

Developing a Mindfulness Practice

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“Meditation practice isn’t about trying to throw ourselves away and become something better, it’s about befriending who we are.”

— Ani Pema Chodron

“Mindfulness is awareness that arises through paying attention on purpose in the moment without judgment.”

— Jon Kabat-Zinn

Benefits of mindfulness meditation

Many, many research studies are proving that meditation — the simple act of sitting quietly for about 20 minutes a day — has tremendous benefits for our emotional, cognitive and physical health.

Research shows that meditation provides lasting emotional control, cultivates compassion, reduces pain sensitivity, boosts multitasking, improves creativity, and more. Meditation helps us gain awareness of the way our minds think (mindfulness or meta-cognition) and helps us control intrusive thoughts. Brain scans show that meditators have a lower response to fear, which can lead to improved symptoms with ADHD, anxiety, depression, OCD and panic attacks.

Meditation is so powerful that after only 8 weeks the density of brain tissue in parts of the brain (the cortex and hippocampus) increased. In another study, after just 4 meditation sessions people had better working memory, decision-making, ability to sustain attention, and visuo-spatial processing. One study showed meditation increased activity in the anterior prefrontal cortex, an area of the brain used in self-knowledge, or “thinking about one’s thoughts.” Data from 47 different clinical trials find meditation is as effective as antidepressants. Mindfulness training in schools has been found to reduce and even prevent depression in adolescents.

Specifically, meditation improves mindfulness, or an awareness of how one’s mind works. By improving mindfulness, one can reduce emotional reactivity. Rather than just instantly get angry, for instance, one can pause, consider a response, and then choose a response. Many relationship problems and emotional difficulties come from reacting to emotions without thinking first. Mindfulness gets one out of the “fight-or-flight-or-freeze” feeling of being completely under the control of emotions and into a thoughtful frame of mind.

Unfortunately, modern society spends a lot of time teaching us how to think, but not really how to just “be”. When we think too much and place too much value on our thoughts, this leads to anxiety, depression and insomnia. Too many people have thoughts, such as “I am a failure,” and assume that this thought is correct. But thoughts are not reality.

Meditation is NOT:

- sitting and doing nothing
- completely focused attention or forced concentration
- a forced state of relaxation
- a forced clearing of the mind
- a trance
- a religion or philosophy

Meditation IS:

Meditation is an **active** training of the mind to increase awareness and insight. In meditation, you will watch the functioning of your mind in a calm and detached manner so you can gain insight into your thoughts, emotions and behavior.

Mindfulness is about learning to pay attention to what’s going on right now, in this present moment: “Mindfulness refers to a compassionate and nonjudgmental moment-to-moment awareness of one’s experiences.” (Raes et al., 2013).

In Tibetan language, meditation means “familiarization.” You will familiarize yourself with your thoughts and how your mind works. Helping you recognize thoughts as merely thoughts and that these thoughts are not in control is the first step toward avoiding feeling overwhelmed.

Many people, when they start meditating find their thoughts are scattered. This is normal. Noticing that your mind bounces all over IS mindfulness. If you have thoughts of “I’m not doing this right,” or “My mind seems impossible to focus,” or “I can’t sit still today,” just notice these judging and evaluative comments and label them. Then be KIND to yourself. Gently let go of those thoughts of judgment and return your focus. Mindfulness is having our minds “wander off,” noticing this, and being observant of what is happening in that moment. Read: <http://www.mindful.org/3-ways-escape-perfect-meditator-trap/>

Beginner’s guide to meditation

There are many names and techniques of meditation, but the fundamentals are similar:

1. Find a place to sit quietly and not be interrupted.
2. Start with 5-10 minutes in the morning, adding another 5-10 minute session in the evening. Most people eventually meditate for about 20 minutes in one session. Set a timer so you don’t want to check the clock regularly. Most smartphones have timers that can be set easily, some with verbal commands. (On iPhones use Siri: “Wake me up in 20 minutes.” Make sure your alert sound is a soothing tone.)
3. Sit in an erect and upright posture on a chair or meditation cushion. Have a sense of regality in your posture, an inner confidence and sense of self-worth. Rest your hands on top of your thighs or in your lap. Close your eyes or look at an object with a soft focus.
4. Relax the body and the mind, but choose something to gently concentrate on. Most meditators focus on the experience of breathing. Pay attention to the natural flow of your breath as it goes in and out. On the out-breath practice let go of all thoughts and feelings and feel completely relaxed.
5. Be mindful. When your attention wavers, and it will almost immediately, GENTLY INVITE it back. Don’t chide yourself; be compassionate with yourself. Label the thoughts as thinking and return your attention to your breath. The act of concentrating on one thing is surprisingly difficult, but gets easier with practice. It turns out this is quite difficult because we’re used to mentally traveling backwards and forwards while making judgments on everything (e.g. worrying, dreading, anticipating, regretting, etc.). The key is to notice, in a detached way, what’s happening, but not to get involved with it. This way of thinking does not come that naturally. ***Shifting attention from arising thoughts to breath IS the practice of meditation.***
6. End with thoughts of gratitude. Once your practice is through, spend 2-3 minutes feeling appreciative of the opportunity to practice, your mind and your wellbeing. Feel compassion for yourself and others.

Learn More:

“Mindfulness in Plain English,” by Venerable Henepola Gunaratana

“Wherever You Go, There You Are,” John Kabat-Zinn

“The Wisdom of No Escape,” Pema Chodron

“How to Practice: The Way to a Meaningful Life,” The Dalai Lama

For FREE guided audio meditations, go to

<http://www.centerformsc.org/meditations> or www.marc.ucla.edu or <http://tarabrach.com/new-to-meditation.html>

More Meditation 101: <http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/the-courage-be-present/201001/how-practice-mindfulness-meditation>

*“Sitting like a mountain, let your mind rise and fly and soar.”
— Sogyal Rinpoche*

*“Generally we waste our lives, distracted from our true selves, in endless activity.
Meditation is the way to bring us back to ourselves, where we can really
experience and taste our full being.”
— Sogyal Rinpoche*

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