WE ALL WANT A BALANCED BODY—AND THAT DOESN’T MEAN JUST SCULPTED ARMS AND FLAT ABS. IT’S ALSO ABOUT A CALM, CLEAR MENTAL STATE THAT SETS YOU UP TO TAKE ON THE WORLD. INTRODUCING THE WORKOUT THAT DELIVERS ALL OF THAT...AT ONCE. BY LIZ KRIEGER

Here are some of the things to love about sweat-drenched, heart-pumping fitness classes, such as boot camp and HIIT: They torch calories, tone your muscles, and help you look even more awesome in a body-con dress. Softer, gentler practices like yoga have a lot going for them, too: Breathing deeply through asanas and then pausing to reflect during Child’s Pose and Savasana transports you to a centered, confident headspace.

Now you can score the best of both worlds with hybrid workouts that focus just as much on inspiration as on perspiration. A new wave of trainers and instructors are exploring the white space where mental breakthroughs, emotional epiphanies, and muscle-quivering exertion meet, transforming the minds and

CONCEPTUAL ARTWORK BY EVA JAUSS
bodies of women across the nation in the process. The rise in these kinds of classes coincides with a related trend in our culture: More of us are interested in incorporating mindfulness into our daily lives, from boutique meditation studios to apps and group wellness events with attendance that’s more typical of an Adele concert than an om session.

Research suggests that high-intensity classes that include strategically timed introspective moments are a powerful way to boost your mood, improve your enjoyment of the workout—even make your brain healthier. And meditation has many proven health benefits, such as reduced anxiety and weight management. Adding those powerful tools to a fitness practice is more than a buzzy trend. It’s a game changer.

THE MAGIC FORMULA
You’ve probably heard people call running, or any workout for that matter, their therapy. (Maybe you’ve even said the same thing!) So what is it about this new category of classes that makes them different? Consider the format of Circuit of Change (COC), which creator Brian Delmonico refers to as “mind/body boot camp.” The 50-minute session starts and ends with meditation. In between, it’s packed with a nonstop mix of yoga, cardio, kickboxing, and high-intensity intervals, all set to a soundtrack of tribal music. “There are no mirrors and no weights,” says Michaela Morton, 25, a real estate agent in New York City who is so hooked on the experience that she goes a few times a week. “All the focus is on how you feel and finding the energy in your own body.”

Other classes with a similar purpose have sprung up. At Woom Center, a new studio in NYC, challenging athletic yoga sequences are punctuated by sound therapy, visual stimulation, and aromatherapy. In a class called HeadStrong, offered at 19 Equinox clubs across the country, carefully choreographed movement sequences are meant to stoke brainpower and creativity.

When you think about it, it makes sense that women reach their physical bests when they’re in an enlightened headspace. “That’s when I’ve seen my body transform,” says Melanie Watterberg, the 40-year-old founder of Cufitra, a wellness retreat company. “There’s something about being really in it, mind and body, that pushes you harder.” Watterberg regularly attends The Class, a 75-minute yoga and HIIT mash-up created by Taryn Toomey and offered in Los Angeles and NYC. It features repetitive, uberchallenging moves—think burpees for the length of an entire song—interspersed with contemplative periods. There’s grunting, shaking...it’s out-there, but, devotees say, it works. “We use the physical body to engage the mind,” says Toomey. “We ask students to stay cognizant of what they think and feel in moments of intensity. The result is a cathartic, purifying, calming release. The postclass vibes are very peaceful.”

It takes serious aerobic fitness, yes, but also tough-as-steel mental strength and colossal willpower. Students sweat and work hard—all while getting profoundly, blissfully lost in movement. “I think some people are more comfortable with meditation through repetitive movement and cuing as opposed to just sitting still,” says Ariane Machin, Ph.D., a sports psychologist and cofounder of the Conscious Coaching Collective in Raleigh, North Carolina. “These workouts are a way for women to fuel themselves with good stuff that incorporates spirituality and physical effort.”

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Studies suggest the benefits described by Machin are not unusual. New research from exercise psychologists at Iowa State University in Ames shows that strategically pacing the intensity during challenging workouts can set you up to feel happier throughout—and make you more likely to come back. “In some people, intense exercise can backfire, at least from an emotional perspective, lead-
way that gets you out of your head with feelings-based cues instead of physical commands.

Indeed, instructors like COC’s Delmonico are just as focused on changing the way you feel and think as they are on tweaking the size and shape of your butt. Throughout class Delmonico prompts students to release negative, toxic thoughts. “The sounds and movements we make are not comfortable at first, but you just start to let go,” he says.

In addition to the mental and emotional benefits of these types of workouts, a number of studies have shown that exercise increases the size of the hippocampus, the part of the brain that’s involved with learning and verbal memory. So a hybrid sweat session does make you in a more confident and less anxious state; it may make you smarter, too!

THE MINDFULNESS MOVEMENT

The popularity of yoga has been on an upward swing for the past decade, but mindfulness has only recently become accessible 24/7. Stand-alone meditation studios, where people can drop in for instructor-led sessions in chic, peaceful spaces, are popping up coast-to-coast, anchored by spots like MNDFL in New York City and L.A.’s Unplug. Hundreds of apps have made it possible to meditate during your commute. These days you can seek inner peace en masse. In October nearly 800 people showed up for a group meditation gathering called The Big Quiet in the transit hub below 1 World Trade Center in NYC.

You can even get a little dose of Zen on your wrist: The most recent Apple Watch software update includes a new feature called Breathe, which nudges you to take deep breaths for a minute or more each day. These active reminders to slow down, let go, and live in the moment are something many of us desperately need, says Machin. And not just during crazy-busy times of the year, like now, at the height of holiday season, or during stressful times at work. “Our culture has become very tense and anxious,” she says. “Everything is so nonstop and outcome-oriented, with no self-reflection or appreciation of the process.”

As a result, Machin says, many people feel depleted. “There’s this fatigue and self-talk that we’re never doing enough,” she says. In other words, it couldn’t be a better time for this kind of hybrid experience to become mainstream. “I think women want to be involved in fitness, but they want to do it in a way that is not punishing or punitive or just to lose weight,” she says. “We want to go beyond a superficial aesthetic payoff and find more meaningful benefits.”

And that’s why these workouts have a tremendous amount to offer. They create an experience where students feel so much more than burning muscles and a racing heart. “It’s like moving prayer for me,” says Morton, the COC devotee. “It’s changed my life. I’m happier and more at home in this skin than I’ve ever been.”

GOOD VIBES ONLY

WE LOVE THESE EASY MINDFULNESS TRICKS. INCORPORATE THEM INTO YOUR NEXT WORKOUT TO FEEL PHYSICALLY AND MENTALLY STRONG.

PUT YOUR HAND TO YOUR HEART

Pre-sweat session, center yourself in the moment by sitting with legs crossed on the floor. Place your left hand over your heart and your right hand on top of your head, and take 10 slow, deep breaths.

WARM UP YOUR BODY

Get your blood flowing and build intensity by doing this sequence three times: From Child’s Pose, lift hips into Downward Dog, then get in a high plank.

CHOOSE A POWER WORD

Set an intention for your workout by focusing on a word or phrase that feels right to you today. Maybe it’s clarity, or patience, or confidence, or forgiveness. Repeat it to yourself and come back to it as often as possible while you sweat.

GET YOUR HEART RATE WAY UP

Physical exertion sets you up for mental breakthroughs, so push yourself in the most challenging parts of your workout, whether that’s squat jumps, butt kicks, or mountain climbers.

SHAKE IT ALL OFF

For one minute do a simple movement over and over, such as shaking out your arms and legs. In traditional Chinese medicine, practitioners use “moving meditation”—repetitive, purposeful actions such as wringing out the entire body—to transfer energy.

JUST CHILL

Seal in all that good stuff at the end with five full minutes in Savasana, the yoga pose where you lie faceup, breathing deeply and allowing thoughts to come in and out of your mind.

SOURCES: BRAIN DELMONICO; ARIANE MACHIN, PH.D.