



MY STORY

How Kirtan Curbed My Anxiety

Imagine lying next to your peaceful, sleeping partner while your mind churns through the events of the day, worrying about everything that has happened and all of the horrible things that might happen in the future. From early childhood through my 30s, that was me. If I had a refrain in my mind, it was:

“Something’s wrong! Something’s wrong!” My chronic anxiety led to self-harming habits like hair pulling, known in medical terms as trichotillomania, a condition so severe that it left me with bald spots on my scalp, off and on from age eleven until recently.



It's like my mind was overrun by monkeys in a coleslaw factory. The monkeys were freaked out, frantically sorting through all of my thoughts and making them into some sort of coleslaw. They never took a break. And my only way of coping with the restlessness and anxiety inside was by creating a similar, relentless rhythm to my life. I was highly productive, but I was workaholic. I never sat still, and I never stopped worrying.

But I was always searching for relief. I thought, "If I take this yoga training, if I meet this guru, if I do this cleanse, then I will stop being anxious." But nothing worked.

Then my life coach, Breck Costin, told me, "You need to stop trying to get rid of the anxiety and try to be in relationship with it instead. Dance with it. Sing with it." I found his suggestion intriguing, so I started trying to befriend my anxiety.

Around that time, I discovered Kirtan, an ancient, community-based, call-and-response practice of

Today, it is my personal mission to help spread awareness of this practice. I believe that mantra chanting is one of the easiest paths to quieting the monkey mind and embracing the joy and delight of being a human being on this planet.

When my Kirtan band and I tour in the US and UK now, I teach a workshop called Vocal Transformation. I explain that the three main things that make chanting so powerful are that:

For starters, chanting heals the whole body. The voice is like a personal sound healing instrument inside our own body; the vibrations we make with it, and the mantras that we chant, heal us from the inside.

Secondly, the deep breathing we do during Kirtan short-circuits anxiety. When you are anxious, you stop breathing, but when you are singing, you have to breathe deeply. This simple practice shifts the nervous system out of fight-or-flight mode and into rest-and-digest mode.



singing of mantras from India. It seemed to hypnotise the monkeys, so I started chanting regularly. At the end of a Kirtan, I would find a stillness and a quietude that I had never experienced before. It would last for minutes, hours, even days after the Kirtan. Over time, I noticed that the more I made Kirtan central to my life, the longer those periods of quietude and stillness lasted.

Now, I live in that state more often than not. Most days, my mind and body feel at ease. I sleep well at night. I use the visionary part of my mind to architect my dreams, and I've quieted the menacing part of my mind, which spent so many years crafting worst case scenario nightmares. My trichotillomania has gone dormant for periods of over a year and a half, and only surfaces now when I'm under the weather or exhausted. If I can, I go and chant, and the urge to pull my hair passes.

Last but not least, mantra chanting, quite literally, is a form of 'mind-release.' Over time the practice of chanting mantras can release you from the bondage of the monkeys in the coleslaw factory. It is an ancient and powerful medicine.

And on that note:
I'm off to chant!

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