

Meditation

Overview

A look at how meditation can improve your physical and mental well-being.

- [How to meditate](#)
- [Visualization and breathing](#)

Many of us spend our days rushing from one thing to another. It seems we're always stressed, anxious, worried and in a hurry. We rarely have time to just be, or to savour all that each moment has to offer.

What is meditation?

Meditation is a way of slowing down and regaining your perspective. It may involve deep breathing, visualization, guided thought or all of those. Research has shown that meditation can ease everyday stress and anxiety and help you cope with medical conditions such as asthma, arthritis and chronic pain. You can learn to meditate on your own or by taking a course and either of these approaches can increase your physical and emotional wellbeing and help you lead a happier, more balanced life.

Many religions include meditation into their practices, and both secular and non-secular people have practiced meditation for thousands of years. In recent decades, scientists and researchers in Western countries have also begun to appreciate and study the value of meditation.

It's not necessary to follow any specific spiritual beliefs to enjoy some of the benefits that can come from the practice of meditation, such as feeling calmer under pressure. One of the most popular types of meditation is known as Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR), which is designed to help people achieve greater physical and emotional well-being. You may want to experiment with several types of meditation before you choose one.

The benefits of meditation

Meditation is a useful tool for easing stress and tension. It has also been found to help people cope with emotional and physical concerns like

- mild anxiety
- mild depression
- high blood pressure

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- headaches
- respiratory problems such as asthma and emphysema
- insomnia
- heart disease
- chronic pain
- premenstrual syndrome
- skin disorders

Doctors typically recommend meditation in addition to -- not instead of -- conventional medical treatment. If you suffer from severe depression, for example, your doctor might add meditation to a course of treatment that includes medication and therapy. For some common health problems, meditation alone may provide effective treatment. For example, in several studies, Dr. Herbert Benson of Harvard University Medical School found that practicing meditation twice a day can bring about significant reductions in blood pressure. Regular practice of meditation can actually change the way your brain works. Studies have shown that meditation activates the nervous systems that calm the body and, over time, can change the electrical impulses in the brain, resulting in increased brain waves associated with insight, rest and compassion.

How to meditate

For a simple meditation, follow these steps:

- **Find a comfortable space** where you can sit peacefully away from any distractions.
- **Relax your body.** Visualize your body becoming relaxed, from your toes to your head. You may want to gently move each body part before entering a relaxed state.
- **Close your eyes and take a few breathes**, breathing from your abdomen. As you breathe in and out, count your breaths, and repeat the number of the breath as you let it out. By doing this helps your mind relax.
- **Focus your attention** on something that brings you a sense of serenity. You may want to visualize a white light surrounding your body. If you choose to do this meditation with your eyes open, you may want to focus on an object such as the light of a candle. Objects often used are flowers, crystals and candles, but you can use other objects (for example plants, clocks, or even coffee mugs!) The purpose of focusing your attention on something is to diminish mind chatter.

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- **Practice this meditation** for five minutes and increasing the time to 10 minutes and so forth, as you become more familiar with the technique.

Visualization and breathing

Visualizing and breathing are ways you can develop stillness in your mind. Some other approaches are:

- **Focus on a sound.** Some sounds carry powerful vibrations that resonate with the body's energy fields. An ancient example is the Sanskrit word "Om" (pronounced "Aum"), which means "perfection." Repeating the word "Om" as a mantra is a helpful way to slow down your breathing while calming the nervous system.
- **Using Imagery.** This can be a very uplifting way of meditating. When you use imagery, you create a mental image of a relaxing place. Imagery is useful because it's one of the ways the brain uses to communicate with the body. When you have a stressful day, the body's natural reaction is to tense up, tightening muscles or creating a shortness of breath. However, when you use imagery, you place calming images into your brain and allow your mind to relax. To practice a short imagery exercise, visualize that you are a feather floating in the breeze. As you float downward, you feel a sense of calmness until you finally touch the ground, fully relaxed. How does this exercise make you feel? You may choose other examples of imagery such as imagining a waterfall or warm sunset.

For more information on the health benefits of meditation, visit the site for the Mayo Clinic (www.mayoclinic.com) and search for "Meditation: A Simple, Fast Way to Reduce Stress."

By practicing meditation on a daily basis, you allow yourself to take a break from your regular routine and enter a place of relaxation.

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