

Meditation: Frequently Asked Questions

When is meditation recommended? All of us need a way to unwind and find a healthy way to deal with everyday stress in our lives. Unfortunately, many of us may develop a dependency on such things as illegal drugs, alcohol, or psychotropic medications to cope with our troubles when something as simple and beneficial as meditation could help.

Meditation improves concentration, increases self-awareness and combats stress by helping us relax and cope. Meditation may even help us get along better with others. Many people who meditate improve their emotional and mental well-being and some even experience improved physical health.

There is no doubt that our mind's ability to analyze, discriminate, plan and communicate has helped us reach where we are today, but it can be a double-edged sword. The brain may help us reason, think relatively, and relate to others, however, if we don't find a way to realize the stress, it can be overwhelming. It can persecute us with fears about failure, our appearance, or the opinions others may have of us.

Meditation can bring relief from these anxieties by helping us to silence inner chatter, to recognize and dismiss negative thoughts, and to create a feeling of peace and serenity.

Is meditation only effective in reducing stress? Clinical studies regarding the effects of meditation are encouraging. Studies show there is a reduction in migraines, insomnia, irritable bowel syndrome, anxiety, panic attacks, lower levels of stress hormones, decreased blood pressure and an improvement in circulation. These studies have also shown that meditation can help control pulse, respiratory rates, and increase job satisfaction and work performance. As a result, many doctors are now beginning to recognize the therapeutic benefits of meditation. Some are even recommending meditation exercises and relaxation techniques to their patients to help treat stress-related ailments.

Part of the reason for my stress is that I have no time. How can I meditate to reduce my stress when I can't seem to fit one more thing in my schedule? Meditation is not dependent upon time availability or schedule. It is much more than simple relaxation, it is a method of controlling the mind. It starts out with a period of relaxation, then the mind is given one point of focus and concentrates on this and nothing else. Many people find this difficult to achieve initially, but can overcome it with practice. Even if practiced for a few minutes at a time, positive results can be achieved when done regularly. There are a variety of ways to meditate. Some may focus on a particular object, such as a leaf or a sound, while others use chanting, withdrawal or expansion of the senses, or contemplation of a concept (such as love). Some people may prefer using color and sound, whereas others may use fragrances. Many choose to mix different methods and approaches. It is helpful to experiment with the different types of meditation to find out what is most effective for you.

How does meditation work? Meditation helps restore balance between the left and right sides of the brain. Generally stated, the left side of the brain deals with thinking, speaking and writing. When awake and in a busy thinking state of mind, the "left" brain emits faster electrical patterns called "beta" waves. In this state, we are able to rationalize and think about the past and the future. The right side of the brain deals with intuition, imagination and feeling. When we are sensing something, the "right" brain emits "alpha" waves. In the alpha state, we are more passive and open to our feelings. When we are awake, we are usually in beta state most of the time and spend only about an hour in alpha state. Meditation helps us to restore the left and right brain balance.

What is meditation exercise? Meditation involves some simple steps and some simple planning to get started. The first step: start a journal. It is important to journal daily thoughts and feelings, and daily happenings as well as what thoughts or feelings came through after each meditation. It is important to identify the entries with day and date so emerging events are clear. Sometimes meditation brings out negative feelings and journaling helps put them into perspective by recognizing them so they can be addressed.

Try meditating every day. The more practice, the easier and more enjoyable it becomes. Time of day is not important, however, it is good to note that meditation done later in the evening will help sleep.

There is no need to focus on making sure you are in the right atmosphere to meditate. Meditation can be done inside or outside; it can incorporate music and fragrances as long as they aren't overpowering or disruptive. The primary criterion for meditation is to be comfortable.

To begin, choose a location in which you feel relaxed. As breathing is also an essential part of meditation, try to breathe more slowly and more deeply to begin the relaxation process. Deep breathing has health benefits such as oxygenating the blood, slowing the heart rate and uncluttering the mind.

Counting breaths is one of the easiest and best-known meditation exercises. Begin with deep breathing for as long as it feels comfortable. Try to develop and maintain this exercise for approximately twenty minutes.

Step one: Sit with legs crossed, eyes closed, body relaxed and breath normally for a few breaths.

Step two: Focus your attention on breathing. After each exhalation, but prior to inhalation, count silently as follows: One inhale..exhale..Two..inhale..exhale..Three.. inhale.. exhale...Four..inhale..exhale..Five..inhale..exhale. Then start again with One.

Step three: Feel the air going in and out of your lungs. Soon, your mind will begin distracting you from counting with all kinds of thoughts. Bring your focus gently back to counting. When finished, "come back" from meditation slowly and open your eyes. Journal the thoughts which distracted you from counting.

There are many different types and styles of meditation, so it is good to experiment and find which one is right for you. There are numerous meditation books available at libraries and bookstores, or online at www.meditationcenter.com , www.learningmeditation.com , and www.meditationsociety.com.

Written by: Marissa Lanning, C.T.R.S.

Reference:

Lanning, M. (April 2005). Meditation: Frequently asked questions. *Mental Health Matters*. 2(7). Gratiot Medical Center: An Affiliate of MidMichigan Health.