The cell phone starts to vibrate beside you on the night table. It's 6:55 am. You get out of bed. Take a shower. Get dressed. Eat breakfast. Then head off to work, facing the barrage of streetcar squeals and car honks that go along with the morning commute.

There are two elements missing from the description above: meditation and mindfulness. But in order to understand how these two elements are useful, you first have to understand what they are.

**BE MINDFUL**
Meditation has been practised over centuries to connect the mind and body, eliminate mind chatter, and reach a higher state of consciousness. From analyzing the forms of meditation practised by various cultures, it is clear that there are two categories: concentrative meditation and mindfulness meditation.

During concentrative meditation, a meditator focuses on one thing, such as a mantra or image. In a nutshell, concentrative meditation involves the processing of one thing in your inner or outer environment. When a meditator's focus expands in a nonjudgmental way to include both internal and external environments, this is called mindfulness meditation. Mindfulness involves being aware and awake to the present moment.

"Eat mindfully when you can—trying even once a week is a step in the right direction."
BOOST YOUR BODY
Over the years, a wide range of studies have shown the physical benefits of meditation. Meditation has been found to lower hypertension, alter the perception of pain, lower sensitivity to pain, and lower emotional responses to stress. There is also evidence that it causes an increase of melatonin and serotonin in the blood, which is associated with immune system stimulation and age defence.

IMPROVE YOUR MOOD
Meditation just makes you feel better. Because of its mood-regulating effects, it is often recommended by psychologists and doctors to alleviate depression and anxiety. Meditation has also been shown to increase the overall quality of life among patients with breast or prostate cancer when combined with yoga, and to improve the quality of sleep among older adults with chronic pain.

If you're thinking, "Meditation wouldn't benefit me. I'm healthy and don't get stressed easily," think again. A 2009 research study in the Journal of Alternative and Complementary Medicine suggested that mindfulness meditation benefits healthy participants by decreasing stress and thought rumination, and increasing empathy and self-compassion.

ACTIVATE YOUR BRAIN
EEG (electroencephalogram) and imaging studies have been used to show the benefits of meditation on the brain. For example, a study showed that the areas of the brain associated with positive affect and happiness were activated in those who practised meditation for three years or more.

Furthermore, the areas related to attention, concentration, and sensory processing, such as the frontal cortex, are activated during meditation. Which areas are activated depends on the length of the meditation practice and length of the session. Some researchers even suggest that long-term meditation of more than nine years can help prevent the thinning of the frontal cortex that happens due to age.

EATING MINDFULLY
As suggested in Mindful Eating (Shambhala Publications, 2009), there are many ways to get started. Try this exercise:

Get a journal to write in and select a new type of food to try. Before you consume the new food, record what attracted you to it in your journal.

Once you've taken a few slow chews, record how it makes you feel physically and what thoughts or emotions come up for you. How did your body digest the new food?

After two or three journal entries, try this exercise with food you're familiar with—you can also try this with drinks. Approach the familiar item with the same sense of openness and exploration as the new item.

Sometimes eating mindfully isn't possible, and that's okay. The point is to eat mindfully when you can—trying even once a week is a step in the right direction. You'll soon notice that eating mindfully not only helps you develop sensitivity to hunger and fullness cues but also helps you tune into how your body accepts or doesn't accept what you're consuming.

MOVING MEDITATION HELPS PAIN
Meditation is now being combined with physical activity to improve our health.

For instance, the Virtual Meditative Walk program, developed by Simon Fraser University professor Diane Gromala, combines a virtual reality headset with a treadmill to train chronic pain sufferers to meditate while exercising, thereby reducing their pain.

One in five Canadians currently experiences chronic pain, and Canada's aging baby boomer generation will increase our need for effective pain-management technologies. Computerized aids such as the Virtual Meditative Walk, which help patients through meditation and visualization therapy, may soon become valuable new treatment options.
“Mindfulness involves being aware and awake to the present moment.”

MOVE MEDITATION INTO YOUR EVERYDAY
Many people wonder how they can use meditation in their daily lives. You can demonstrate creative mindfulness activities and meditate many times through the day if you are present in every moment.

For instance, rhythmic hand drumming can be used as a form of movement meditation when done mindfully. Another mindfulness exercise inspired by Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh is to focus on 10 inhales and exhales upon waking and again before going to bed.

An additional mindful activity to practise is mindful eating.

STOP TO TASTE THE FLAVOURS
Mindful eating involves being aware of how food feels in your mouth, experiencing flavours that are released with each chew, and noticing the colours that make up your meal.

Being aware of bodily sensation and the different kinds of hunger you’re experiencing is also part of mindful eating. According to Jan Chozen Bays, author of *Mindful Eating* (Shambhala Publications, 2009), there are seven kinds of hunger: eye, nose, mouth, stomach, cellular, mind, and heart (see sidebar for a simple exercise to begin eating mindfully).

EXPERIENCE HARMONY
There’s always something for everyone to learn and explore with meditation. Not only does it benefit the body and brain, but it also helps create a harmonious environment within.

Let’s try the morning description again.

The cell phone starts to vibrate beside you on the night table. It’s 6:55 am. You mindfully get out of bed and meditate for 10 minutes. Feeling more aware of your sensations, you take a shower, mindful of the warm water. You get dressed and appreciate your hands, your legs, your toes, your whole body.

As you eat breakfast, you observe the soothing mix of flavours and colours. You head off to work one mindful step at a time. You are grateful for your ears and their ability to hear the symphony of streetcars and car honks that go along with your morning commute. You feel calm and energized.

Doesn’t that sound more refreshing?

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MEDITATION IN SCHOOLS

With all of the health benefits to be gained from meditation, educators have begun looking at incorporating meditation classes into schools. Meditation programs have been designed to help students develop concentration and decrease anxiety. For instance:

In England’s Tonbridge School, students receive weekly 40-minute sessions in meditation and stress relief, designed by psychologists from the universities of Oxford and Cambridge. The course helps teenage students learn how to maintain attention, appreciate silence, and identify and escape mindsets that could lead to conditions such as depression, eating disorders, and addiction. Students also have a weekly MP3 file of mindfulness exercises that they can listen to before beginning homework.

The Canadian Association for Stress-Free Schools is an organization seeking to implement transcendental meditation (a type of mantra meditation) programs in schools. Their program has been integrated at the US-based Maharishi School, where students in grades 10 to 12 consistently score in the top 1 percent of the nation on standardized tests, and over 95 percent of graduates are accepted into college or university.

The David Lynch Foundation funds meditation programs for private and public schools, with a focus on inner-city youth. Since 2005 the foundation has funded programs at 21 schools and universities. Initial evidence supports meditation’s effectiveness: a 2004 Medical College of Georgia study found that meditation helped to lower the blood pressure of 156 inner-city African-American teens. As well, a University of Michigan study from 2003 revealed that African-American sixth-graders who practised transcendental meditation daily had higher self-esteem and handled stress better than other students.

MEDITATION 2.0

LOOKING FOR MORE INFORMATION ON MEDITATION OR SOME HANDY TOOLS TO HELP YOU STAY FOCUSED? YOUR COMPUTER OR SMARTPHONE MAY BE A GOOD PLACE TO START.

• Browse the iTunes app store for meditation-related applications to download. There are many options, such as Mindfulness Meditation, Meditation for Success, or even Tai Chi for Seniors. You can also download a gently chiming timer or some meditation music for your sessions.

• Check out some meditation websites online. You can get meditation tips, listen to chants, discuss techniques with fellow meditators, explore different mantras, or learn more about meditation retreats or resources in your area. Try freemeditation.com or how-to-meditate.org, or look for your own favourite.