

Meditation

The practice of meditation – the quiet focusing of the mind and body – is highly beneficial to maintaining good health and a balanced life. Meditation engages the parasympathetic nervous system, activating the mind, body, and spirit in ways that can help heal, repair and strengthen vital support systems. In our always-on, mobile-connected, 24/7 world, carving out some downtime has become more important than ever.

While the practice of meditation is widely varied across numerous cultural, religious, and regional influences, at its very core, meditation can be made accessible to everyone regardless of their particular preferences, beliefs, or background.

Research has shown meditation to have a variety of healthful benefits. A study by Drs. Benson and Ornish showed that meditating reduces the fight or flight response, decreasing heart rate, blood pressure, and oxygen consumption. Dr. Ornish even used meditation techniques as part of a program to reverse heart disease.

The Core Fundamentals

At its core, meditation is the practice of being present. There are four fundamental elements that are common to all forms of (stationary)¹ meditation.

A Quiet Environment – The objective is to limit noise and other forms of distraction. When first practicing meditation, it can be a challenge to calm the chatter inside your mind. Trying to practice in noisy or distracting surroundings makes it even more difficult. However, you do not need to go into a sensory deprivation chamber to practice meditation. Understand that some sounds are unavoidable (I think this works better than inevitable but it is up to you), especially if you are meditating outside. So, regardless of what sound you may encounter, simply acknowledge that sound happens and try to return to your focus.

A Comfortable, Self-Supported Posture – It's best to find a comfortable, balanced and stable posture before beginning your practice. Some prefer to sit in a cross-legged position that provides firm anchoring. The body is more likely to remain in this position without discomfort and with minimal effort for longer periods of time.

¹ Meditation can also occur in a state of motion. For example, yoga in its various forms constitutes a moving meditation, as well as forms of walking meditation.

You can experiment with various ways of crossing your legs to decide which is most comfortable for you. When done correctly, your base — formed by your knees and bottom — should connect with the surface you are sitting on, providing support and stability.

Chair-seated positions are also okay as long as you don't use the back of the chair for support. Work on maintaining an erect posture without undoing effort. Think of having an elongated spine that allows each vertebra to sit as if one were stacked neatly on top of the next. Reclined or prone positions are usually not a good idea, as these postures typically end in sleeping rather than meditation. A good sitting posture will actually assist the mind in focusing, allowing you to be alert yet calm.

A Passive Attitude – Meditation is challenging work, make no mistake. So, it is very important not to judge yourself when things such as mind-wandering inevitably occur. Be aware of the fact that your mind has wandered, acknowledge it, and then simply return to your practice – over and over again. This is normal, try to let go of judgment. It is called "practice", not "perfection", for a reason. Be kind to yourself.

A Mental Device To Focus Attention – This is something you focus on in order to calm the mind and shift it away from normal, often random thought patterns. The specific type of meditation you choose to do is often associated with the mental device that you use. Three mental devices are discussed in the next section to provide you with options.

Seated Meditation Practices

Following are three variations of meditation practices, each with a slightly different mental device on which to focus. While in actuality there are many more variations of meditation practice, these three are the most common.

Concentrative – In concentrative meditation, you will focus on the mind. It is the foundation for all other forms of meditation and can help build your capacity to overcome distraction and sustain mental focus.

The thing you will focus on is the breath itself, the steady cycle of inhale-exhale that we all do. The breath is a convenient thing to focus on since it is something that is with you at all times. Choose one particular element of breathing to focus on such as the sensation as the breath flows in and out of the nostrils or the sensation of the abdomen rising and falling with each breath. You will not be manipulating your breath during meditation, simply breathe naturally and observe the breath.

Whenever this happens, think of it as a quiet little wake-up bell. Be kind to yourself and start over at 1. With practice, you can stay focused through several 10-count cycles. Eventually, once you feel confident, you can set the counting aside and simply remain focused on the breath. But when starting out, counting is an effective training tool. Spend ample time developing the “muscles” of concentration and be sure to maintain a passive attitude.

Reflective – In reflective meditation, you will focus on a question, and in so doing, engage the mind. You may think, “Oh, I sit and think about things all the time,” but in this case, the manner in which you focus on the question will be different.

Focus on a matter of inquiry, typically a question, and suspend judgment or preconception. As before with the concentration practice, whenever your thought strays, simply return to the question.

What question you choose is up to you. Typically the questions take on the form of a “koan”, those crazy questions that Zen monks ask their students: “What is the sound of one hand clapping?” or “Does the flag move, the wind move, or the mind move?” The question can be as simple as “Who am I?” or “What is this?” The question will most likely be open-ended and not have a definite answer. The object of this practice is to move beyond the answer.

As you sit and focus on the question, have an awareness of everything that is in the present moment. Do you sense a response in your body as you hold the question in your mind? Can you sense something past intellectual thought that gives you some insight into the question? Ask the question over and over again and then pause, with no expectations, but remain aware and alert.

Mindfulness – In mindfulness meditation, you will focus on what arises in the never-ending sequence of “present moments”. There is no effort to attach, cling to, or otherwise analyze whatever may arise. The practice is simply to be mindful, aware, and fully alive to whatever happens in the present.

This practice will require some fairly well-developed concentration muscles to avoid the natural habit to chase after thoughts as if they were rabbits running across the trail in front of you. Simply say, “rabbit”, and proceed down the trail. Mindfulness emphasizes the cultivation of a receptive, choice-less quality of attention toward whatever you experience.

Be aware of all the things that are in the present moment, not just a single object to focus on. But let things be as they are. Do not try to stop your thinking, rather allow it to simply come to rest on its own. This can be achieved by being an unattached observer of your thoughts and by not placing any judgment upon your observations.

To assist with mindfulness meditation you can sit and observe what floats through your mind as you would clouds on a sunny day. Label the different clouds as they pass and you become aware of them, such as “remembering” for memories, “planning” for things you intend to do in the future, “sound” for anything you might hear, or “rabbit” should that pesky rabbit run across the trail. Once labeled, let the cloud disperse as easily as it formed. Then, simply return to your mind and see what arises next.

Summary

Hopefully, this introduction explains a few of the basics of meditation and provides some practices from which to choose. Keep in mind that this is not something one picks up easily in a week or two. It takes time, dedication, effort, and a willingness to be kind and gentle with yourself.

How long and how often you meditate is up to you. This is your practice. If you commit to it, then you will reap the benefits; it is as simple as that. The best advice is the 10 or 20 minutes you CAN do every day are always better than the hour you can't. Continuity and dedication are key. And just as you return your focus if your attention should stray during meditation, you always can return to your practice if you should stray from it.

Along with a sound diet and proper exercise, consider meditation a part of your overall health and wellness program.

SOURCE: Scott H. Prengle, The Relaxation Response

Local Meditation Groups

Dallas Meditation Center: dallasmeditationcenter.com

Dallas Shambhala Center: dallas.shambhala.org

Interfaith Peace Chapel: interfaithpeacechapel.org

For Additional Information

Jack Kornfield: A Path With Heart (Bantam), 1993

Deepak Chopra: chopra.com/meditation

Thich Nhat Hanh: shambhalasun.com

Vipassana Meditation: dhamma.org

Transcendental Meditation: tm.org

HeartMath App: heartmathstore.com

Dr. Jeffrey Thompson Audio Programs: neuroacoustic.com