

Meditation

Meditation of one style or another can be found in most of the major religions, including Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam. Generally, Eastern religions have tended to concentrate on meditation as a means of realising spiritual enlightenment. This has usually also included many health promoting practices. In the West, meditation has been embraced for both reasons, too, although many people know it most as a self-help tool for promoting good health and for stress management.

Many forms of meditation result in the clearing of one's mind and this promotes a sense of calm and heightened awareness. During meditation, the brain's activity alters significantly, as mapped by a device called an electroencephalograph (EEG). The most well-known brain waves evident during many kinds of meditation are called alpha waves. These brain waves accompany relaxation of the entire nervous system. Gamma, delta and theta brain waves accompany other types of meditation and are associated with various altered states of consciousness. Scientific studies show that the regular practice of meditation can be a powerful healing tool.

A range of disorders

Regular meditation can be used to help treat a range of disorders, including:

- Anxiety
- Chronic pain
- Depression
- Headaches
- High blood pressure
- Insomnia
- Migraines
- Stress
- Life-threatening illnesses
- Recovery from accident or illness
- A sense of rootlessness or purposelessness.

Benefits of meditation

The direct benefits of meditation can include:

- Improved physical, emotional and mental health
- Focused and clear thinking
- Enhancing a sense of self and personal presence
- Increased emotional balance
- Greater relaxation and ease
- More equanimity in the face of challenges
- An improved sense of spiritual fulfillment and awakening.

Soothing the nervous system

Resting the mind has a dramatic effect on brain activity. When the brain moves into an alpha wave state, many physiological changes occur, starting with the autonomic nervous system. One of the main roles of the autonomic nervous system is to regulate glands and organs without any effort from our conscious minds.

The autonomic nervous system is made up of two parts, called the sympathetic and the parasympathetic. These systems act in opposite yet complementary ways: the sympathetic nervous system 'revs' the body, while the parasympathetic calms it down. Chronic stress or burnout can occur when the sympathetic nervous system dominates for too long.

During an alpha wave state, the parasympathetic half of the autonomic nervous system comes to the fore. This results in lowered blood pressure and heart rate, a reduction in stress hormones and slowed metabolism. If meditation is practised regularly, these beneficial changes become relatively permanent.

Research combining current technological innovations (magnetic resonance imaging, or MRI) and the talents of long-term meditators has revealed marked changes in both brain function and structure. Finding evidence of these types of changes adds Western scientific validation to many of the claims made by advanced meditators for centuries.

Different types of meditation

Meditation has evolved out of many different religions and philosophies, which means there are many different techniques to choose from.

Some examples include:

- **Concentrating on the breath** – consciously noticing the movement of air in and out of your nostrils, or counting the breath in variety of ways.
- **Emptying the mind** – allowing the mind to clear and 'float', gently pushing aside any stray thoughts, or allowing thoughts to float in and out of awareness.
- **Looking at an object** – focusing your attention, but not necessarily your thoughts, on the shape, sound and texture of an object, such as a tree or a candle flame.
- **Movement** – using a physical technique like yoga, Qi Gong or Tai Chi to still the mind by coordinating the breath and the body with gentle movement.
- **Using a mantra** – repeating a word or phrase over and over, either out loud or silently, to focus the attention, perhaps timed with the breath.

Practising meditation

Whatever your preferred technique, it helps in the beginning to have a quiet place, a comfortable sitting position and around five minutes to half an hour without outside distractions. Set an alarm if you don't want to lose track of time. Contrary to popular belief, you don't have to sit cross-legged on the floor in order to meditate. You can sit in a chair or sit up in bed. You might just fall asleep, however, if you try to meditate lying down, which defeats the purpose of doing it.

Meditating every day at around the same time can help to develop a regular habit and make it easier and quicker to slip into deeply meditative states. Although you can master meditation by yourself, some people prefer to attend classes and learn in a group from an experienced teacher.

Trying too hard

Trying to meditate is a lot like trying to sleep – attempting to force it can often make it more difficult. Thinking of a meditation session as a chance to relax rather than as a discipline you have to master can make a great difference. If your attention wanders, practise acceptance and avoid getting annoyed with yourself. Simply direct your attention back to what you are doing and experience the moment.

Special considerations

In the instance of serious mental illness, meditation should be used with caution, if at all.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Yoga, Qi Gong and Tai Chi teachers
- Meditation teachers

Things to remember

- Meditation is the deliberate focusing of attention to bring about feelings of calm, and heightened energy and awareness.
- Regular meditation offers many health benefits, such as reduced stress and reduced blood pressure.
- There are many different ways to meditate, such as using a mantra, looking at an object, or focusing on the breath.

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