

# THINK YOURSELF STRONG AND LEAN

How to stop multitasking and slow down to get fitter and leaner faster.

BY JUDI KETTELER

You want it all—better performance in the gym; less stress; cleaner, guilt-free eating and quicker fat loss. Believe it or not, you only need one tool in your fitness bag—it's called mindfulness. And, although considered one of the most popular trends in fitness, mindful living is much more than a gimmicky term left over from the '70s. In fact, used properly, mindful living can get you everything from better results in the gym to actually being able to transform your life.

"Mindfulness is the awareness that arises when you intentionally pay attention in an open, accepting and discerning way," says Shauna Shapiro, Ph.D., associate professor of psychology at Santa Clara University and author of *The Art and Science of Mindfulness* (American Psychological Association, 2009). Too often, we live our lives on autopilot. Mindfulness is about hitting the pause button and being fully present in the moment. "The future doesn't exist yet; the past is gone. Right now is the only moment we have to live our lives," Shapiro explains.

Less stress. More energy. Better immune function. A rocking self-esteem. And a full night's

**LESS STRESS. MORE ENERGY. BETTER IMMUNE FUNCTION. A ROCKING SELF-ESTEEM. AND A FULL NIGHT'S REST THAT KEEPS YOU GOING ALL DAY LONG.**





rest that keeps you going all day long. With these added benefits, it's no wonder many active women are choosing to slow down and get mindful.

### Mindfulness in the Gym

If you've been working out for a while, your body already knows how to do the exercises, but getting your brain on board can take your training and your fat loss to a whole new level. For one, exercising mindfully allows you to recruit the right muscle group immediately, making your workout much more efficient and targeted, says trainer and exercise physiologist Lisa Hampton, MS, owner of Mindful Fitness in San Diego. "Being mindful helps you put your mind into the muscle," she says – and that can lead to significant fitness gains. "Your muscles have more than a 10 percent response to when you simply imagine moving them," Hampton says. In other words, mental imagery alone causes activity in the muscles. Exercising mindfully allows you to build on that.

A 2004 Cleveland Clinic Foundation study found that by practicing "mental contractions" for 12 weeks, study participants improved strength in the little finger by 35 percent and the elbow by 13.5 percent (those were the only two body parts the study dealt with). How does this

happen? Simple: By just imagining yourself contracting your muscles when you're not even working out, your brain sends a signal to the muscle. If you visualize yourself working the muscle at the same time that you are actually working the muscle, your brain will send an even stronger signal – giving you a more effective workout. And, since mindful training is all about this kind of mind/body connection, adding it to your daily gym routine could really pay off, starting with your first session.

But where do you begin? The first step requires an attitude shift: Instead of gritting through your workout, focusing on getting to the other side while mentally recapping last night's episode of *The City* or planning what you'll have for dinner later, you need to focus on the here and now. As simple as it sounds, you need to be present in what you are doing.

To get calm and quiet enough to pay attention to what's going on with their brains and bodies, Hampton has her clients begin each workout by setting an intention. It may be as concrete as strengthening the biceps or relate to a state-of-mind goal, such as getting rid of stress. "Take two to five minutes to get centered," Hampton says, through deep breathing and visualization. Then, you're ready to begin your workout.

**EXERCISING MINDFULLY ALLOWS YOU TO RECRUIT THE RIGHT MUSCLE GROUP IMMEDIATELY, MAKING YOUR WORKOUT MUCH MORE EFFICIENT**

# Train Mindfully

Follow these tips for better training that will fire up your mind/muscle connection – and your fat loss too.



## 1. Practice flexing in front of the mirror.

Try contracting only one muscle at a time, making note of how your body responds. Doing this before your workout will make it easier to maintain form and control during exercise.

## 2. Ditch the dumbbells.

Take time before each workout to go through the motions of the exercise without any equipment. Without the weights, it'll be easier to focus on the muscle contractions and prepare for your strength session.

## 3. Focus on getting through the rep.

Try not to think of the set as a whole. With mindfulness, it's always quality over quantity. Once you get through one set, switch your focus to the next.

## 4. Tune in to your breath by counting.

For example, when you do a biceps curl, inhale and then exhale for a count of one to two to lift, and inhale for a count of four to lower.

## 5. Close your eyes for one repetition during each set.

It will allow you to fully experience how your body moves, and block out visual distractions.

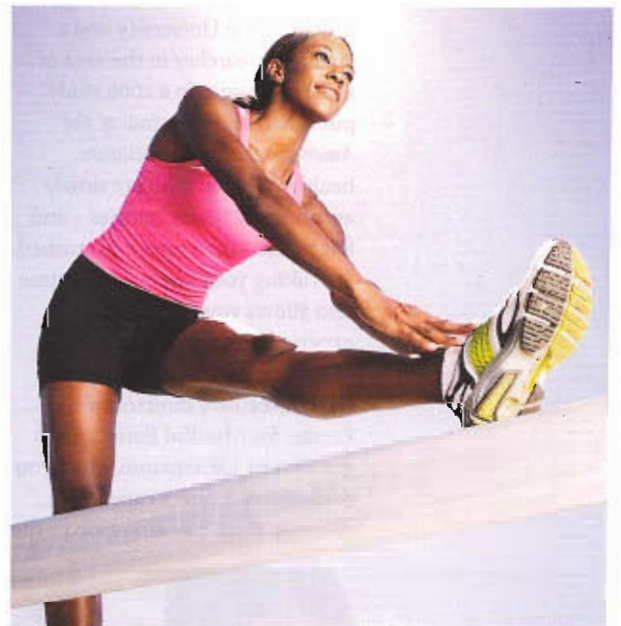


Practicing mindfulness while training means focusing on five key things: Breaths, feelings, sensations, sounds and thoughts, says fitness and wellness coach Cheryl Jones-Reardon, MS, owner of the Mindful Path in South Windsor, Connecticut. But how do you connect your mind with your body?

As you begin to move, notice your physiology: How do your muscles feel? What is happening with your breath? Can you feel your heart beat? Are you perspiring? "Do a check-in with your body," Jones-Reardon says. Staying aware of the messages that it's sending in response to the exercise movements will also reduce your chances of injury, since you'll be paying attention to the feedback your body is sending, says Hampton. When you're just starting out,

getting rid of your distracting thoughts can be the trickiest part. "[They] are a huge source of stress," Jones-Reardon says. The real key to mindful exercise is to recognize that thoughts about your work, your annoying mother-in-law or your cash-strapped bank account will continually pop up, but to train yourself to get past them. Acknowledge the thought, then return to focusing on the mind/body connection. "The goal isn't to have no thoughts," Jones-Reardon says. "It's about saying, 'Oh, there's a thought,' and then letting it go and going back to your breathing, back to the movement – over and over again." Eventually, you will find that this process will come naturally, making it even easier for you to become mindful and fit in the gym.

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## Mindfulness at the Table

Outside of the gym, learning to be mindful could also power up your fat loss at the dinner table. For years, researchers have been stressing the benefits of slowing down and spending at least 20 minutes on each meal – but if you’re eating clean and keeping your metabolism revved by eating five to six small meals each day, that’s probably not going to fly. Instead, try spending 20 minutes on at least one of your daily meals, such as lunch, and spend more time eating when it’s more practical, like the weekends.

“When people eat more slowly and with awareness, they tend to eat less and to make better choices,” says Jean Kristeller, Ph.D., professor of psychology at Indiana State University and a leading researcher in the area of mindful eating. In a 2008 study published in the *Journal of the American Dietetic Association*, healthy women who ate slowly ate about 67 fewer calories – and felt fuller! – than ones who rushed.

Taking your sweet, sweet time also allows you to directly experience your food, explains Megrette Fletcher, RD, MEd, CDE, executive director of the Center for Mindful Eating. “You get a lot of information when you connect with direct experience,” she says. First, pay attention to the

sensory reaction: How does the food smell? What is its texture? What flavors are you picking up? Pay attention to how your body reacts to certain taste triggers: Do salty foods make you feel happy? Are you feeling guilty while eating something sweet? **Simply notice how eating different foods makes you feel, also paying attention to how satisfied you’re getting so that you don’t overeat.**

Fletcher also recommends taking a few moments before each meal to connect with what you want. “Just a few moments can drastically change what you choose,” she says. Again, if you’re eating six times a day, you may not have the luxury of time before each meal. Spend the time where you do have it, and just do a quick 30-second check-in when you’re rushed. Mini-meditations can be very effective, Kristeller says. Her initial pilot study showed that just

taking 30 seconds to get centered before a meal reduced binge eating by 70 percent.

Getting centered means asking yourself why you’re eating what you’re eating: Is what you’re eating going to nourish your body? Is this food conducive to what you have to do today (such as work out, drive a long distance or deal with kids)? Kristeller’s latest research has shown that taking a more traditional “healthy balance diet” approach – such as clean eating – does not contradict with mindful eating. “Participants in our latest obesity study lost even more weight when they were able to combine ‘inner wisdom’ with ‘outer wisdom,’” she says. In other words: Making food choices based on both your inner awareness and your knowledge of which foods are healthiest for your body will keep your fat loss on track.

## Eat Mindfully

Keep these tips in mind to get the most out of your clean-eating plan.

### 1. Eat when you’re hungry.

If only a specific flavor, texture or food can satisfy your desire to eat, you’re probably having a craving. Take a minute to get centered before packing your plate.

### 2. Stop eating when you’re full.

Use a hunger and fullness scale before and during your meals (one being very hungry, seven being very full), says Sasha Loring, MEd, LCSW, mindfulness teacher and psychotherapist at Duke Integrative Medicine. Learn to pay attention to your body, and stop when you are moderately full, about a 5.5.

### 3. Focus on each bite, not the whole meal.

Pause with each bite to discern the different flavors and textures. This mindset will allow you to stop eating once you reach the bite that makes you feel full.

### 4. Minimize distraction.

Turn off the TV and put down the newspaper, giving all your attention to your meals.

### 5. Keep a log of how your surroundings impact your eating.

Do you eat more in a certain place, at a certain time of day or around certain people? Recognize and eliminate your triggers. Ⓞ

