



Weekend

HIGH ON LIFE

HOW MEDITATION DRASTICALLY
CHANGED ONE WOMAN'S WORLD

HEAVILY MEDITATED

AFTER A DECADE OF BATTLING CHRONIC DISEASE AND MENTAL ILLNESS,
CAITLIN CADY KNEW THAT SOMETHING HAD TO CHANGE



WORDS: KIRI TEN DOLLE

Never has the need to be calm been greater.

While we enter a new-found “life as we know it”, Caitlin Cady, like many of us, is unsure what is around the corner.

But one thing is certain in her day-to-day life, and that is meditation.

The 37-year-old mother calls herself a “hope dealer” and a “meditation junkie”. She is “heavily meditated” and it’s written on her shirt. It’s also the name of her first book.

The American-born author lives in Byron Bay with her husband and three children. But it’s not all incense and Lycra for this devoted yogi. She runs multiple businesses including a nightclub, a restaurant and until recently, a street magazine in Byron Bay.

She’s a recovering perfectionist, who despite what her multiple hats might suggest, refuses to endorse multi-tasking.

ROCK BOTTOM

At 21, Caitlin was brought to her knees by disease. In the space of four years she had contracted mononucleosis, Epstein-Barr virus, dengue fever and lyme disease.

For a decade she endured chronic lyme disease, a tick-borne disease that is disputed by some conventional medical practitioners in Australia but known to endemic areas such as northeast US. For Caitlin, this was compounded by years of depression, anxiety and eating disorders.

“I had tried everything, from vitamin C flushes, vitamin IVs, naturopathy, acupuncture, doing blood work and taking Chinese remedies – everything that I could,” Caitlin tells *Weekend*.

“The western medical system basically gave me two weeks of antibiotics and told me you’re stuck with this for the rest of your life.

“After 10 years of being sick with the lyme disease, I was deflated and frustrated. I didn’t want to be sick for the rest of my life.”

She describes this intuitive realisation in the opening chapters of her book. It was no longer about her physical body; it was about making a mental shift.

“Up to that point I always derived my sense of happiness and self-worth through what I could control and what I could achieve,” Caitlin recalls.

“I threw myself into work. I worked in sales and didn’t turn off. I was always multi-tasking and saying yes to everything. Most people can relate to that because it’s an attitude and canon of behaviour that our society tends to champion. Hustle and work hard and achieve things.

“That sense of overachievement and

perfectionism was actually making me sick because my immune system couldn’t reset itself when I had adrenal fatigue and off-the-charts cortisol levels.”

FRONT OF MIND

While the real impact of the coronavirus fallout on people’s mental wellbeing plays out, according the Black Dog Institute, one in five (20 per cent) Australians aged 16-85

experience a mental illness in any year. The most common mental illnesses are depression, anxiety and substance use disorder. Often all three occur in combination.

Late last year the Productivity Commission handed down its draft report that examined the cost of mental illness and suicide in Australia. It revealed there are up to a million people going untreated for mental health conditions in Australia, costing the economy about \$180 billion every year.

TAKING A SEAT

As her health and mental state deteriorated, Caitlin was faced with a life-changing decision.

“People had told me about meditation and initially I thought that’s not for me ... I’m busy, I have a busy mind,” she explains. “It’s hard for me to sit still, so I’m just not cut out for this. I would start meditating and then bail, over and over again. I had this sense of guilt about doing nothing for 15 minutes.”

Caitlin was afraid that if she slowed down that her “whole life would fall apart”.

“The bottom line was I was terrified of meditating. But I understood that resistance always stands in the way of something new, any kind of growth or expansion or realisation of your potential as a human.

“For me, it came down to a choice of being sick and stressed for the rest of my life or breaking through that resistance and believing there was something better on the other side. Once I understood why I was meditating, what I was afraid of, committing was easy. It’s effortless to show up for something when you understand on a deeply personal level why you are doing it.”

BYRON BOUND

In 2009, Caitlin was living in the US when she reconnected online with her now husband.

“We hadn’t seen each other in seven years. He was the one that got away,” she laughs.

“I flew down to New Zealand on a frequent flyer ticket and visited him for two weeks. I went home, packed up my life and moved to New Zealand.”

Caitlin lived there for a while before the



pair moved to Byron Bay, where opportunity beckoned in the hospitality industry.

“When I had children, my reason for meditating really deepened,” she says.

“As a working mother, distractions are pervasive. Multi-tasking can feel like it’s the only way to get through the day. Presence can feel like something that comes at a price because you’re either choosing to show up for your children and your work is falling by the wayside or vice versa.

“I think meditation is the ultimate act of single tasking. By practising that on the cushion every day, I understand the value of giving my full attention to my children or my work. Multi-tasking is actually not a useful way to live or work.”

Caitlin says meditation gives her the tools to support the transition in and out of the roles in her life, from being a mother to being a writer, a business owner.

“When you punctuate your life with times of stillness, you learn to transition in and out of doing and being,” she says.

GET SIT DONE

While meditation has been practised for centuries across different cultures, only recently has it gained mainstream interest in Australia.

“Scientific studies are starting to explain the benefits of meditation and mindfulness in scientific language and scientific terms,” Caitlin says. “For people who may have been sceptical about anecdotal or esoteric evidence, science is now speaking their language.”

Research by Michigan State University, published in *Brain Sciences* in November last year, suggests meditating just once proves to make a difference in the brain. MSU



psychology doctoral candidate and study co-author Jeff Lin says the analysis – the largest of its kind to date – found that sitting with your thoughts could help you to become less error-prone.

“People’s interest in meditation and mindfulness is outpacing what science can prove in terms of effects and benefits,” he says. “But it’s amazing to me that we were able to see how one session of a guided meditation can produce changes to brain activity in non-meditators.”

He said the goal was to sit quietly and pay close attention to where the mind travelled without getting too caught up in the scenery.

The 200 participants, who had never

meditated before, were taken through a 20-minute open monitoring meditation exercise while researchers measured brain activity through electroencephalography, or EEG. They then completed a computerised distraction test. It found the meditators had increased error recognition than those who didn’t meditate.

Another review of 11 studies, published in the journal *Brain Plasticity* late last year, found yoga and meditation practice increased the volume of the hippocampus and the amygdala, a brain structure that contributes to emotional regulation. The prefrontal cortex (a brain region just behind the forehead essential to planning, decision-making and multi-tasking) and the cingulate cortex (emotional regulation, learning and memory) tend to be larger or more efficient in those who regularly practise yoga.

DOWN-TO-EARTH

Caitlin says it’s her mission to make meditation more accessible and help others get their daily dose using soulful straight-talk.

“I wanted to bring relatability and colour to talking about a topic that I think just had a PR problem,” she says.

The World Health Organisation estimates depression will be the number one health concern in the world by 2030.

“In the world that we live in it is hard not to feel overwhelmed or disempowered or pessimistic, or even angry,” Caitlin says. “There’s also a lot of guilt and shame in feeling joy in hard times.

“The best way I know of to create a change in the outer environment, is to change the inner environment. And the best tool I know of to do that is meditation. Meditation offers us the opportunity to develop equanimity.

“By listening to our thoughts, we deepen our self-awareness and amp up our emotional intelligence. It also schools us in non-attachment, which means we can respond wisely to our impulses and emotions.”

Caitlin has now been free of lyme disease for more than eight years. “It literally was life changing,” she resolves. “You can’t have a meaningful meditation practice and not see the effect of it on your life.”

Heavily Meditated by Caitlin Cady and published by Hardie Grant is out now.

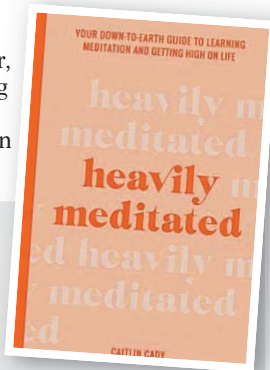


HOW TO GET STARTED

- 1. Start where you are:** Don't put yourself under pressure to bust out a twice daily 20-minute practice. Seven minutes every morning is great.
- 2. Done is better than perfect:** Small, regular victories are much more empowering and powerful than sporadic whims. I believe that the benefits always show up if you do.
- 3. Understanding your why:** When you are really clear on why you are meditating, it is easier to show up and making sure it is specific to you.
- 4. Set a regular time:** Think of it as an appointment with your higher self. Make it non-negotiable. Half of the resistance to meditation is just showing up. I think of it like brushing my teeth. I don't weigh up if I should do it every morning. It is part of my routine.
- 5. Know that it is normal for your mind to wander:** Your mind is designed to wander, it is designed to be vigilant to keep you alive. Don't think you're doing it wrong if your mind begins to wander because it is normal. The whole point of meditation is bringing your attention back over and over again..



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MINDFULNESS: Caitlin Cady,
pictured with her three children, is
the author of *Heavily Meditated*.