



How to train your mind to achieve your goals with less stress

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Executive Summary:

"This programme will make you so focussed you will find yourself doing double the work, in half the time and still wonder how you have so much energy left. Purposeful mindfulness is cutting out the crap and rewiring your mind with a super effective spam filter."

The above is a quote from a Welsh beef and sheep farmer who completed the Focussed Farmers programme which measured the results of introducing mindfulness to farmers in 2017.

The response from an Irish dairy farmer; "I feel that there are knock-on benefits for other people in my life also as I am a happier and more productive person because of the skills picked up in the course. These are life skills that I hope to benefit from every day for the rest of my life, if I keep exercising my brain in the right way!"

These comments mirror the positive results from the Mindfulness Pilot Study carried out with the help of 30 volunteers in 2017. The initial results have produced significant benefits to farmers taking the programme;

- 21.3 % decrease in stress.
- 20.6 % increase in positive state of mind.
- 18.4 % increase in purposeful focus.

The exercise of mindful meditation challenged people's pre-conceived ideas of how to reduce stress, improve mental health and achieve goals more easily and has become standard practice within the corporate sector over the past 6 years.

The focussed farmers programme which included daily meditation for just 10 minutes per day, aimed to measure if the same positive results which are being seen in the corporate sector would be apparent for ag-sector workers. The results clearly demonstrated that the practice of meditation improves your focus, increases your productivity, reduces stress and enables you to achieve your goals effortlessly.

This paper describes a 2017 study which was undertaken to measure the effects that meditation, coupled with goal setting has on farmers.

The results have been consistent to show that the practice of meditation, coupled with goal setting; increases focus, discipline, improves state of mind and reduces stress.

The Research

The human brain is wired to **not** pay attention. The widely accepted psychological reason for this, stems back to the days of cave dwelling. The men would go out hunting while the women picked berries and the main aim of the day was to make it back to the camp alive without being eaten by a man-eating tiger!

To ensure that the body was ready for action if faced by the tiger, the brain would 'reserve' The Central Executive' – the attentional spotlight in our brain – for a time of necessary fight or flight action. Instead it would just keep itself occupied 'making it through the day' with wandering thoughts and very little focus.

In a time when the mind would need to make a quick decision of whether to stay and fight the man-eating tiger or run away, the **stress response** would be triggered in the body. The heart rate would quicken to push blood faster around the body, the arteries would constrict and slicken with a fatty residue to allow the blood to pump around faster. The immune system and the digestive system would stop working as they were not needed at that point in time.

This effect on the body, the physiological response to stress, worked well for us in those days, but in the 21st Century, this evolved development of the brain - to not turn on our attentional spotlight without the stress response being triggered - is resulting in a very underutilised mind. So, unless we manage our mind, our mind will often mismanage us and this can cause the stress response to be triggered a lot!

The World Health Organisation says that the number one killer in the Western world, in the 21st Century will be low-level, underlying everyday stress. The kind of stressed we get when we have a sick animal, or something breaks down, the grass gets trampled or milk prices drop. All very real things to care about and that may cause us stress if we don't manage our thoughts and behaviour.

However, these issues can often be on our mind even if they haven't happened – what if the animals get sick? What if the price drops? What if it rains? What if it doesn't rain? What if Brexit has a poor effect on the industry? All these thoughts and worries are not real, they have not actually happened, yet we spend time thinking of these things over and over again and if we do not act upon them (many of which we can't as they are outside of our control) they become a worry.

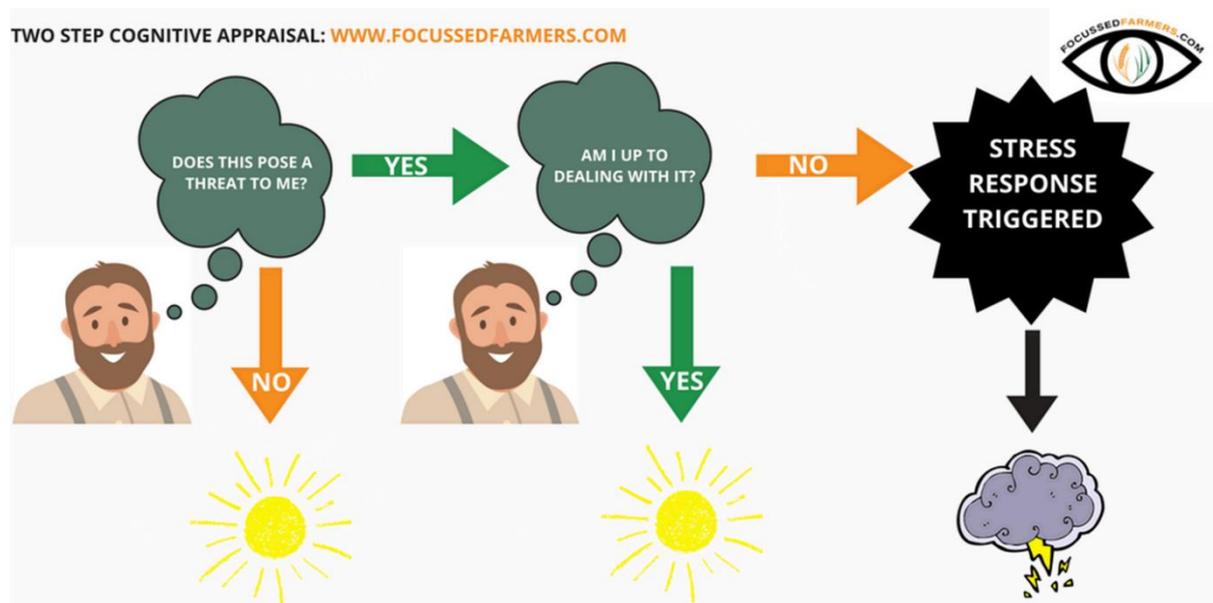
Coupled to this, the body's response to the worry is the stress response, slickening the arteries, raising blood pressure, shutting down the digestive and immune system and the like.

When faced with each situation in life, our unconscious mind will make a decision for us with a two-step approach. It is called 'two-step cognitive appraisal' as illustrated in figure 2.

When you are faced with something – that you perhaps don't want to happen or haven't chosen to happen, your unconscious mind will start at step one and you ask yourself – "Does this particular thing pose a threat to me?" If the answer is no – happy days!

If the answer is yes – you move to step two, and ask – “Am I up to it?” Again, if the answer is Yes - happy days – off you go to deal with the situation with a skip in your step and feeling ‘motivated’.

Figure 2: Two Step Cognitive Appraisal

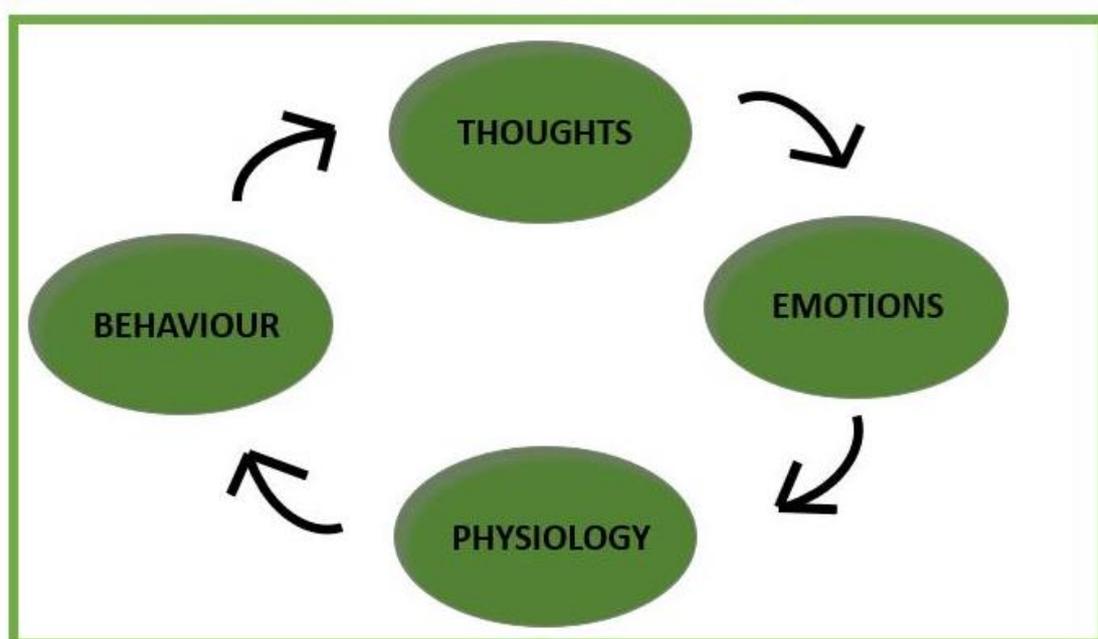


If the answer is no, your brain triggers the stress response, this whole two-step cognitive appraisal and the triggering of the stress response will happen in an instant in your subconscious – you are unaware of the process – **BUT** you will be aware of the stress response in your body.

The low-level stress response is related to coronary disease and mental ill-health – the thing that is slowly killing you.

Actually though, you are killing yourself! Stress is created in the mind from our thoughts and if we don't take control of our thoughts, we are effectively choosing stress. Figure 3 illustrates the cycle that occurs psychologically in our minds.

Figure 3: Relationship between thoughts, emotions, physiology and behaviour

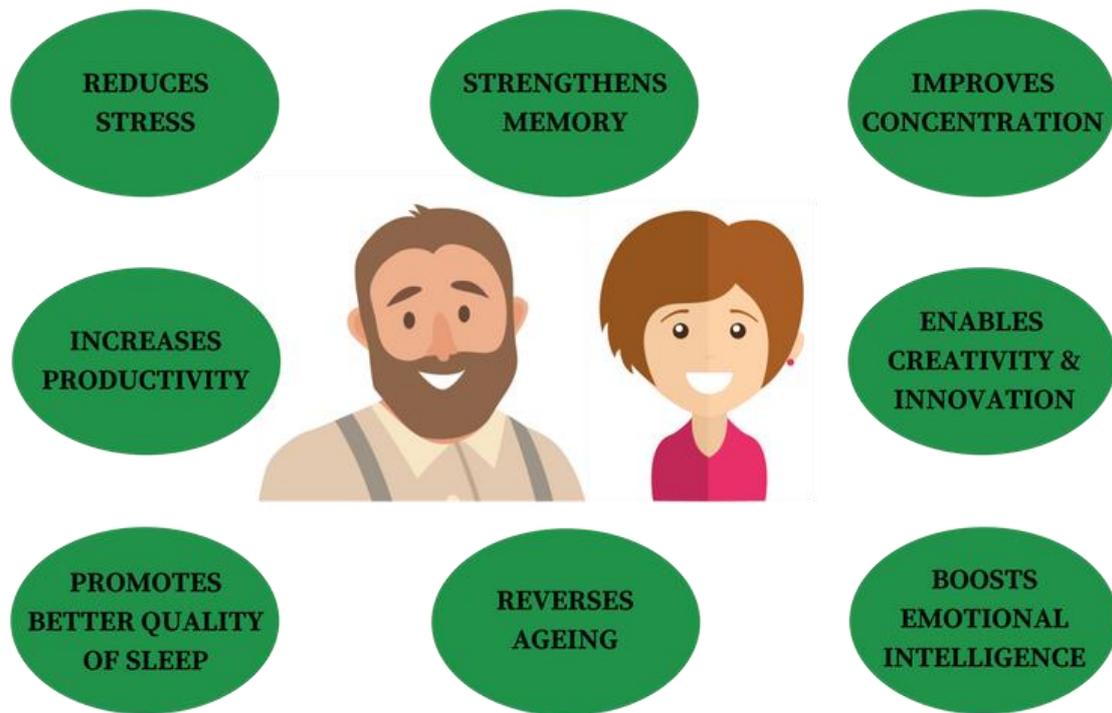


Our everyday thoughts create emotions; (some thoughts will make us feel good, other thoughts will make us feel stressed). Our emotions then effect our physiological state by producing chemicals in our brain. If the emotion is positive the body will produce happy hormones such as serotonin and dopamine. if the emotion is negative, the body produces cortisol, the chemical released by stress, which literally shortens our lives. This release of chemicals in the brain effects our behaviour and our state of mind – what we think – and so the cycle continues.

By taking control of our thoughts, we can take more control of our emotions, our stress levels and our behaviour. We can take control of our thoughts by becoming more mindful and more aware. Mindfulness is built through meditation – literally training your brain.

Research shows that meditation builds the muscles of awareness and focus in our brains. It literally rewires our brains. There is now much research through modern neuroscience to show a whole host of benefits of meditation as shown in figure 4.

Figure 4: Benefits of mindful meditation



To me this sounded just like something that would be ideal for farmers, a technique that would relieve the worry of issues that were outside of their control, the weather, market volatility and the like.

Farmers increasingly accept and understand that stress affects the health and productivity of animals. I wanted to share this knowledge and research, to enable farmers to understand that these same principles apply to them. Practicing mental hygiene, through meditation / brain training, is as vital as managing your physical hygiene – brushing your teeth and taking regular showers!

Introducing Mindfulness to Agriculture – The Pilot Study

Although on my study tour I had come across a few farmers that meditated and one dairy group that had completed a mindfulness course together, I could not find any agriculturally focussed body that was promoting the practice of mindfulness to farmers and the wider ag sector as a tool;

- To relieve stress
- To increase productivity
- To improve decision making and
- Focus on goals and strategic planning.

I approached The Frank Parkinson Agricultural Trust for sponsorship to introduce mindfulness to agriculture and was delighted that they were supportive of the venture.

I worked with Willie Horton to set up a pilot study of 30 people to take part in an 8-12 week trial to measure the difference that mindful meditation, coupled with goal setting made on their lives.

We also created an online mini-series which was the first part of the programme for people to understand how their mind works and what steps are needed to banish stress and achieve goals effortlessly.

The website www.focussedfarmers.com was created and the video series is currently available for free for anyone who visits and signs up to receive the videos by email.

After watching the video series, the participants took part in an 8 week programme which combined, daily meditation, coaching and exercises around goal setting.

The participants took a Mindfulness Measurement Index (MMI) – a survey of 100 statements which were scored – at the beginning of the 8 weeks and again at the end.

The MMI is designed to produce a score for individuals of the level of their discipline, focus, conceptual self (how they view themselves), interpersonal (how they feel others view them) state of mind, flow and stress.

Results

At the time of writing this paper, 21 of the 30 participants had completed the programme and taken a 2nd mindfulness measurement index to measure any changes over the 8 weeks.

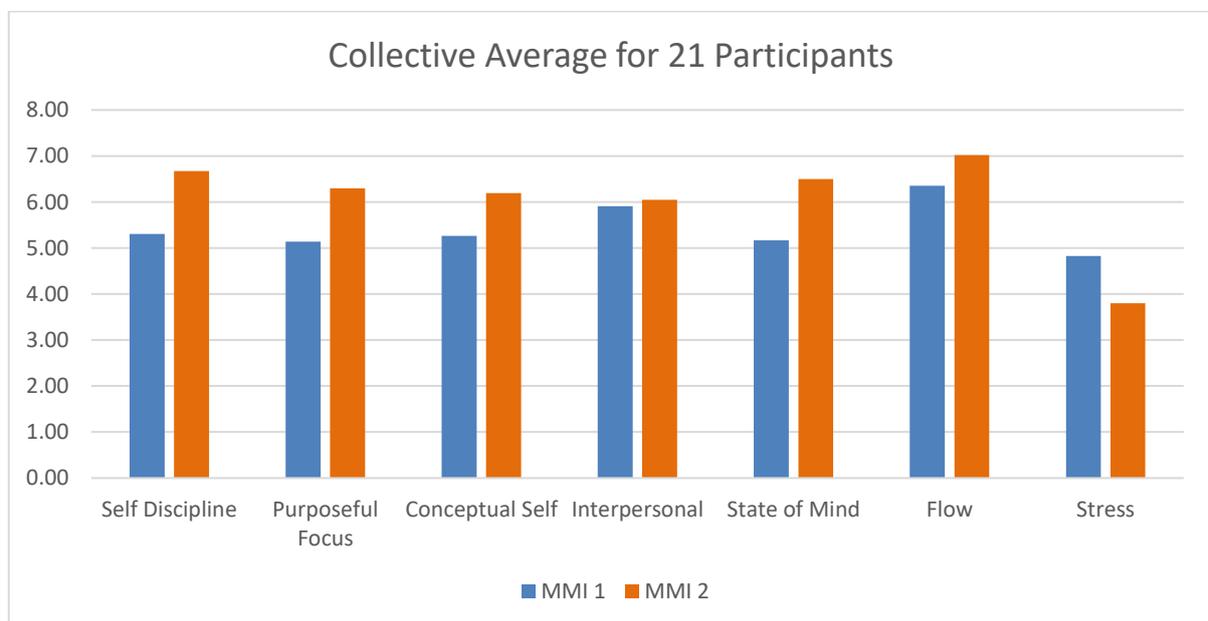
The table and graph below (Figures 5 & 6) shows the collective average scores of all 21 participants in the measured areas and from this we can see the following results;

- **21.3 % decrease in stress.**
- **20.6 % increase in positive state of mind.**
- **18.4 % increase in purposeful focus.**

Figure 5: Table to show collective/average results of changes in participants over 8 weeks.

	Self Discipline	Purposeful Focus	Conceptual Self	Interpersonal	State of Mind	Flow	Stress
MMI 1	5.30	5.14	5.26	5.91	5.16	6.36	4.83
MMI 2	6.67	6.30	6.19	6.05	6.50	7.02	3.80
Variance	1.37	1.16	0.93	0.14	1.34	0.66	-1.03

Figure 6: Graph to illustrate collective results of all 21 participants.

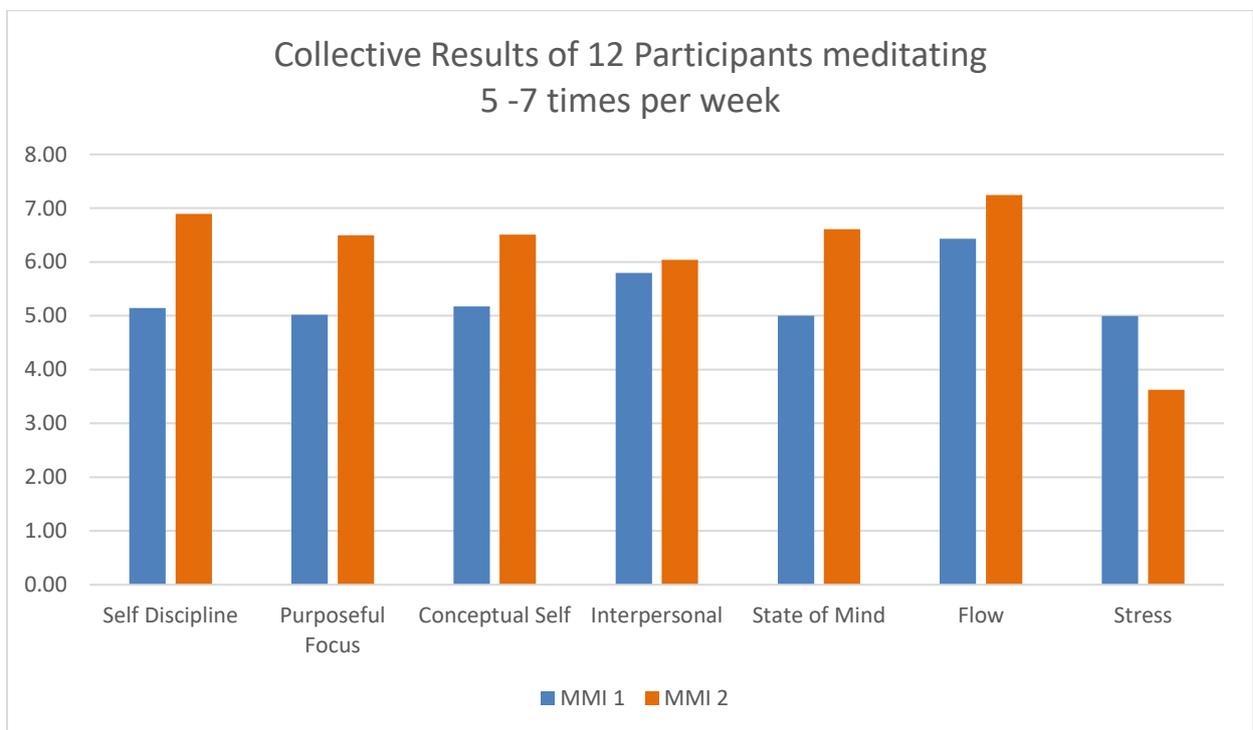


It is important to recognise that all participants did not practice the same amount of meditation. Those that reported meditating between 5 – 7 times a week showed an even higher increase in each area with a **24.4 % increase in positive mind set and a huge 27.6 % decrease in stress** as shown in figures 7 & 8.

Figure 7: Table to show average of 12 participants that meditated 5 – 7 times per week.

	Self Discipline	Purposeful Focus	Conceptual Self	Interpersonal	State of Mind	Flow	Stress
MMI 1	5.14	5.02	5.17	5.80	5.00	6.43	5.00
MMI 2	6.89	6.50	6.51	6.04	6.61	7.25	3.62
Variance	1.75	1.48	1.34	0.24	1.61	0.81	-1.37

Figure 8: Graph to illustrate the change in participants meditating 5 – 7 times per week.

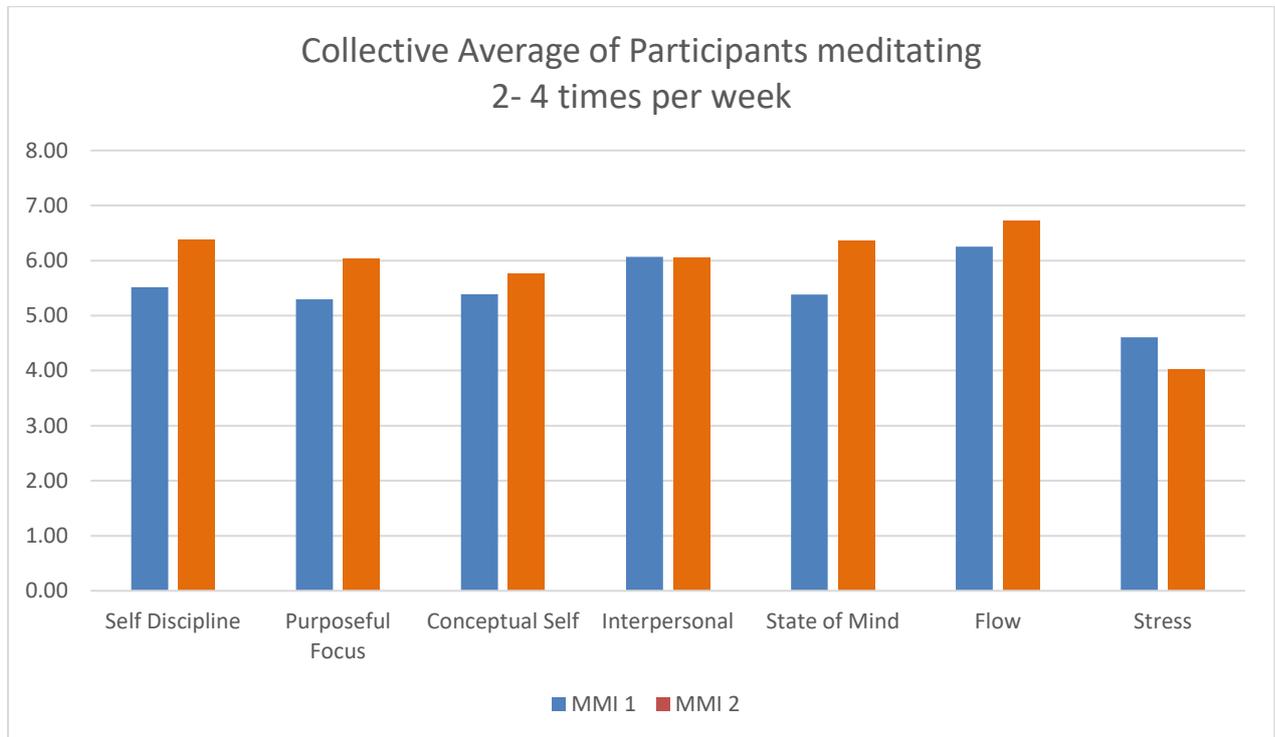


Those that reported only meditating on average 3 times a week produced the following collective results shown in figure 9 & 10. Although the changes are less, there is still a significant difference in scores.

Figure 9: Average results of 9 participants who meditated between 2 and 4 times a week.

	Self Discipline	Purposeful Focus	Conceptual Self	Interpersonal	State of Mind	Flow	Stress
MMI 1	5.51	5.30	5.39	6.07	5.38	6.25	4.61
MMI 2	6.37	6.04	5.77	6.06	6.36	6.72	4.03
Variance	0.86	0.74	0.39	-0.01	0.97	0.46	-0.58

Figure 10: Graph to illustrate average of 4 participants who meditated between 2 and 4 times a week.



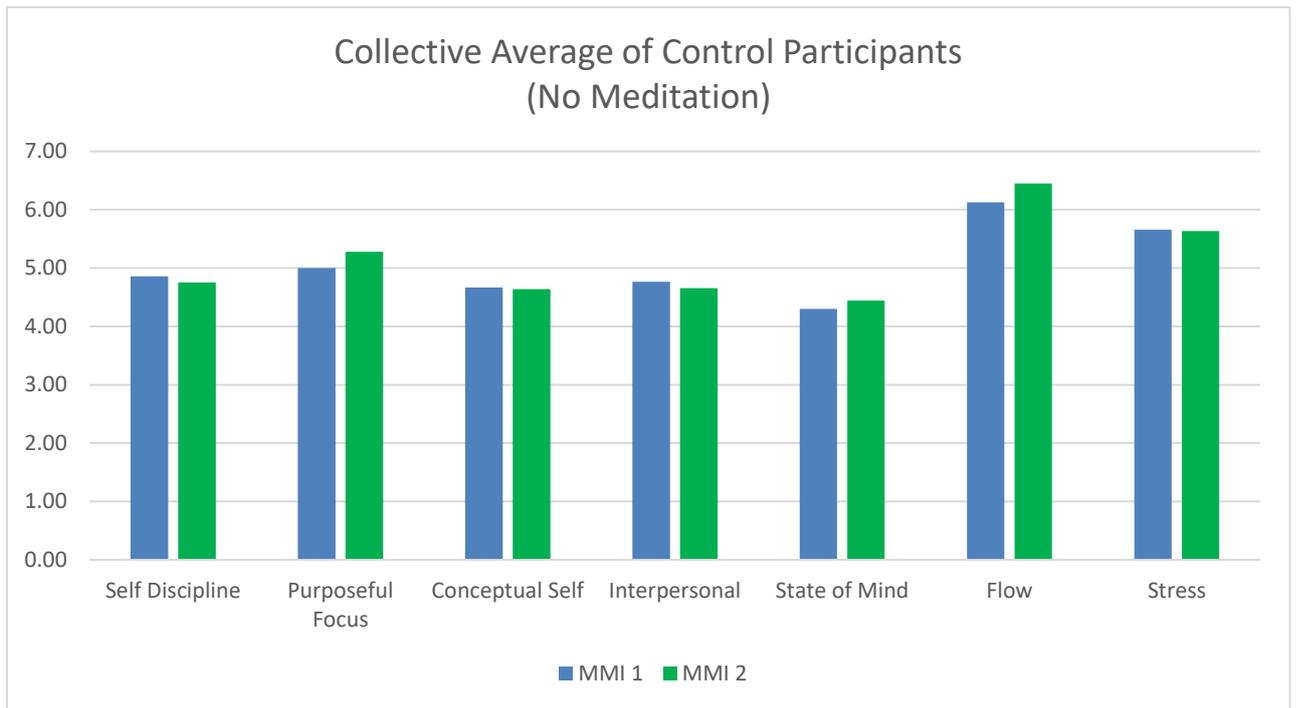
For scientific rigour, a control group is being gathered to take an MMI on day 1 and a further MMI 8 weeks later without any intervention.

Currently only 6 participants have completed this trial and this has produced the following results in figures 11 & 12 which shows little change and in fact has decreased in score for many of the areas and only decreased their stress score by 0.4%.

Figure 11: Results of 6 control participants over 8 week period with no meditation.

	Self Discipline	Purposeful Focus	Conceptual Self	Interpersonal	State of Mind	Flow	Stress
MMI 1	4.86	5.00	4.67	4.77	4.30	6.13	5.66
MMI 2	4.75	5.28	4.64	4.65	4.44	6.45	5.64
Variance	-0.11	0.28	-0.03	-0.11	0.14	0.32	-0.02

Figure 12: Graph to illustrate changes in control participant.



The results that are achieved as a result of the Focussed Farmers 121 programme provide clear quantitative data outlining psychological changes with the participants. Of great interest also, the participants gave a qualitative and descriptive account of the changes that the practice of meditation had made in their lives.

The following case studies are from direct participants in the trial.

AARON HUGHES – Beef & Sheep Farmer, Wales

“This programme is about cutting out the crap. Re-wiring your mind with a super effective spam filter. It will make you so focussed you will find yourself doing double the work, in half the time and still wonder how you have so much energy left.”



BACKGROUND

Aaron, lives with his wife and 2 young children in Clynog Fawr near Caernarfon where he farms a 60 acre beef and sheep farm that he bought in 2006 and also runs a stone masonry business that he set up on leaving school.

He won the AGI ACADEMY business and innovation programme in 2013 and has since gone on to work as an AGRISGOP leader and mentor for Farming Connect.

Aaron is a champion sheep shearer and visited countless farms in NZ and Switzerland taking part in competitions.

BENEFITS GAINED FROM THE VIDEO SERIES AND 8 WEEK PROGRAMME

I had many goals in my mind but they were all muddled up, I was constantly concerned I would miss out on opportunities. I worried about things that were out of my control and often worried throughout the night. It was causing severe lack of sleep.

I had given up my hobbies which included socialising, sheep shearing competitions, rugby and singing in a male voice choir – spending all my time working to make the farm viable and ensure my family's future. My emotions were almost frozen by this narrow mind-set.

Before I did the course, saying no to people was an issue. I wanted to please everyone and I was concerned about how they judged me. My main concern was my wife and two children and the thought of letting them down was heavy.

During the programme, I learnt through guidance from Willie how to use recapitulation before bedtime to ensure a good night's sleep, which proved to have immediate effect.

Visualising - imagining and writing down how it would feel to achieve my goals has brought great clarity about them.

Becoming aware of the difference between caring and worrying has lifted a lot of weight off my shoulders. My mind now feels much lighter and I feel that I have better control over my thoughts. Decision making has become easier and my confidence in myself and my goals has grown.

Now I have realised there is time for everything and I have started socialising again. I have entered sheep shearing competitions – and will be re-joining the choir in September. I am too old to play rugby again but my son wants to start playing under 5s this autumn and I look forward to being part of the coaching team.”

AARON'S TIME COMMITTED TO THE PROGRAMME: 1-2 HOURS PER WEEK

Paidi Kelly, Dairy Farmer and Ag-Researcher. Ireland

"I've found the course massively beneficial. At the start, I never could have believed that taking 10 minutes every day to be mindful could make such a difference. However, having experienced the benefits I can't recommend this course enough.

I feel that there are knock-on benefits for other people in my life also as I am a happier and more productive person because of the skills picked up in the course. These are life skills that I hope to benefit from every day for the rest of my life, if I keep exercising my brain in the right way!"



BACKGROUND

Paidi grew up on his family's dairy farm in Tipperary, Ireland. His full time job is a Research Officer for Teagasc (who are similar to DairyCO in the UK) and his current role focusses on researching and implementing incentives to allow people who don't own any land to get into farming via collaborative farming arrangements. He is also studying for a PhD as part of this project.

In 2016, he and his college friend set up a partnership and entered into an arrangement with a farm owner. They are now milking over 200 cows.

Paidi is a keen sportsman and keeps active with a weekly hurling schedule.

BENEFITS GAINED FROM THE VIDEO SERIES AND 8 WEEK PROGRAMME

"Self-awareness and focus were always two things I tried to be conscious of. However, this course has made it crystal clear to me how to be more self-aware and focussed in the future. A few stand out points:

- This ability to focus made work more enjoyable. I really enjoyed working on the farm and being fully focussed on the job at hand rather than day dreaming about all sorts of things, good and bad. I can still daydream but on topics that I really want to daydream about!
- I now understand the things that challenge my ability to be self-aware and focussed e.g. being on auto-pilot and not being conscious of my thoughts, letting preconceived notions/ self-limiting beliefs influence my thinking, and getting bogged down and thinking about too many different things at once. This programme has helped me develop the ability to still my mind, notice unhelpful thoughts and focus on what matters.
- I'm the type of person who really loves a challenge. This programme has helped me to be fully focused on each challenge. As I apply myself to it I enjoy the challenge more and possibly most importantly, I can switch off from these challenges and fully enjoy time with my family and friends."

PAIDI'S TIME COMMITTED TO THE PROGRAMME: 1-2 HOURS PER WEEK

ROB GARRETT: Beef & Sheep Farmer, Derbyshire

“Before watching the video series, I would be the last person in the world you would expect to find meditating. My wife would not let me attend her yoga classes because she knew I would not be able to keep a straight face!

However, the videos were a key part of understanding the science behind the program, without which the 8 week program exercises would just feel a bit “happy clappy”. The phrases and terms used in the videos kept appearing within the exercises and helped remind me that there is a lot of science behind the course.”



BACKGROUND

Rob, 47, grew up on a farm in Suffolk and, after studying agricultural, had a career in forestry and then hospitality.

He now farms beef, sheep and bees on a tenant farm in Derbyshire which he took on seven years ago after coming back into the industry.

BENEFITS GAINED FROM THE VIDEO SERIES AND 8 WEEK PROGRAMME

Keeping a clear head and getting on with the job, not getting run down by all those useless thoughts, most of which you cannot do anything about, the outcomes of which are

1. Productivity; I get the days jobs done and some.
2. Mental health; I am happier doing what I do
3. Personal development; spending a few minutes each day on myself

The 8 week course in itself implies a specific time or fix period with a start middle and end, when in fact the 8 weeks is all it takes to start the journey of mindfulness.

I seem to be less worried about the bigger picture issues i.e. length of tenancy term, farm production systems, year-end accounts, money in the bank etc. That does not mean to say I don't think about them on a daily basis, but it does not get me down so much.

It also feels that I am a bit more organised than usual i.e. ordering vaccines and products a few weeks before I need them and getting ready for the next job (I have Rispoval 4 pneumonia vaccine in the fridge and a cattle pen ready before actually having purchased any store cattle!).

Although I am still putting in a good 70 to 80 hour week there is less of that feeling of “chasing your own tail”, scrapping about to get jobs done only to feel like you have achieved nothing at the end of the day.

ROB'S TIME COMMITTED TO THE PROGRAMME: 1-2 HOURS PER WEEK

Conclusions

This study and the creation of Focussed Farmers is not about proving that meditation has positive effects on both your mental and physical health, there is much research out there already to confirm this, but I wanted to see if the practice could fit within the agricultural industry and if the same effects would be seen.

The results gathered so far show strong evidence that the practice of brain training (meditation) which strengthens our ability to control our mind is just as effective for farmers in managing stress and increasing productivity as it is for people from the corporate industry.

Aaron talked of doing double the work in half the time, Paidi described becoming more productive and Rob explained how he'd get the days task completed 'and some'.

Whilst we can mentally train our focus and awareness, we are more focussed on the task in hand, we become more productive at getting the important jobs done which lead to achieving our overarching goals – with far less stress!

Although I have not discussed goal setting in great detail within this paper, it is essential that if you take the steps to switch on the attentional spotlight in your brain, you should couple this with goal setting, which means setting your mind to where you want to go. So you point your mind in the right direction to achieve your goals...effortlessly.

To find out more, the video series is available at www.focussedfarmers.com and although you can watch 100 videos and read 1000 books on tasting a tomato, the only way to really know what a tomato tastes like – is to try it!