



## *Exercise your brain for good!*

In their book *How GOD Changes Your Brain*, authors Andrew Newberg and Mark Robert Waldman argue convincingly that various meditation (and/or mindfulness) practices change the way your brain works. In other words, not only does meditation produce a peaceful feeling, but it helps us actually become more peaceful. For those of us, however, for whom "meditation" conjures up images of sitting still (hard for me) for long periods of time (REALLY hard for me!), Newberg and Waldman suggest eight ways to become more healthy in all aspects of our lives (and some are quite surprising!):

**#8: Smile** "Even if you don't feel like it, the mere act of smiling repetitively helps to interrupt mood disorders and strengthen the brain's neural ability to maintain a positive outlook on life" (151\*).

**#7: Stay intellectually active** "When it comes to the dendrites and axons that connect on neuron to thousands of others, if you don't use it, you will lose it" (153). [And they point out that video games don't count!]

**#6: Consciously relax** "I'm talking about deliberately scanning each part of your body to reduce muscle tension and physical fatigue" (155).

**#5: Yawn** "Yawning evokes a unique neural activity in the areas of the brain that are directly involved in generating social awareness and creating feelings of empathy" (156). Don't feel like it? "All you have to do to trigger a deep yawn is to fake it six or seven times" (159).

**#4: Meditate** "Ten to fifteen minutes of meditation appears to have significantly positive effects on cognition, relaxation, and psychological health, and it has been shown to reduce smoking and binge drinking behavior" (159).

**#3: Aerobic exercise** "Exercise can even be viewed as a form of meditation because it involves sustained concentration and a deliberate regulation of body movements and breathing. Studies have even shown that it enhances relaxation and spiritual well-being" (160).

**#2: Dialogue with others** "Dialogue requires social interaction, and the more social ties we have, the less our cognitive abilities will decline. . . . Without dialogue, we would not be able to cooperate with others, and without cooperation, human behavior rapidly deteriorates into conflict" (162).

**#1: Faith** Also understood as 'optimistic thinking', it "decreases stress, helps you resist catching the common cold, reduces your risk of coronary artery disease, eases breathing if you have certain respiratory diseases, and improves your coping skills during hardships" (165).

The authors also stress that whatever we do to benefit our own brains (and spirit) spills over to others. So I challenge you to join me in stealth smiling and yawning! Talk with others about deep, interesting, issues. Exercise and relax. Breathe. Look forward to the future. Renew your spirit, and help renew the world.

Blessings,

Gary

[\*Page numbers referenced above are from Andrew Newberg and Mark Robert Waldman, *How God Changes the Brain*, New York: Ballantine Books, 2009.]