

Medicate or Meditate?

It can be hard, sometimes even chaotic, being a teenager in today's fast-paced, cortisone-infused world, where our senses are bombarded with an overload of information each time we blink. Everything comes at us so fast – one second, we're playing in the sandpit with our friends at lunchtime and the next thing we know, we're hit with the realisation that the choices we make now will influence the rest of our lives. This liminal, teenage stage between childhood and adulthood can be especially tough and many of us can become overwhelmed by the curveballs and pressures which 'life' chucks our way.

When we seek professional help to deal with stress or what could be the beginnings of a mental illness, we are usually steered towards either therapy and medication, or a combination of both, depending on whom we are consulting. While psychiatry and drugs like SSRIs or benzodiazepines can be lifesaving for those suffering from severe anxiety or depression it has largely become the default for treatment, and perhaps we sometimes overlook how our ancestors dealt with times of distress: by relaxing and unwinding. The medication which many stressed teenagers rely on can also contribute to the stigmas surrounding mental health. Anxiolytics and antidepressants are also often unhealthily stigmatised as addictive, mind-controlling drugs, or as a crutch for people "too weak to manage their problems".

In the same way that there are unreasonable stigmas associated with mental health, meditation and mindfulness aren't necessarily exempt from prejudice either. When we hear the word "meditation", we immediately conjure up images of old men sitting in caves doing nothing, and in our modern productivity-infatuated world, simply "doing nothing" seems wasteful and guilt-inducing. However, meditation can be simply taking a step back from the rush of everyday life and taking a moment to calm down and reflect on how we feel. Meditation can be performed by anyone, anywhere – yes, I'm serious, you don't need to be 80 years of age, bald and with a beard which reaches your belly button. In fact, modern-day practitioners of mindfulness include elite performers in sport, entrepreneurship, finance, and even music. Indeed, surprisingly, Bill Gates and Kendrick Lamar, two people from vastly different backgrounds, with completely different cultures, who are successful in their respective professions both share this habit.

By creating a culture more open to meditation, perhaps, just perhaps, we could curb the rapidly growing teenage mental health epidemic. When our worries, anxieties and fears start to accumulate faster than we can solve them, they start to pile up in a stack on top of our heads, till it feels as if we're bearing the weight of the world on our shoulders. Rather than using medication to relieve the pressures on our shoulders, consistent meditation could help prevent those stresses from accumulating in the first place. Additionally, taking a step back, becoming aware and

attentive to our own thoughts and feelings, can help us put our issues into perspective and allow us to take our struggles on one at a time.

Rather than dismissing meditation as ineffective pseudoscience, or only for a certain type of person, I encourage all of us to have an open mind and try out some app such as *Headspace* and *Calm* whose development and popularisation has made taking the first step towards a healthier mind accessible to anyone. Medication, while being highly effective, may potentially also engender unintended consequences and should be reserved as supplemental treatment for natural remedies such as meditation rather than a go-to treatment for the stress and pressures of life.