
Meditation

Summary

- 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 anxiety.
 - There are many different ways to meditate, such as using a mantra, looking at an object, or focusing on the breath. It can be done sitting still or moving around while maintaining self-awareness.
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Meditation of one style or another can be found in most of the major religions, including Christianity, Judaism, Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam. Generally, Eastern religions have tended to concentrate on meditation as a means of realising spiritual enlightenment, a fundamental part of which has been the use of many health-promoting practices that go hand in hand with the spiritual ones.

Many millions of people in the West and elsewhere in the world are active meditators. Meditation in the West is practiced for both health and religious or spiritual reasons, although many people regard it mainly as a self-help tool for improving cognitive (thought) performance and for managing stress.

Meditating for spiritual expansion and fulfilment, without a religious basis, is becoming very common.

Meditation produces a clearing of the mind in ways that promote a sense of calm and heightened awareness. Interestingly, measurements using electroencephalography (EEG) and magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) show that meditation can alter your brain's activity.

Risks of meditation

When meditating alone or without guidance, it is important to remember that meditation is part of living a balanced life. It should not be used to withdraw from life or to avoid personal and practical issues.

For a person with serious mental illness, meditation should be used under expert guidance, and if done alone, extreme caution should be taken.

Types of meditation

Meditation has evolved out of numerous approaches to life, religions, philosophies and situations, 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 your breaths in various ways
 - grounding and mindfulness – being aware of inner experiences (such as bodily sensations, feelings, thoughts and memories) and simply observing them without judgement
 - emptying your mind – allowing your 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, a candle flame, or a spiritually significant painting or image
 - movement – using a physical technique like yoga, qi gong or tai chi to still your mind by coordinating your breath and body with gentle movement
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- using a mantra – repeating a word or phrase over and over, either aloud or silently, sometimes timed with the breath, to focus your attention and brighten your consciousness.

Practicing meditation

Whatever your preferred meditation technique, a common approach is to sit in a comfortable position in a quiet place for five minutes to half an hour without outside distractions. Set an alarm if you don't want to lose track of time. Meditating every day at around the same time can help you develop a regular habit, and make it easier and quicker to slip into deeply meditative states.

Contrary to popular belief, you don't have to sit cross-legged on the floor in order to meditate. You can also sit in a chair or in bed. However, you might just fall asleep if you try to meditate lying down at night, which will defeat the purpose.

Many people prefer to meditate while moving around. When meditating like this, it is important to make sure that your activities are an expression of inner focus, not a distraction from whatever you are experiencing. The activity is done slowly and attentively.

People can meditate while walking, swimming or doing something repetitive that is not distracting (such as washing dishes, digging in the garden or sweeping). The activity is not the purpose – it is a means of focusing and holding attention on inner processes.

You can master many meditation practices by yourself. However, some people prefer to attend classes or learn in a group from an experienced teacher.

Relax as you meditate

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 big difference.

If your attention wanders, try to practice acceptance and avoid getting annoyed with yourself. Simply direct your attention back to what you are doing and your experience of that moment.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Psychologist
- Yoga, kum nye, qi gong and tai chi teachers

Things to remember

- Meditation is the deliberate focusing of attention to bring about feelings of calm and heightened energy and awareness.
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