BBC, that door is still open for them", Clarkson said: "Well so can I, you know, I'm not sacked — remember."

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