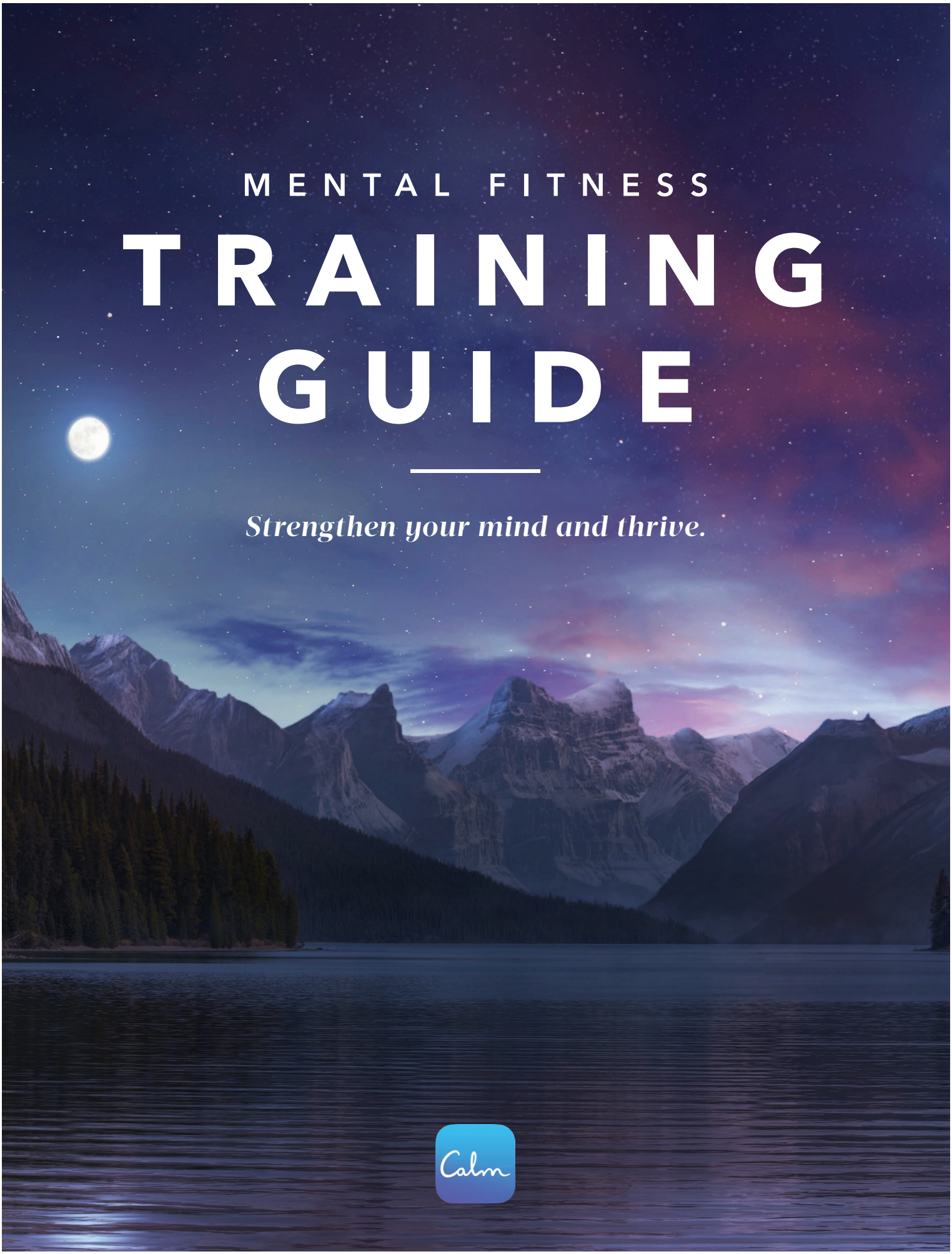

MENTAL FITNESS
TRAINING
GUIDE
Strengthen your mind and thrive.
Calm

INTRO

Neuroscience is discovering new, effective ways to develop our brains for enhanced mental strength and performance. What we are learning about neuroplasticity means that, at any age, through training, we can change our brains to become even more mentally strong, healthy, and fit.

Much as we need specific physical exercises and movement to build bodily strength, agility, and resilience; we can also benefit from exercises – or practices – to strengthen our minds, mental performance, and well-being. We can tap this immense potential to experience greater courage, confidence, composure, clarity, and creativity, the 5 Cs of mental strength we need to cultivate happier, healthier, and more rewarding lives.

We created this mental strength training guide to give you 13 specific exercises to practice.

Your mind is a muscle – together, let's flex it.

MEET THE MUSCLES OF THE MIND

When we talk about "muscles of the mind," we're referring to different mental abilities we want to access, strengthen, and flex – four different capabilities that, when strong, work together to support us in feeling creative, calm, resilient, happy, and successful.

CONCENTRATION

Concentration is the mind's ability to come back to a chosen point of focus. It's important to note that even a mind with a well-developed "concentration muscle" will wander. That's not weakness; it's just the nature of the human brain. A strengthened mind will notice this wandering and use concentration to return to the point of focus (as many times as needed). It's not how often we have to come back that matters, it's that we come back.

EQUANIMITY

Equanimity is the mind's capacity to be okay with what's happening, even if, especially if, we wish things were otherwise. This isn't to be confused with being passive, weak, or letting life walk all over us. Equanimity means not pushing away or grabbing onto experience. We feel it as a sort of relaxed, easygoingness, an inner-smoothness, a way of going with the flow. Ultimately it's an acceptance of the imperfect way that things tend to roll.

CLARITY

Clarity is the power of the mind to be aware of itself. It's the way that we notice what our mind is doing, whether that be wandering, concentrating, spinning, overthinking, going with the flow, or going down the rabbit hole. When we are oblivious to what our minds are doing, we are at the mercy of its shenanigans. When we are clear about what's happening, we're empowered to make a different choice.

FRIENDLINESS

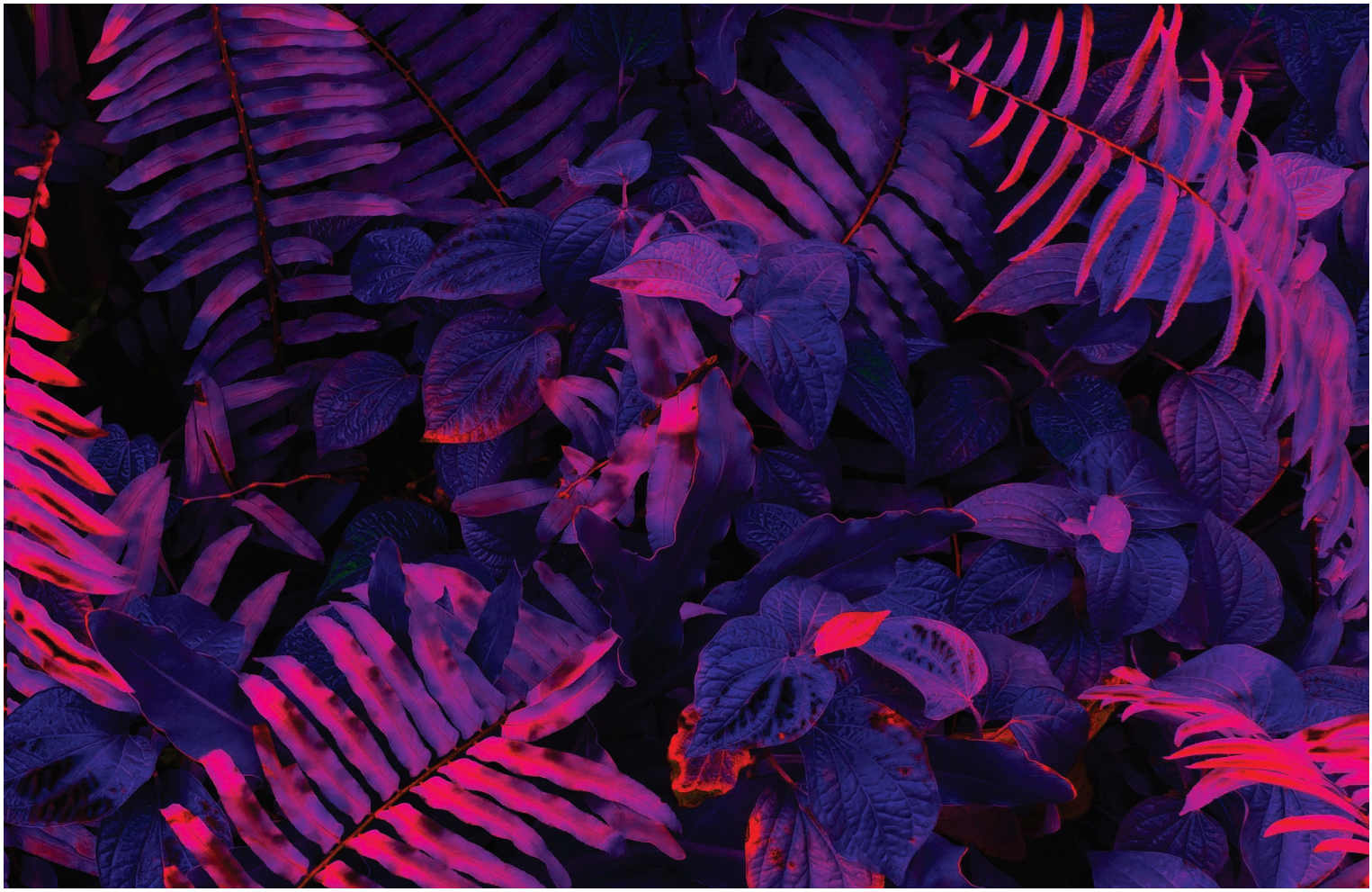
Friendliness is the mind's potential to meet ourselves and others with kindness and good wishes. This muscle often gets overlooked for being sappy or unimportant. However, cultivating more friendliness can make us happier and more connected. It makes both our minds and the world better places to live.

All of these muscles are equally important and work together to support overall health and wellbeing.

TRAINING YOUR MENTAL MUSCLES

We don't get strong arms by doing bicep curls once. Our mental strength is the same. Improving our mental muscles' performance requires time, practice, and consistency. In the following pages, we offer a diversity of mental strength training mini-workouts. Work through them one by one in order, or choose a few that resonate with you right now and start there.

If you journal or are open to trying it, we recommend noting what happens in these mental workouts, as you go. Reflection strengthens clarity which leads to insight. Recording progress also trains our minds to maintain focus and to regularly recommit to habits we see as rewarding.



SUMMARY OF MENTAL FITNESS EXERCISES

- Take a Deep Breath
- Do Different
- Meditation
- Focus
- *Respond Instead of Reacting*
- Don't Go Down the Rabbit Hole
- Let it Go
- *Drop the Filter*
- Lean into the Good
- Take a Break
- Prioritize Sleep
- Tune out the Noise
- *Get Out of Your Head and Into Your Body*
- Listen to the Wise Voice Within
- Connect
- *Routine & Ritual*

Important: If you notice that some of these exercises are overwhelming or triggering in ways that feel unmanageable, we recommend reaching out and getting support from a trusted friend, a therapist, or a health-care practitioner. While it's helpful to be independent and self-sufficient in some areas of life, we weren't meant to go through our challenges alone. One of the greatest acts of courage is asking for help.

TAKE A DEEP BREATH

The breath is a powerful support that you can access anywhere – a first date, a test, a big presentation, a tough conversation, or a traffic jam. Slowing down and deepening the breath has been shown to help calm the mind. It can also reduce blood pressure, improve memory, and settle emotions. (source)

- [ ] *Practice deep breathing at least once a day for at least three breaths*

HERE'S A BREATHING EXERCISE YOU CAN DO ANYWHERE:

1. Take a long slow deep inhale through the nose, as if you were sipping air in through a straw. Let the breath expand into your chest, rib cage, and belly.
2. Pause for a moment.

3. Now exhale through the nose in a way that matches the speed and length of your inhale. Feel the belly drawing in and the chest and ribcage falling slightly.
4. Pause and repeat this cycle at least three times.

***Tip**: Let your exhales be slightly longer than your inhales for added relaxation.*

USE YOUR MENTAL MUSCLES TO SUPPORT THIS PRACTICE:

- Concentration: Counting the length of your inhales and exhales can help you focus during this exercise. Inhale 1-2-3. Exhale 3-2-1.
- Clarity & Equanimity: You'll likely notice that your breathing feels different on different days. This is completely fine. Stay curious and go with the flow.
- Friendliness: While you work to expand your breath do so with gentleness. Never force or strain your breathing pattern. Instead, work with your capacity and notice how it shifts even after a few breaths.

DO DIFFERENT

New experiences can create new neural pathways in our brains. By the time we reach adulthood, most of us have formed habits that may or may not be useful, but we continue to do them because they're what we do. By switching things up, we change our brains, spark creativity, and become better problem-solvers -- because we bring newness to rote mental processes.

- *Do something you've never done before.*

Your "something different" doesn't have to be a big deal. It might be taking a different route to work, or taking public transit if you usually drive. It might be going to a restaurant that specializes in a cuisine that's new to you. It could be signing up for a singing lesson when you've never considered yourself musical. It could even be choosing the cinnamon toothpaste when you've always bought mint. Any of these provide new sensory and intellectual inputs that the brain has to integrate, expanding and strengthening the mind in the process.

"Sometimes meditation is easy; sometimes it's hard. It doesn't matter–the mental muscles build regardless. Over time, our baseline strength in all these areas increases. We find ourselves more focused, more easy-going, more aware of our patterns and behaviors, and hopefully more caring too."

- JEFF WARREN

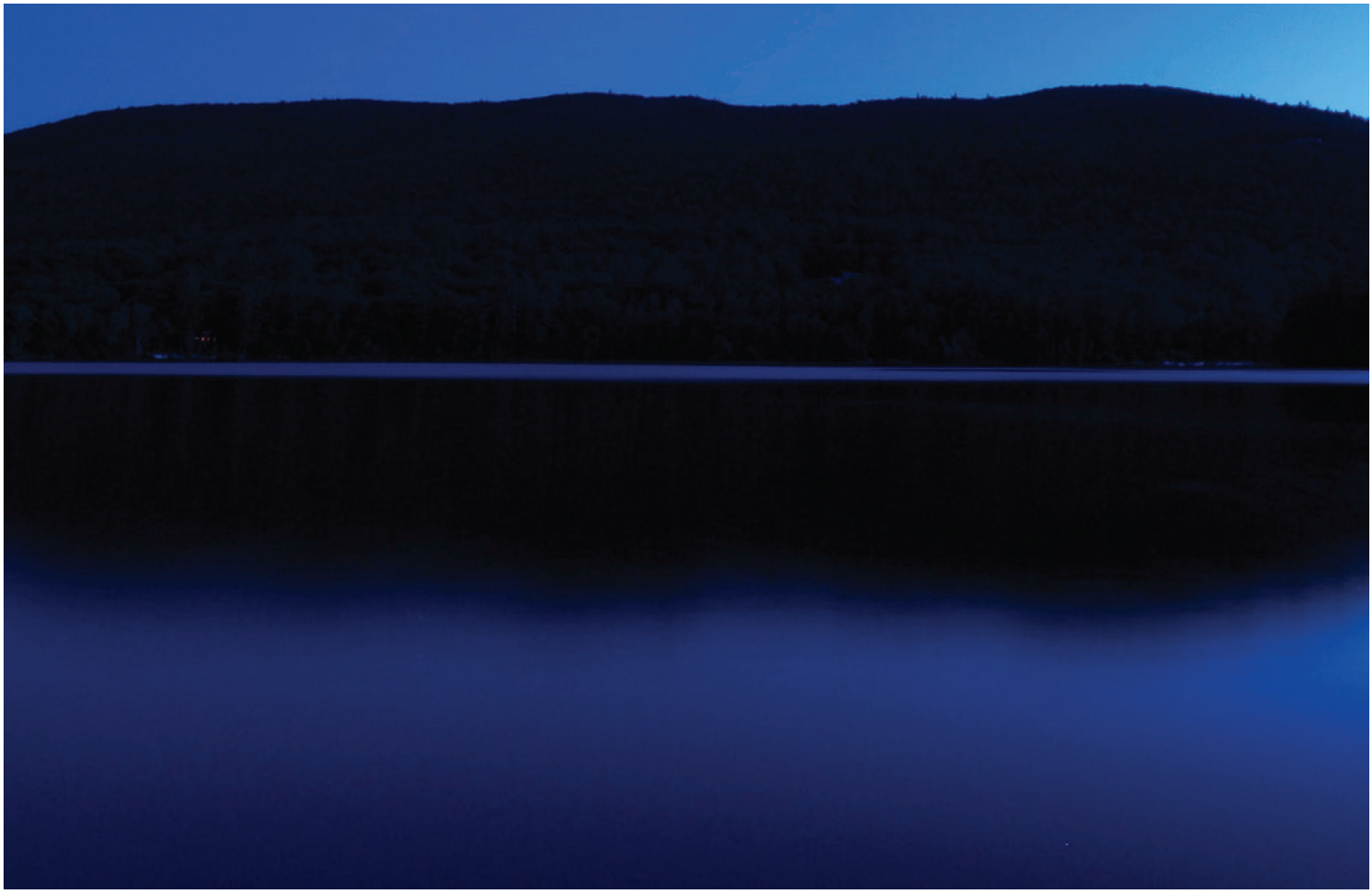
MEDITATION

Okay, you knew we were going to say this: meditate. Meditation is the way in to a personal mental muscle-building playground. It strengthens our ability to watch (hopefully with a sense of humor) all of the wacky, unhelpful, and troubling things that our minds do and is the first step in interrupting and shifting the mental habits that cause us pain. Meditation is also a great way to practice concentration, equanimity, clarity, and friendliness with yourself.

- *Meditate for 30 days (ideally you would do this every day consecutively, but if that's not realistic, map out 30 days on your calendar that you can make work).*

We recommend How to Meditate: A Simple 30-day Program for Everyone with Jeff Warren. These 10-minute meditations were designed to help make meditation a rewarding, regular habit. What you learn in each of these sessions will naturally extend into your life.

Once you begin, you might notice your mind trying to wiggle out of your commitment. Let your brain know that after 30 days it can decide something different, but for now, this is an experiment that we're testing and we want to see the results. So if you can't meditate in the morning, do it before bed, on your lunch break, or on the bus. Just make it happen.



RESPOND INSTEAD OF REACTING

A reaction happens in an instant; it's informed by the past and fueled by emotions. A response takes a little longer; it includes the present and is empowered by awareness and the mental muscle of clarity. Reactions are more likely to cause harm or bring up feelings of regret. Responses are thoughtful and tend to take into consideration everyone involved and future consequences. It's the difference between sending an angry or dismissive email to a coworker versus taking a moment to collect thoughts s before writing the email. Sometimes what makes a response possible is only a deep breath, and other times we need more time to keep from reacting

The truth is that we'll always have a reaction, but if we keep it to ourselves for a moment we can then decide how we want to act.

Notice yourself reacting instead of responding and practice turning it around.

NEXT TIME YOU'RE AT RISK OF REACTING INSTEAD OF RESPONDING, USE YOUR MENTAL MUSCLES TO:

- Pause and take a deep breath.
- Label your experience. What are you feeling? Angry? Sad? Frustrated? Afraid of rejection? Often we react from a place of emotion without even knowing that there is emotion there. Allow for clarity. Take some time to feel your feelings. For instance, if you're angry, that's cool. Let yourself feel it within yourself. Give that feeling your time and attention. And notice when it shifts. (Feelings always pass.) Once those initial strong emotions move, explore how you want to respond and imagine what the impact of your response might be from a calmer perspective.
- When you're ready, respond. You can always give yourself time by saying something like: *Thanks for bringing this to my attention, I need some time to think before I respond.*

DON'T GO DOWN THE RABBIT HOLE

Have you noticed the downward spiral of thoughts that can happen when you're worried, stressed, disappointed, angry, or nervous? It's easy to get lost in a flurry of what-ifs, criticism (of self and others), and overthinking. A part of us believes that if we dwell in the problem and spend our energy analyzing the situation that we'll somehow figure it all out and escape the discomfort we're feeling. Instead, we end up spinning in a sea of repetitive thoughts, negative feelings, regrets, and fears and become more anxious – and, also, totally exhausted. We become so distracted by our thoughts that it's impossible to be present and this makes it hard to truly engage and enjoy whatever we're doing. In our sincere (but misguided) attempt to find some relief, this mental pattern leads to further suffering.

Each time you find yourself beginning to overthink, pause and see if you can make a different choice.

HERE ARE THE MUSCLES YOU NEED TO FLEX TO SAY NO TO THE RABBIT HOLE:

CONCENTRATION

Bring yourself back to the moment. Hop out of the rabbit hole or walk on by. Often when we're feeling some distress in the mind, the body is simultaneously experiencing some discomfort – perhaps you've tensed up, you feel a lump in your throat or fire in your belly. Bringing your attention to the body is a great way to be present. Resist any storytelling around the sensation you're feeling and instead just get curious about the body. If that sensation were a color, what would it be? What shape would it be? Are the edges soft or sharp? How does it shift and change with the breath?

FRIENDLINESS

Once we've brought our attention to the body, we're naturally more aware of how we are affected by our experiences. As you attend to the discomfort, practice self-compassion. Some people find it helpful to imagine themselves as a small child; others benefit from the soothing reminder that they don't need to be perfect and it's okay to make mistakes. Explore what works for you. The key is to be kind.

EQUANIMITY

Now it's time to find some okay-ness and acceptance for these uncomfortable emotions and sensations. Give yourself permission to feel your feelings, and notice, as you do, that while they may not be exactly what you wanted to be feeling, you are okay. You can survive the discomfort.

**You'll definitely need to do a few reps, where rabbit hole avoidance is concerned. Even after steering yourself away, you'll notice that the mind will hurry back to peek in that rabbit hole. Notice how compelling it can be to stew in our thoughts. Choosing clarity, concentration, friendliness, and equanimity – again and again – is how we build and strengthen these mental muscles over time.*

It will feel a little weird at first. Believe it or not, when we go into a rabbit hole we are tricking ourselves into thinking that we are doing something productive, like trying to figure out the problem, when in fact we're actually trying to get out of the discomfort of the situation. Once we realize that we can brave the discomfort, a whole new world of possibilities opens up to us. Most often, there is nothing to be solved, just a feeling to be felt. And when there is actually something to figure out, the answer often arises with ease from the wise voice within – which we can hear much more clearly when we're not in the rabbit hole.

DROP THE FILTER

The thoughts, beliefs, and feelings that we bring to any situation are like an invisible filter that influences the way we interpret and experience the world. The trouble is that we often don't realize that we have a filter. Imagine walking through the world with glasses that have a gloomy lens and just thinking that's how the world looks. It's difficult, in that situation, to consider that a different way of seeing is possible. But it is! We can intentionally remove our filters and open up to the world with fresh eyes. Perhaps you remember a time when you were newly in love and it seemed the world sparkled with goodness? This is a sweet experience and is worth enjoying. It's when our lenses are less rosy that we tend to be unaware of them. We may be unconsciously looking at the world through a filter of negativity, fear, or unworthiness, which leads to considerable suffering.

☐ *Become aware of your filters.*

HERE'S A WORKOUT FOR IDENTIFYING FILTERS AND DROPPING THEM.

Step 1: Work your awareness muscle to notice the different filters that you tend to apply in different situations. A few popular ones include:

- unworthiness
- anxiety/fear
- sadness/despair
- negativity/hopelessness
- concern over what others might think

Step 2: Once you've noticed what tends to filter your experience, it's time to start interrupting this pattern by taking a deep breath and dropping the filter. This doesn't mean you're denying a feeling; for example, if you're sad, you can acknowledge feeling down but not use the sadness to filter the rest of the world. So when you pass a tree on your way home you can receive the tree for all its beauty. Even when nervous, it's possible to experience the warmth of a morning tea or the joy of laughing with a coworker. We don't have to cloud any moment with a filter.

Step 3: Of course, the pull of our thoughts, feelings, and beliefs are strong. Almost as soon as we drop the filter, we'll unconsciously add another. This is where the other mental muscles come into play. Turn on clarity to see that it's happened, engage concentration to drop the filter again by coming back to the moment as it is, and flex friendliness to be kind with yourself on this mental rollercoaster! It can be easy to get critical of ourselves, but it's important to always be compassionate. It's like being a good sport. Cheer your mind on. This isn't easy, but it makes all the difference.

LET IT GO

Trying to control our lives and the people in them is a one-way ticket to anxiety and exhaustion.

- *Release control.*

HERE'S YOUR WORKOUT FOR LETTING GO:

CLARITY

Notice when you're fixated on something that you don't have control over or when you're taking on more responsibility than is yours, or when perfectionism is keeping you stuck.

EQUANIMITY

Accept what you can't control. Let your best efforts be enough for now.

FRIENDLINESS

Accept what you can't control. Let your best efforts be enough for now.

LEAN INTO THE GOOD

We want good things to happen to us, and then when they happen, our mind has a way of freaking out. We're so terrified that this good thing won't last forever, that we start to worry and try to control everything. The truth is that it won't last forever and our efforts to try and control situations or people often end poorly. So, knowing that this feeling is temporary, let's soak it up. Allow yourself to feel joy, connection, love, and happiness. Inhale the goodness. Exhale gratitude.

- *Look for and savor the good in this moment.*

HERE'S YOUR WORKOUT FOR LETTING GO:

CONCENTRATION

Stay with your experience. Soak in the goodness.

CLARITY

Notice when you start thinking, "*Oh no! this isn't going to last*" or "*I don't deserve this*" or "*I have to take control*" and bring yourself back to the conversation at hand or the feeling of the sun on your skin.

EQUANIMITY

In the same way that we tap into our easygoing sense of okayness when things are tough, how can you do the same when things are good? We assume this as a given, but many of us don't realize that holding tightly to something good actually robs us the true experience and enjoyment.

FRIENDLINESS

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LOOK FOR THE GOOD

On hard days, we can soothe our nervous system by taking a moment to look around the space that we're in and notice what we like. Maybe it's a plant, the wood grain of the floor or the colors in a painting. Whatever it is, let your attention rest there for a few breaths. Add more of what helps you feel good and grounded in spaces that you spend a lot of time like your home or workplace. And, the places that you visit and don't have much influence over, give yourself a moment to orient yourself in the space and find what's soothing for you, maybe the view outside the window, the lighting, or the texture of the curtains ...

"If you get tired, learn to rest, not to quit."

- BANKSY

TAKE A BREAK

No different than taking a break in between sprints or a set of deadlifts, your brain needs breaks to reset and recharge. Rest has been stigmatized for so long that many of us feel lazy when we relax and fear that downtime will hurt our productivity. The truth is, adequate rest increases our focus, creativity, and energy so that we can be more productive and efficient. While resting might look like cozying up to read a book, it could also be crafting, climbing or a board game, basically, anything that gives us a reprieve from our everyday stressors.

- [ ] *Schedule breaks for rest, and take them.*

HERE'S HOW TO WORKOUT THE MENTAL MUSCLES TO IMPROVE THE QUALITY OF REST YOU'RE GETTING:

CONCENTRATION

Stay present. Allow yourself to feel the comfy support of your couch or lose yourself in a game of sudoku.

CLARITY

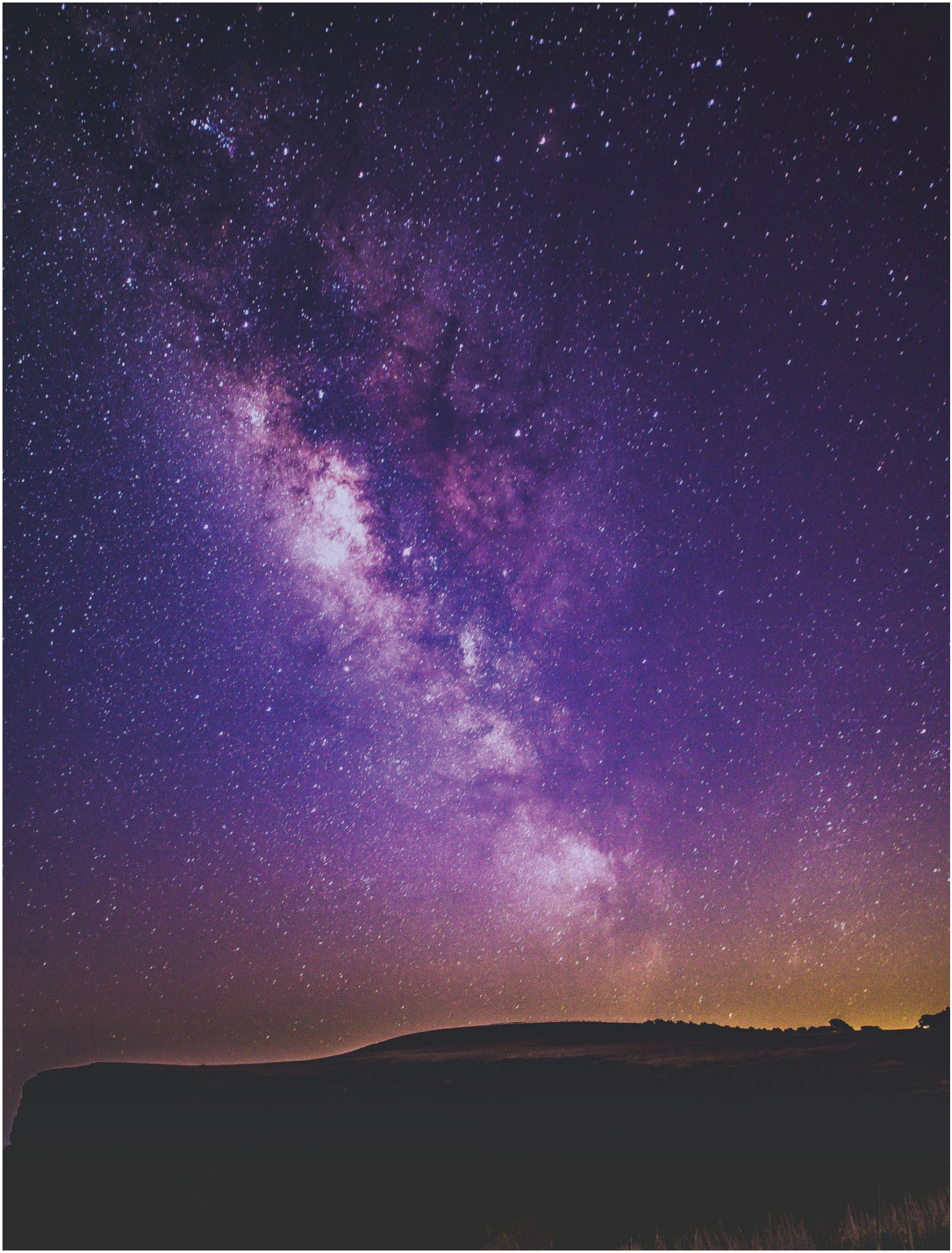
Notice when you're worrying about what you should be doing and gently bring yourself back to your relaxing activity. You may even want to name it, *Oh look, there I go stressing again.*

EQUANIMITY

Repeat to yourself: It's okay to rest.

FRIENDLINESS

Send some love to the worrywart within. With a sense of humor, you might say to your worrywart, I'm sorry but you're not in charge right now. (Note: Feel free to change the name of your worrier and the joke to suit your personality; make yourself laugh—that helps with relaxation too!)



PRIORITIZE SLEEP

The time we spend awake is precious, but so is the time we spend asleep. In addition to the relaxation benefits, our bodies and brains have the opportunity to repair and recover while we sleep. To show up in the world as our best selves, it's crucial that we give ourselves this time to recharge. More ZZZs improves memory, mood, creativity and our problem-solving skills.

☐ *Make and follow a plan for quality sleep.*

HERE'S YOUR SLEEP WORKOUT:

CONCENTRATION

Bring yourself back to the moment. Hop out of the rabbit hole or walk on by. Often when we're feeling some distress in the mind, the body is simultaneously experiencing some discomfort – perhaps you've tensed up, you feel a lump in your throat or fire in your belly. Bringing your attention to the body is a great way to be present. Resist any storytelling around the sensation you're feeling and instead just get curious about the body. If that sensation were a color, what would it be? What shape would it be? Are the edges soft or sharp? How does it shift and change with the breath?

FRIENDLINESS

Once we've brought our attention to the body, we're naturally more aware of how we are affected by our experiences. As you attend to the discomfort, practice self-compassion. Some people find it helpful to imagine themselves as a small child; others benefit from the soothing reminder that they don't need to be perfect and it's okay to make mistakes. Explore what works for you. The key is to be kind.

EQUANIMITY

Now it's time to find some okay-ness and acceptance for these uncomfortable emotions and sensations. Give yourself permission to feel your feelings, and notice, as you do, that while they may not be exactly what you wanted to be feeling, you are okay. You can survive the discomfort.

HERE'S HOW TO EXERCISE YOUR MENTAL MUSCLES AT BEDTIME:

CONCENTRATION

It's pretty natural to start reviewing your day and going over your to-do list as soon as your head hits the pillow. That's why it's nice to wind-down before you get under the covers. When you're in bed, bring your attention to the body and the breath. Feel the coziness of the blankets and try the breathing exercise below.

CLARITY

Don't worry about it if you don't fall asleep right away.

EQUANIMITY

Notice when you start wandering back to that to-do list and go back to the breath.

FRIENDLINESS

Remember that you are giving yourself the gift of rest. Give yourself permission to receive it.

BEDTIME BREATHING EXERCISE:

1. Place your hand on your belly.
2. Feel the rise and fall of every breath.
3. With every exhale sink into your bed a little deeper and let go of your day.

TUNE OUT THE NOISE

We are in the digital age of distraction. There is no shortage of notifications, messages, social media, and streaming platforms vying for our attention. Left unchecked it can be easy to be pulled away from what's important.

Some digital clean-up, like minimizing the push notifications on the phone, is an important first step. In addition, what we need to tune out the noise is discipline. Not a discipline that governs with punishment, but a more inspiring form of discipline that is devoted to what's important.

- *Give attention to what's truly important to you.*

HERE'S THE MENTAL MUSCLES WORKOUT FOR TUNING OUT NOISE.

CLARITY

Notice when you're distracted from the task at hand.

CONCENTRATION

Acknowledge the distraction and bring attention back to what you were doing.

EQUANIMITY

What we choose to devote our time towards is not always immediately gratifying. Our morning run might feel heavy, or our latest project might be a little tedious, but it's important to just be with it as it is. Remember it won't be forever, and getting worked up about it tends to make things more painful.

FRIENDLINESS

Send some love to the worrywart within. With a sense of humor, you might say to your worrywart, I'm sorry but you're not in charge right now. (Note: Feel free to change the name of your worrier and the joke to suit your personality; make yourself laugh—that helps with relaxation too!)

***Tip:** Let yourself be bored sometimes. Now that we all have personal computers in our pockets, it's easy to fill up our time and minds. It's overstimulating to always be digesting information. Next time you're waiting in line or for the bus, just hang out with your breath or put on some soothing music. Distracting ourselves is so habitual that it is sometimes hard to even catch ourselves doing it. As an experiment for one day, count how many times you purposely distract yourself to escape boredom or discomfort.*

GET OUT OF YOUR HEAD AND INTO YOUR BODY

Of course, there is really no separation between mind and body, but it can be helpful to think of these things separately as a way to bring a little more balance to where we place our attention. Our minds are powerful and amazing tools. So much so that we can often forget that we have a body. This sort of disembodiment is the perfect breeding ground for anxiety. The body is what grounds us, so it's crucial that we spend more time aware of the body we live in. A prompt that can be useful to explore is: Settle deeper than the thinking mind and into the feeling body. This doesn't mean that you have to stop thinking (that's pretty impossible), but rather, invite your attention to the sensations in the body.

- *Pay attention to your body.*

HERE'S YOUR MIND-BODY WORKOUT:

CONCENTRATION

Place your focus on something physical. Your breath, the breeze on your skin, or the parts of your body touching the ground.

CLARITY

What do you notice?

EQUANIMITY

Nothing needs to be different, you don't have to change anything, but notice that often just the act of noticing will cause something to shift.

FRIENDLINESS

As we explore the body we'll often meet some pain or discomfort. Offer yourself tenderness for whatever hardship or pain you are going through. For extra support, check out the *7 days of Soothing Pain* series in the Calm app.

Tip #1: If it's difficult to feel your body, create some sensation by rubbing your hands up and down the thighs, or gently run one or two of your fingers over your lips. Focus on how it feels.

Tip #2: Find support in your body and physical environment. Rest into the back of your chair, root your feet into the ground, or find refuge in the breath.

Tip #3: Do a Body Scan meditation to get in touch with your body.

Tip #4: Explore different meditative movement practices like Qi Gong, Tai Chi or yoga.

LISTEN TO THE WISE VOICE WITHIN

The wisdom within, our instincts or intuition, has different ways of revealing itself. Sometimes it's a quiet voice asking to be heard, a feeling in the gut, or a deep knowing. Too often we ignore this wise messenger because our truth can be inconvenient or incongruent with the advice and hopes of our family or society. When we do listen and test out acting in alignment with this wisdom, we begin to build a relationship of trust with ourselves. This is a powerful act of self-love that honors who we are and what we need.

- *Be aware of your instincts and intuition and act on them.*

HERE'S YOUR MIND-BODY WORKOUT:

CLARITY

Notice when you're getting a message from your body, or when you hear whispers of a deeper personal truth or an inner knowing.

CONCENTRATION

Listen to the whisper, feel your body, explore that sense of knowing. Just be curious. Don't look for answers or try to figure something out, just ask questions. The answers will come on their own.

EQUANIMITY

Can you be at ease with all of this? You don't have to act on anything until you're ready. Your job is just to pay attention. To let things be at the surface without pushing anything away.

FRIENDLINESS

It's brave to truly be with ourselves, especially when we tend to do things to numb or distract ourselves instead. Can you want what's best for yourself even when it is different than what you imagined?

Tip #1: This is courageous lifelong work. Every time we try something new is an opportunity to pay attention and see how it feels. This is how we grow and learn.

Tip #2: Listen to the Relationship with Self Series.

CONNECT

In many modern cultures, independence is prized. We're encouraged to succeed on our own and are told stories of lone heroes. But the truth is, the most effective and successful leaders know how to be in healthy relationships with others. The most effective and successful leaders know how to connect. Many of us, though, were never shown how to do that. As a result, in a world that can be very isolating, many of us, inside, are just straight up lonely.

Connection, though, can be learned and practiced and we can prime our brains for it. In fact, our brains were *made* for it. In relation to our body size, humans have larger brains than other animals. It's the work of anthropologist Robin Dunbar that posits the reason; the size of the neocortex relates to the size of an animal's social group. The human brain is large because we are meant to be social creatures. So, how do we practice connection?

- *Say something real to somebody.*

"Say something real to somebody." What does that even mean? If someone asks us how we are, how often do we answer automatically with "fine" or "great" or even by returning the question, "Hey! how are you?" There's nothing wrong with casual pleasantries and all the friendly relationships we keep light. But are there opportunities in our days where we could really connect with someone but we miss them or we let them pass? Could you tell your buddy that you're in a rough patch in your marriage and you're scared? Could you tell the coffee shop owner, "You know, I always like coming in here because you've got the best taste in music."

HERE'S HOW CONNECTING HAPPENS, USING MENTAL MUSCLES:

CLARITY

Notice when you have an opportunity to connect with someone.

CONCENTRATION

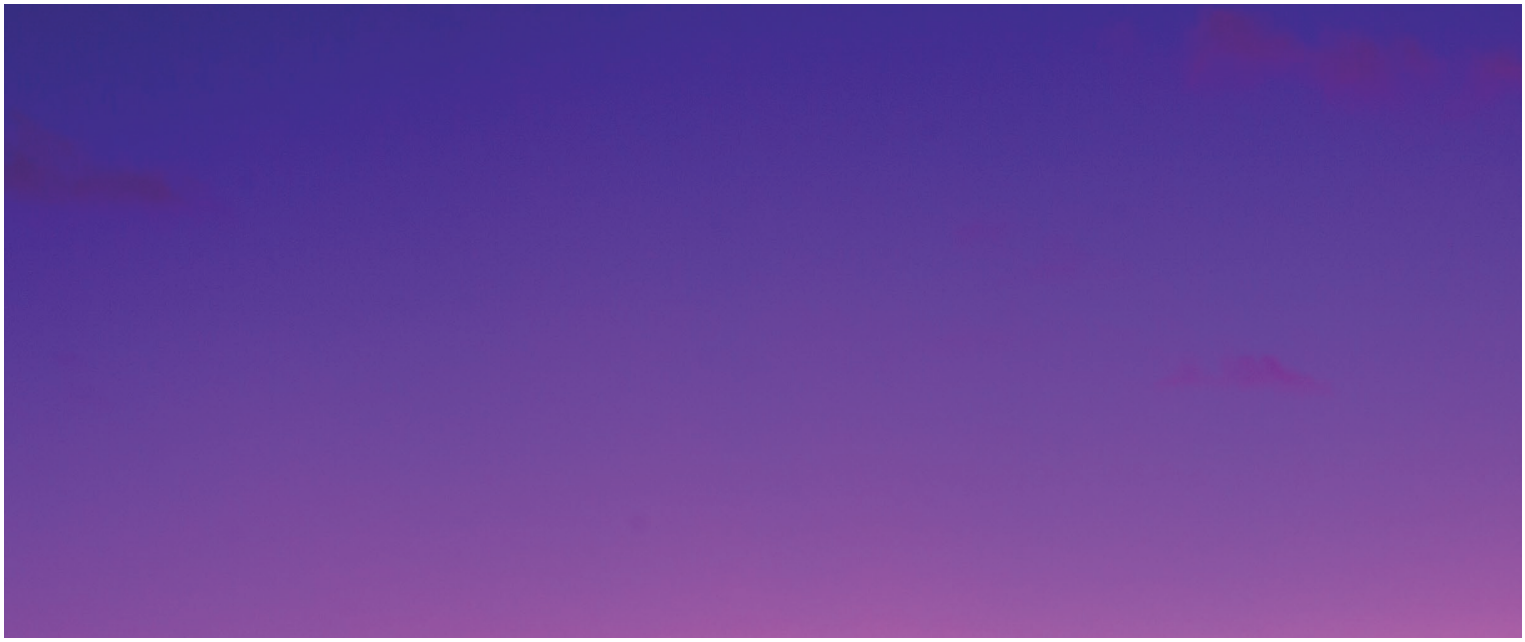
Meet their eyes, and feel that meeting. If you're connecting with someone without eyesight, when you've spoken, pause to feel that moment of recognition between you.

EQUANIMITY

Release expectations. Don't pay someone a compliment because you want them to feel a certain way. Don't try to come up with the "right" thing to say in order to feel a connection. Say something simple that is simple because it's just true.

FRIENDLINESS

Recognize that fear of rejection is real and it's okay to be nervous saying something real to someone, especially if you don't know how it will be received. Human interactions are complex. Allow yourself to be anxious about being vulnerable. Don't judge or critique your efforts to connect with others.



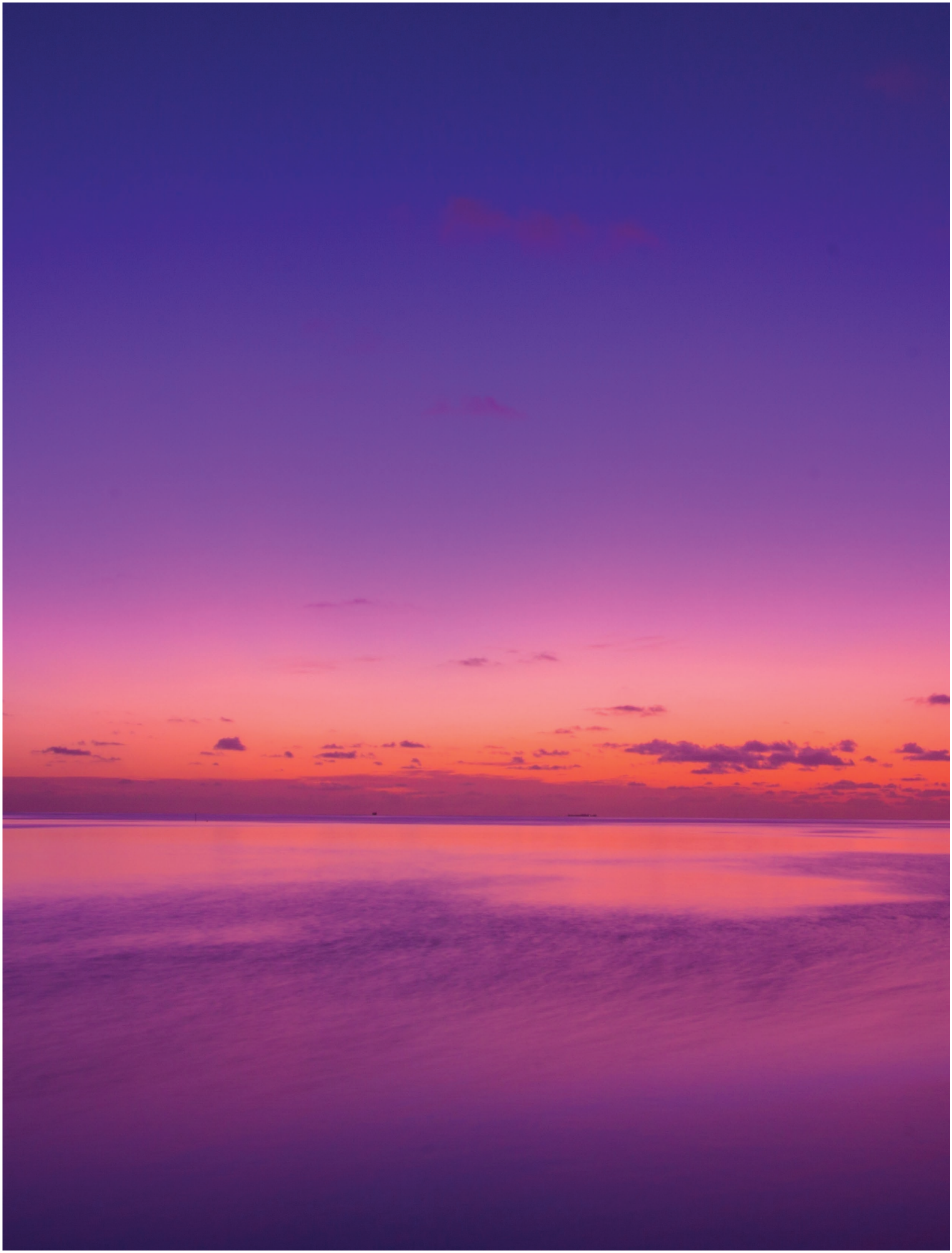
ROUTINE & RITUAL

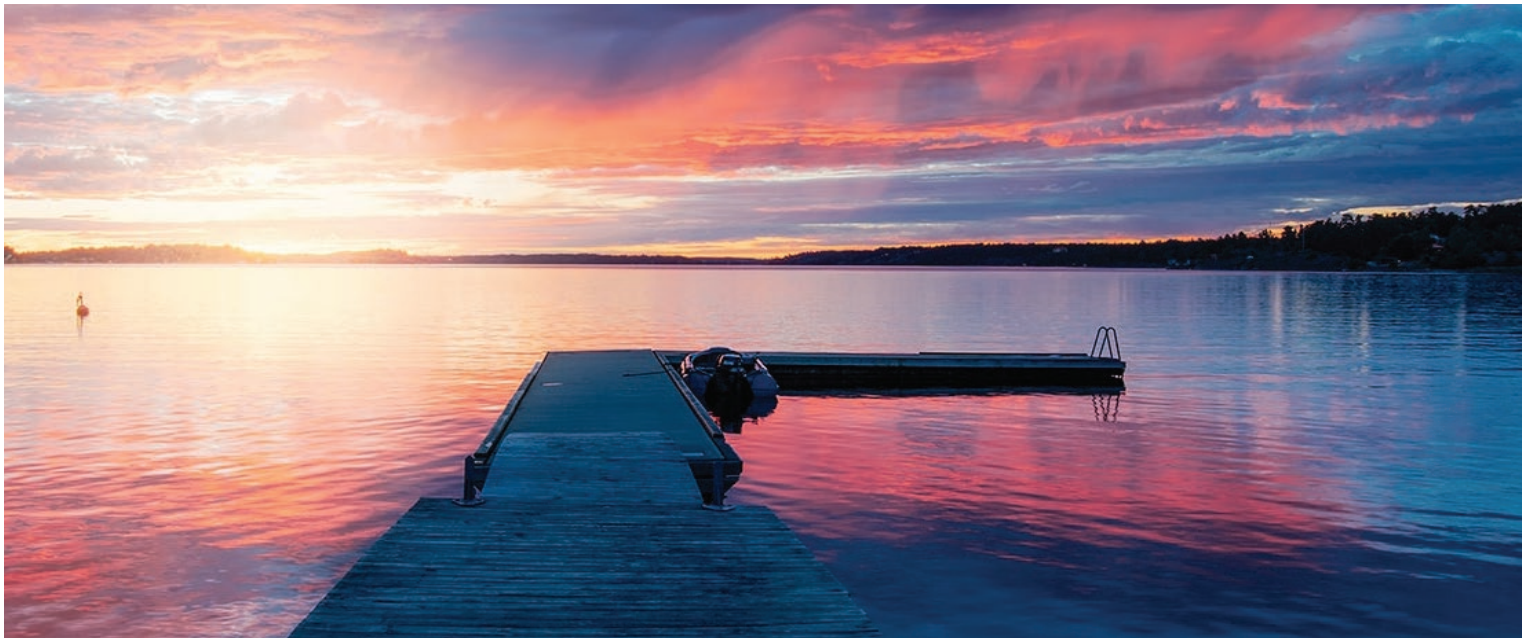
The brain is brilliant at forming connections and we can use this to the benefit of our mental health and fitness when introducing new practices. Here's what we mean. If you decide you want to try the 30-day meditation challenge, a way you can increase the likelihood of managing it 30 days in a row, is to form a connection between an existing habit and this new one. You would do this by making an addition to a personal routine you already have in place.

So that might look like meditating each day right after showering and before your first cup of coffee. After a few repetitions, the end of the shower becomes the mental cue that it's time to meditate. This isn't magic. We still have to show up for the commitment we've made to ourselves and won't always be in the mood for it, but it's a built-in neurological support we can activate.

That's routine. Ritual is a little different, although sometimes the two overlap. Ritual is when we do something to make an action more intentional. To use the meditation example, you might decide to light a particular candle or incense each time you meditate. You might sit in the same spot in your room. Some people have a scarf they put over their shoulders or a cushion they use. Rituals are actions we repeat that make the practice feel set apart from the everyday, special. They can then trigger the brain to move through any resistance more quickly and drop into connections previously made between the ritual and positive feelings/sensations associated with it.

- *Schedule focused time each day to single-task.*





REFLECTION QUESTIONS

We don't get strong arms by doing bicep curls once. Our mental strength is the same. Improving our mental muscles' performance requires time, practice, and consistency. In the following pages, we offer a diversity of mental strength training mini-workouts. Work through them one by one in order, or choose a few that resonate with you right now and start there.

If you journal or are open to trying it, we recommend noting what happens in these mental workouts, as you go. Reflection strengthens clarity which leads to insight. Recording progress also trains our minds to maintain focus and to regularly recommit to habits we see as rewarding.

1. How would you describe yourself when you are mentally strong, healthy, and fit?

2. What are some of the benefits you've noticed when your mind has felt balanced and calm more often?

3. What warning signs help you to know you need to prioritize your mental fitness?

4. Which exercises/practices from this guidebook did you find most challenging? Why?

5. Which mental fitness exercise(s) do you want to carry with you and practice regularly?

6. What new understandings about yourself have you come to?

7. Celebrate a moment where you applied your mental fitness skills in a challenging situation.