

The Power of Meditation

Worry, anxiety and stress can be more than distractions. Continually replaying in your mind daily problems and fears can affect your mental and physical health.

"Meditation provides a way of quieting that chatter," says James N. Dillard, M.D., D.C., C.Ac., assistant clinical professor at Columbia University College of Physicians and Surgeons in New York City, and author of "The Chronic Pain Solution." "By bringing your focus to your breath, a mantra or a sound, you give your mind something simple to hold on to as you gradually let go of the world."



By controlling your attention as you meditate, you begin to feel more relaxed and at peace. And this peacefulness usually lasts far beyond the meditation itself, so that when stress appears hours later, you have the psychic resources to deflect it.

Meditation allows you to become more awake and more deliberate about your actions, says the Arthritis Foundation. It teaches you how to respond rather than react to situations in your life.

Although meditation sounds simple, it takes discipline to remain still in body and mind, blocking out the world around you and quieting your thoughts, the AF says. You also need to practice at least 20 minutes a day to get the most out of your meditation.

There are a number of theories about how meditation may improve physical and mental health. One hypothesis is that it reduces activity of the sympathetic nervous system, leading to a slower heart rate, lower blood pressure, slower breathing and muscle relaxation.

Various types of meditation use different techniques. Popular forms of meditation include:

- Mindfulness, which involves focusing on a physical sensation such as the breath. When thoughts intrude, you return your focus to your breathing.
- Relaxation response, which involves progressively relaxing your body and then focusing on a word or sound.
- Visualization, which involves focusing on specific places or situations.

"It's important to remember there's no 'right' way to meditate," says Randy Flora, a mind-body fitness instructor at Canyon Ranch in Tucson, Ariz. "If you get frustrated with one method, or it's just not working for you, try another technique until you find one that's helpful."

Two of the most popular meditation techniques are described below. For best results, try to meditate every day for 20 to 30 minutes.

Mindfulness meditation

In mindfulness meditation, you focus on an awareness of the present moment, the AF says. You start with a single focal point, such as your breath, and then expand to include thoughts, emotions and sensations. Here are some tips to keep in mind when you meditate.

- Find a quiet place. Sit in a chair or on the floor.
- Become aware of your breathing, focusing on the sensation of air moving in and out of your body as you breathe. Feel your belly rise and fall and the air enter your nostrils and leave your mouth.
- Watch every thought come and go. When thoughts come up, don't suppress them, but simply note them and return to your breathing.
- As the time comes to a close, sit for a minute or two, becoming aware of where you are. Get up gradually.

Relaxation response

- Sit quietly in a comfortable position or lie down on the floor and close your eyes.
- Deeply relax all your muscles, beginning at your feet and progressing up to your face. To do so, start with your toes and consciously relax them. Then relax your feet, ankles, calves, knees and so on until you reach your face. Keep everything relaxed as you go.
- Then choose a word or phrase that makes you feel peaceful.
- As you breathe in, slowly say the sound or word to yourself. Breathe slowly and naturally. Inhale through your nose and pause for a few seconds. Exhale through your mouth, again pausing for a few seconds.
- As the time comes to a close, become aware of where you are, open your eyes and get up slowly.

Moving meditation

Fitting an additional 20 to 30 minutes of meditation into your already busy day may be difficult. An alternative is to try a form of exercise that combines fitness with meditation. Yoga, for instance, focuses on breathing, movement and posture to help you relax and control stress. Tai chi is a form of meditation that combines slow, gentle movements and deep breathing. Some people do a walking meditation; with this method, you slow down your walk so that you can focus on your steps and the movement of your legs and feet.

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