HOW TO CULTIVATE MENTAL AGILITY

Spend 10 minutes a day rewiring your brain for mental agility.

• Sit in a way that allows you to be both alert and relaxed.

• Allow your mind and the body to just settle.

• Now simply notice your breath and the experience of breathing. Don’t try to control your breath; this isn’t a breathing exercise. You are training your focus, and the breath is simply the object of your attention. Your only task is sustained focus on the breath.

• Notice when you get distracted by a sound, sensation, or thought (because you will get distracted). Be aware of this – “ah, my mind has wandered.” Then, let go of the distraction and return your focus to your breath.

• If it helps you to maintain focus on the breath, you can try breathing in and breathing out, and on each outbreath counting silently to yourself from 1-10.

See if you can do this for 10 minutes.

When you zoom in and focus on your breath — or anything else during the day — your prefrontal cortex is activated.¹ This is the “executive center” of the brain responsible for complex cognitive activities, such as planning and decision-making.

At some point, your mind naturally wanders off, and an evolutionarily old brain network, called the default mode network (DMN), is activated. When you zoom out enough to notice that your mind has wandered and redirect your attention back to your breath, you return to the prefrontal cortex.

Every time that you go through that zoom in and zoom out loop, your prefrontal cortex is strengthened, and your mental agility deepens.

¹Scientific American, November 2014