The A-list yoga technique that

Scientists have found that Kundalini yoga improves brain function. Mandy Appleyard is an unlikely convert

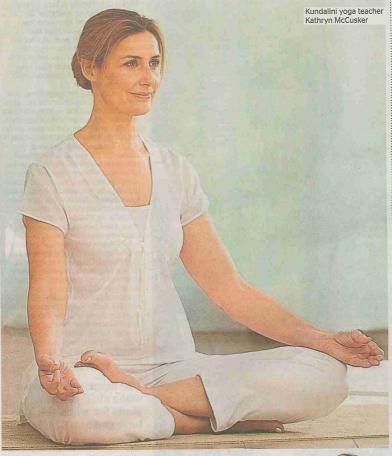
here were people wearing turbans and earnest smiles, squatting on well-worn sheepskin mats around a pile of hippy accoutrements
— beads, smouldering joss

beaus, smouthering Joss sticks, crystals, and what looked suspiciously like a "talking stick". This was not looking good. For a natural sceptic like me, this first Kundalini yoga session feltjust a little too "out there". I was embarrassed and blissfully unaware that embarrassed and blissfully unaware that what I was about to experience would create a surprising shift in my life. The principles of Kundalini yoga are quite simple, focusing on breathing, mantras and sequences of poses to increase strength and flexibility. It incorporates meditation — sometimes with chanting and specific hand positions that have been used for hundreds of years in India to promote mental agility.

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Celebrities including Gwyneth Paltrow,
Madonna and Russell Brand are fans of
what many might be quick to dismiss as
another fad for the healing-obsessed
middle classes. Except that the mental
and physical benefits of Kundalini now have scientific endorsement, after two important new studies revealed that it is a powerful tool for changing the way our brains work and combating the mental decline that often precedes Alzheimer's

In a study published in April this year in the Journal of Alzheimer's Disease, scientists studied 25 volunteers over 55 who had reported forgetting names and faces, missing appointments or misplacing belongings. Eleven participants received memory-training sessions. The rest had an hour-long yoga session once a week and practised Kirtan Kriya meditation at home practised Kirtan Knya meditation at nome for 20 minutes every day. (Kirtan Kriya involves singing the phrase "saah, taah, naah, maah", accompanied by repetitive finger movements.) Scientists saw similar verbal memory improvements in both groups 12 weeks later, but visual-spatial memory was increased to a greater degree in the yoga-meditation group. Participants practising yoga and meditation were also less likely to be depressed and anxious, and

It is not just a fad — this yoga is a powerful tool for changing how our brains work



were better able to cope with stress

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In a separate study published in the journal last summer, scientists singled out Kundalini's Kirtan Kriya for its benefits in alleviating stress and recommended that it be included in prevention programmes for Alzheimer's. The Alzheimer's Research and Prevention Foundation, the charity that funded the research, now has instructions for Kirtan Kriya on its website (although the ones with music to chant

(atmough the ones with music to chandalong to on YouTube are easier to follow).

Kundalini yoga came into my life recently, and quite by accident, on a dank winter's day when I was feeling lacklustre and out of shape, and came across a newsand out of shape, and came across a newspaper article about a new yoga retreat in Sri Lanka. I'd had several half-hearted stabs at hatha yoga, to no discernible benefit, but I fancied the idea often days in the sun doing something that might just tip me out of my torpor. So, knowing nothing about the Kundalini yoga I'd shortly be doing for up to four hours a day of Lord of the bit only as we landed at (I read that bit only as we landed at Colombo airport), I caught a plane and began a journey that, quite unexpectedly,

nanged my life. I arrived at the Breath of Life Sanctuary, an outpost of a London osteopathy and acupuncture clinic of the same name, with



trepidation. A cup of herbal tea and two hours of yoga outside in the dark from 6am every day was a daunting departure from waking at 9am to a couple of espressos and an hour reading the papers. We chanted and stretched, sang and sighed, and closed our yoga sessions with a singalong blessing called May the Long Time Sun Shine Upon You, which, even now, makes me tearful whenever I hear it. My fellow Kundalini yoga students were people like me: ordinary and a little bruised by life, with open minds about ways to become stronger and fitter.

I found unprecedented energy as the week unfolded, despite the searing heat and 5.30am wake-up calls. Quite quickly I began to feel stronger and more positive, less out of control, less anxious. I learnt that Kundalini is an ancient technology designed to awaken energy through yoga-pose sequences known as kriyas, breathing techniques, mantras and meditation. Movements are usually rapid and repetitive, which differentiates Kundalini from other yogas, and designed to free energy centres in the body known as chakras.

Often called the "yoga of awareness", Kundalini goes beyond a physical workout. The Sikh guru Yogi Bhajan brought it to the West in the 1960s, and it's now regarded as particularly helpful for propole struggling with amoticeal stresses. people struggling with emotional stress addictions and anxiety. Kundalini classes are held at many yoga centres in the UK and begin with a short chant followed by a warm-up stretch then the yoga sequences. The class usually ends with a meditation, perhaps the playing of a gong, and a closing song. You won't find Kundalini teachers in

floo designer leggings and crop tops. They can be distinguished by their neutral-white cotton clothing and heavraps. The use of natural fibres is encouraged, so they usually use sheepskin. encouraged, so they usually use sneepskir rugs rather than yoga mats. In the final session of our Sri Lanka retreat, we sal course-legged on a beach at dawn, staring out to sea, singing together for 33 minutes the mantra: "I am bountiful, I am blissful I am beautiful."

At the start of the week I would have been stiff with mortification; at the end of

the week I sang my heart out, tean streaming down my face, believing, for the first time in my life, the words of that most time in my ne, the words of map owerful little mantra. I cried a lot that week, but laughed just as much. Five months on, I am an unlikely but committed convert to Kundalini. I start 50 minutes of practice at home at 7am every day and finish it feeling stronger, full of energy and clear-headed. I feel calmer after the session, my mind

less frantic, and I am happier. I am more flexible, physically and mentally stronger, and the structure and commitment are good for me. Sadly, there's no class close to me in rural Yorkshire, so I go it alone, using memeritural forksmile, so Igot anone, using YouTube clips, usually by the instructor Maya Fiennes, for my sessions. I know there's something off-putting about Kundalini because I felt it myself at the start. You have only to look at online clips of bearded old men in skimpy clothing and of bearded old men in skimpy clothing and tight turbans chanting baritone mantras to feel a little wary. Yet Kundalini has brought such positive change to my life that I can see beyond the disconcerting rituals. Fellow devotees include the New York Times bestselling self-help author Gabrielle Bernstein, who teaches

helps to ward off Alzheimer's

Kundalini and describes it as "a detox of all the stagnant energy and limiting beliefs we hold in our bodies".

I especially enjoy the calming Kirtan Kriya, the meditation so effective in the recent Alzheimer's study and designed to bring the body, mind and emotions into balance. From an Eastern perspective, it is believed that placing the tongue on the roof of the mouth while reciting the Kirtan Kriva mantra stimulates acupuncture points on the palate, causing beneficial biochemical transformation in the brain. According to Western research, the simultaneous finger-tapping and chanting enhance blood flow to the brain, improving cognition, focus and memory. This is music to my ears. I am 56, and I am aware of a worrying decline in my memory in recent years. This may be natural, but my father, who died in 2012 at the age of 78, had dementia, so I have extra reason to be concerned by my moments of forgetfulness.

Perhaps the benefits of doing Kundalini are more profound than I realise. Professor Helen Lavretsky, the co-author of the Alzheimer's and yoga study in April, says: "If you try to memorise a sequence of movements or breathe in a sequence, you movements or breathe in a sequence, you are exercising the brain and invoking a type of memory. A regular practice of yoga and meditation could be a simple, safe and low-cost solution to improving brain fitness."

brain fitness:

Kathryn McCusker, who teaches
Kundalini yoga at the London Breath of
Life Clinic (she taught the actress Rachel
McAdams and the singer Björk) says that
Kundalini has become the yoga du jour because it is so effective. "People are realis-ing they need something to help them cope in this time of information overload and where technology has become the most overused tool of the modern world.

"In a very short time Kundalini alleviates pressure on the nervous system. It relaxes you, calms you, grounds you, inspires and motivates you. I think it makes you happy to be alive." breathoflifeclinic.co.uk

How to do Kundalini at home

Breathing exercises

This dynamic, cleansing breath is great for stimulating the thyroid gland, boosting energy levels and metabolism. Sit on the floor with your legs crossed, stretch your arms and rest your hands on your knees

on your knees with palms facing up and your back straight. Press your index fingers and thumbs lightly together, on each hand. Open your mouth and extend your tongue as far as possible. Inhale powerfully through your mouth, feeling the pressure build in your chest, then exhale. Continue for 1-3 minutes

This cooling breath relaxes and soothes the spine. It is said to be great if you want to release anger or lower your body temperature Don't worry if you notice a bitter taste on your tongue at first. This means you are detoxing. Sit on the floor with your legs crossed,

stretch out your arms and rest your hands on your knees with palms facing up and your back straight.
Press your index fingers and thumbs lightly together. Curl the sides of your tongue to form a tube. Inhale long and deeply through this tube, then exhale through your nostrils as you close your mouth. Repeat

The 12-minute brainboosting meditation

Research has found that this meditation improves short-term memory and cognitive function, and reduces stress levels. Controlled trials have found that Kirtan Kriya meditation can help to combat the mental decline that often precedes Alzheimer's disease. Kundalini devotees say that it is designed to create emotional balance and increase intuition. Practising it is said to bring mental calm. It can be especially helpful for women and can be used to cope with hormonal imbalances.

- 1 Sit on the floor with legs crossed, resting the backs of your hands on your
- knees with palms facing upwards.

 2 Close your eyes, inhale deeply and begin to chant aloud the mantra "saah, taah, naah, maah".
- 3 On the syllable "saah" touch the index finger of each hand to the thumb; on "taah" touch the middle finger to the thumb; on "naah" touch the ring finger to the thumb; on "maah" touch the little finger to the thumb. Continue these finger movements (which are called
- mudras) throughout the meditation.

 4 During this meditation you will chant the mantra in three different voices for different lengths of time: normal (out loud) for two minutes; whispered for two minutes; and silent (in your head) for four minutes.

 5 After the silent (in your head) chant,
- return to the whispered voice for two minutes and then finish by chanting for two minutes with the normal voice. The entire meditation will take

A daily exercise for your back

and maintains its flexibility. It is also said to aid digestion and increase energy. Start by sitting on the floor with your legs crossed. Hold your ankles with both hands and inhale deeply as you flex your spine forwards. Open your chest and lift your ribcage, keeping your shoulders relaxed. Then exhale, and seeping your shoulders relaxed. Their extrale, and slowly round your spine, bringing your shoulders forwards and pushing your back backwards. Your chin should be parallel to the ground. Repeat this cycle slowly, gradually increasing the pace as you flex your spine backwards and forwards. Continue for 1-3 minutes. Return to the centre, hold your breath



Extracted from: Kundalini Meditation by Kathryn McCusker (Watkins, London, £10.99); www.kathrynmccuskerkundalini.com

Protect your ears!

Unlike your eyes or your mouth, you can't close your ears. Your hearing is therefore exposed to attacks and can suffer irreparable damage. It's better to be safe than sorry!

If you're after a quiet night's sleep
Go for Quies wax ear plugs. These ear plugs made of pure wax provide noise reduction of 27 dB and are both comfortable and effective



Benefit: They become soft when reaching your body temperature, moulding themselves to your ear, fitting perfectly. Simply pop them in and forget about them...

If you're at a concert or in a loud environment Use Quies foam ear plugs. These polyurethane foam ear protection devices reduce sound levels by 35 dB.

Benefit: They are anatomically designed to fit all ear shapes and sizes. Also available in beige neutral colour.







