

Joyful Brains

It's long been a human notion that joy lies in your heart. Time and again, people have proven this through their expressions. When you feel overjoyed or totally content, you may say something like "My heart is full." Conversely, if you're sad, you might say you're brokenhearted. One reason for this may be those warm and light feelings in your chest when you are truly joyful or those sharp and aching pangs when you're deeply sad.

As it turns out, though, your heart has little to do with your joy — in fact, joy is all in your head. Well, as research from Japan explains, a very specific part of your brain that is. And what is even more incredible, the study suggests you may be able to physically grow the joyful parts of your brain through certain practices.

While science has had its finger on how certain hormones can affect our emotions for a while, it's never been clear where joy and contentment come from. Recently, researchers from Kyoto University performed a study to find the source of joy once and for all. During their quest, the scientist had 51 participants undergo MRI scans and then complete three short surveys in order to gauge their joy and contentment with life, as well as how intensely they experience negative and positive emotions.

When the results came in, the scientists discovered that the participants who experienced high joy scores had more gray matter in a certain part of the brain — the precuneus — than their gloomy counterparts. The precuneus is a tiny part of the brain that influences consciousness and self-reflection. It's thought that the precuneus is of significance for subjective joy — meaning the type of joy that occurs when you "make the best of it."

But what is so intriguing about this finding — it seems that you have the power to grow this part of your brain, just like a muscle, through meditation (or contemplation). In fact, previous studies have shown that those who meditate (or contemplate) may have more grey matter in the precuneus and report greater feelings of joy and contentment.

As the research indicates, these practices maybe the quickest route to a larger precuneus. Sato agrees, "Several studies have shown that meditation increases gray matter mass in the precuneus. This new insight on where joy happens in the brain will be useful for developing joy programs based on scientific research."

While meditation (or contemplation) may seem like an impossible task for most, the most important part is taking the first step. Aristotle was right — joy does depend upon ourselves. Get started today and grow your brain joyful!

Meditation vs. Contemplation What's the difference?

In the secular world, both terms are often used interchangeably, but there is a distinction for us in the faith. The simplest way to describe this distinction is to say that meditation is thinking and praying about something you have read, heard, or seen (such as a biblical passage or some music), or have experienced (such as an answer to prayer or the current state of your soul). Contemplation, on the other hand, is to clear one's mind of everything and just let God communicate with your heart and soul. Both are equally good for us to practice for meditation feeds our faith while contemplation feeds our hearts and souls.

Often meditation comes before contemplation. In meditating, you do the work. In contemplating, you let God do the work in you.