

Developing a Mindfulness Practice

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

— Jon Kabat-Zinn

Meditation is an active training of the mind to increase focus, awareness and insight. In meditation, you will watch the functioning of your mind in a calm, non-judgmental 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).

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. If you struggle with fears that you’re not “doing it right,” read: <http://www.mindful.org/3-ways-escape-perfect-meditator-trap/>

Some people are afraid of “being alone with my thoughts” during meditation. Well, you are alone with your thoughts without meditation, too! If uncomfortable thoughts arise, just notice them without judgment and see if you can sit with them for a bit longer. Learning to tolerate uncomfortable thoughts and emotions is a major benefit of meditation. The same with fidgeting — just see if you can sit just a bit longer. You may find that calmness is on the other side.

Benefits of mindfulness meditation*

There are now thousands of research studies proving that meditation has tremendous benefits for our emotional, cognitive and physical health. It not only creates pleasant, peaceful sensations during meditation, but actually permanently alters traits so that you can have an improved sense of wellbeing throughout your days without conscious effort.

Several studies have found physical changes in the body and brain in long-time meditators, including lower blood pressure, slowed breathing, decreased inflammatory response, and even enlarged and strengthened brain tissue! If you need more good news: Brains of long-time meditators age more slowly — they were the equivalent of 7.5 years “younger” or healthier than non-meditators. Meditation is so powerful that after only 8 weeks the density of brain tissue in parts of the brain (the cortex and hippocampus) increased.

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.

There are many other positive effects of meditation:

REDUCES ADHD, OCD, ANXIETY AND DEPRESSION: When we experience the threat emotions of anger, fear or disgust, a part of the brain called the amygdala hijacks and can even paralyze executive functioning of the brain in the prefrontal cortex (PFC). The PFC is our “thinking” brain that manages our voluntary attention and reduces distractibility. Meditation trains us to take active control of our attention, which engages the PFC and quiets the amygdala, reducing our reactive, “fight-or-flight” response to fear. Brain

scans show that meditators have a lower response to fear, because there were strong connections between the PFC and the amygdala, reducing emotional hijacking or hyper-reactivity. These changes can lead to improved symptoms with ADHD, anxiety, depression, OCD and panic attacks. 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.

IMPROVES MEMORY: By improving concentration and reducing mind-wandering, meditation then improves working memory, the holding of information to transfer into long-term memory. (Attention is crucial for working memory; if we aren't paying attention, we can't remember.) In one study, mindfulness increased performance on the graduate admissions exam (GRE) by 30 percent! In another study, after just 4 meditation sessions people had better working memory, decision-making, ability to sustain attention, and visuo-spatial processing (puzzle completion).

IMPROVED MINDFULNESS OR SELF-AWARENESS: Meditation improves mindfulness, or an awareness of how one's mind works, which can reduce emotional reactivity. Rather than just instantly get angry, for instance, one can pause, consider, then choose a response. Many relationship problems and emotional difficulties arise from reacting to emotions without thinking. 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."

Several different studies showed specific areas of the brain that enlarged in meditators, including: 1) The insula, which attunes us to our internal state and powers emotional self-awareness by enhancing attention to internal signals 2) Somatomotor areas, the main cortical hubs for sensing touch and pain, which may increase bodily awareness 3) Parts of the PFC that pay attention and improve meta-awareness 4) Regions of the cingulate cortex instrumental in self-regulation 5) Orbitofrontal cortex, which improves self-regulation.

PAIN MANAGEMENT: Meditation helps people manage pain better; studies show changes in the brain of experienced meditators where they felt the pain, but did not react emotionally to it.

BETTER STRESS MANAGEMENT: Meditators have faster recovery following a stressful event, with increased blood pressure returning to normal more quickly. They had a smaller rise in the stress hormone cortisol and perceived difficult events as less stressful.

CONTROLLED INFLAMMATORY RESPONSE: Those with trauma and adverse childhood events (ACES) tend to be chronically in the "fight-or-flight" response and, as a result, have increased inflammatory chemicals, such as cortisol and epinephrine (adrenalin), flowing through the body. After years of these elevated levels, trauma victims have higher rates of inflammatory diseases, such as cancer, heart disease, diabetes, arthritis, lupus, and thyroid diseases.

In contrast, research shows that meditators have decreased inflammatory chemicals and responses in the body. In one study, skin abrasions healed faster in meditators as a result. Cortisol was 13% lower in long-term meditators but this result even showed up after just four weeks or 30 hours of meditation. One study even showed a down-regulation in inflammatory genes in meditators, which would decrease diseases caused by chronic low-grade inflammation.

SLOWER BREATHING: Meditation can help slow the breathing, which is important because science has shown that people with problems like anxiety disorders and chronic pain breathe more quickly and less regularly than others. If you're already breathing fast, you are more likely to trigger a "fight-or-flight" response when confronting something stressful. Long-term meditators breathe more slowly — 2,000 fewer breaths per day or 800,000 fewer breaths over a lifetime.

IMPROVED COMPASSION: Meditation improves the ability to be compassionately present with others, tolerate their pain and emotional suffering, and remain calm — which is especially good for relationships and parenting! Meditators are more likely to be selflessness, and have a loving presence and engage with equanimity or impartial compassion.

Numerous different studies show meditators are more generous, ethical, self-disciplined, patient, altruistic, tolerant, composed, peaceful, diligent, wise, compassionate, and empathic. They have better clarity, focus and concentration.

**Most of the scientific studies mentioned here are reported on in the book “Altered Traits”, by Daniel Goleman & Richard J. Davison.*

Beginner’s guide to meditation

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

1. Find a place to sit quietly where you will not be interrupted.
2. Start with 5-10 minutes in the morning, adding another 5-10 minute session in the evening. The best effects seem to come if you can meditate for at least 20 minutes in one session every day. Set a timer so you don’t feel compelled 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. Try not to “think about” your breathing; just experience it without thought.
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.*** As I like to say: “When your mind wanders, that’s great! You now have the opportunity to practice mindfulness!”
6. Be kind: If you find yourself judging or doubting yourself, let go of those thoughts. Approach meditation with an attitude of unconditional curiosity and open-mindedness. Be unattached to the outcome so that you don’t strive to “do it right”. There is no “right outcome” of meditation. “Meditation practice isn’t about trying to throw ourselves away and become something better, it’s about befriending who we are.” — *Ani Pema Chodron*
7. End with thoughts of gratitude. Spend a few minutes feeling appreciative of even small aspects of your life to generate feelings of safety, soothing, and peace.
8. You may eventually want to add in thoughts of loving-kindness or “metta” in the Pali language. For example, silently repeat these phrases: “May I be safe. May I be healthy. May my life unfold with ease.” Then wish this for those you love (“May you be safe...”), then for neutral “others,” then all beings (“May we be safe...”). If you are using an app, search for “Compassion”, “LKM” or “Metta” guided practices.

9. If you struggle with anxiety or attentional problems, use a focusing meditation, such as with the focus on the breath or a mantra (“Insight” or “Vipissanna” meditations). If you are not as empathic as you’d like, start with the focusing meditation, but add in and emphasize compassion practices.
10. Regular practice has more effect. Just as exercising regularly has more effect than going to the gym once a month, daily meditation is the goal. Find the best time and place, and make it a daily practice until it becomes a habit you enjoy!

Meditation is NOT:

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

Learn More:

Article on Meditation How To’s: <http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/the-courage-be-present/201001/how-practice-mindfulness-meditation>

For FREE guided audio meditations, go to

Center for Mindful Self-Compassion: <https://centerformsc.org/practice-msc/>

UCLA Mindful Awareness Research Center: www.marc.ucla.edu

Tara Brach, Meditation Teacher: <http://tarabrach.com/new-to-meditation.html>

Chris Germer, PhD: <https://chrisgermer.com/meditations/>

Kristen Neff, PhD: <http://www.self-compassion.org/>

Center for Compassion Focused Therapy: <http://www.mindfulcompassion.com/what-we-do-1-1/>

Mindful Self-Compassion for Teens: www.mindfulselfcompassionforteens.com

Mindfulness Exercises and Resources for Children: <https://www.shambhala.com/sittingstilllikeafrog/>

BOOKS:

“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

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