

# Meditation

## Overview

Using meditation to improve your mental and physical well-being.

- What is meditation?
- What are the benefits of meditation?
- What are the risks of meditation?
- Types of meditation
- Additional resources

Many of us spend a lot of our time rushing from one activity to the next. We have so many things to *do* that we may rarely have time just to *be*, or to savor all that each moment has to offer.

Meditation is a way of slowing down and feeling calm again. It may involve deep breathing, visualization, guided thought, or all of those. Research has shown that meditation can ease everyday stress and anxiety and help you cope with medical conditions such as asthma, arthritis, and chronic pain. You can learn to meditate on your own or by taking a course and either of these approaches can increase your physical and emotional well-being and help you lead a happier, more balanced life.

## What is meditation?

Meditation is a technique that is used to calm both the mind and the body. It usually involves sitting in a quiet room with your eyes closed while taking deep breaths and becoming aware of your thoughts and the sensations in your body. You can also meditate during some activities, such as walking or swimming.

Some Eastern religions, such as Buddhism, have used meditation for thousands of years. Christianity has also used forms of meditation, including the practice of contemplative prayer used by Christian monks. In recent decades, scientists and researchers in Western countries have also begun to appreciate and study the value of meditation. It's not necessary to follow any specific spiritual beliefs to enjoy some of the benefits that can come from the practice of meditation, such as feeling calmer under pressure.

## What are the benefits of meditation?

Meditation is a useful tool for easing stress and tension. It has also been found to help people cope with emotional and physical concerns like

- mild anxiety
- mild depression
- mild panic
- headaches
- respiratory problems such as asthma and emphysema
- high blood pressure
- insomnia

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- heart disease
- chronic pain
- chronic fatigue
- arthritis
- irritable bowel syndrome
- premenstrual syndrome
- HIV infection
- skin disorders

Doctors typically recommend meditation in addition to -- not instead of -- conventional medical treatment. If you suffer from severe depression, for example, your doctor might add meditation to a course of treatment that includes medication and therapy.

For some common health problems, meditation alone may provide effective treatment. For example, in several studies, Dr. Herbert Benson of Harvard University found that practicing meditation twice a day can bring about significant reductions in blood pressure.

Regular practice of meditation can actually change the way your brain works. Studies have shown that meditation activates the nervous systems that calm the body and, over time, can change the electrical impulses in the brain, resulting in increased brain waves associated with insight, rest, and compassion.

### **What are the risks of meditation?**

Meditation usually involves few risks. Some people at first feel restless or impatient while they are trying to sit quietly. Less often, meditation may bring up distressing thoughts and mental images. Someone may suddenly become very sad or frightened. Usually this discomfort goes away quickly. But occasionally symptoms of anxiety and depression increase during meditation. If this happens, talk with your health care provider about what to do. Your doctor may recommend that you try a different technique or, at first, meditate only in classes supervised by a health care professional.

### **Types of meditation**

The main goal of meditation is to calm the mind and empty it of thoughts that create anxiety or stress. There are two main types of meditation. The first involves working to empty your mind of thoughts by focusing on your breathing or the sensations in your body. The second involves repeating a word or thought called a “mantra.” Both types of meditation usually require sitting still in a quiet room for a period of time.

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After meditation, people tend to feel calm, refreshed, and clearheaded. Sometimes the positive effects of meditation are delayed and may appear an hour or more after meditating. To get the full benefit from meditation, experts typically recommend that you set aside 15 minutes twice a day (say, in the morning and in the evening). It's usually best to avoid meditating right after you have eaten.

Following are some common forms of meditation:

#### **Transcendental Meditation (TM)<sup>TM</sup>**

Over 6 million people of all ages (including 1 million Americans) practice the technique known as TM. TM has its roots in Eastern spiritual practices, but you don't have to have any specific beliefs to do it. Its goal is to teach you how "to gain deep rest" in two 20-minute sessions a day.

To learn TM, you'll need to take a brief seven-step course that may include lectures, private instruction, and group seminars. Afterward, you can do TM on your own. TM aims to put your mind and body in a deeply relaxed state as you breathe rhythmically and concentrate on a mantra (usually a word from the ancient Sanskrit language).

#### **Progressive relaxation**

Dr. Herbert Benson, a Harvard University cardiologist, developed "progressive relaxation" about 25 years ago. Since then, many other people have picked up the phrase, though not all of them use his techniques.

Under the approach developed by Benson, you typically choose a word or phrase that fits in with your belief system, such as "peace" or "one" as a mantra. Then you try to let go of other thoughts. This technique can be combined with others, such as "progressive muscle relaxation," in which you gradually relax all your muscles as you focus on your body from your head to your toes.

#### **Mindfulness meditation**

While TM and progressive relaxation encourage you to empty your mind, mindfulness meditation aims to help you observe your inner experience. You pay attention to the moment and monitor your thoughts in a detached way, using a method developed more than 25 years ago by Dr. Jon Kabat-Zinn at the University of Massachusetts Medical School. This approach aims to help you gain inner peace by developing a greater awareness of what is happening in both your mind and your body.

More than 200 hospitals throughout the U.S. teach a form of mindfulness meditation called Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR). These hospitals

often use MBSR to help patients cope with stress, anxiety, chronic pain or illness or situational depression.

Some health insurance plans cover certain forms of meditation, such as progressive relaxation and MBSR. You may want to contact your health plan to check its provisions before choosing a meditation program or doctor.

### **Additional resources**

Here are some ways to learn more about meditation:

- *Contact local hospitals.* Many hospitals run workshops on meditation and can refer you to meditation instructors. Your health care provider may also be able to tell you how to learn meditation in your community.
- *Visit the site for the U.S. government's National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine at [www.nccam.nih.gov/health/meditation](http://www.nccam.nih.gov/health/meditation).* This site has helpful information on meditation for health purposes and related subjects.
- *Read The Relaxation Response: 25th Anniversary Edition by Herbert Benson, with Miriam Z. Klipper (Avon, 2000).* This classic guide by a doctor explains Benson's progressive relaxation techniques and how to do them on your own. You may also want to visit the site for the Benson-Henry Institute for Mind Body Medicine at [www.mbmi.org](http://www.mbmi.org), which has other material on those techniques.
- *Get in touch with a TM center in your area.* You can find one by going to [www.tm.org](http://www.tm.org) or calling 888-LEARN TM (888-532-7686).
- *If you'd like to learn how to do deep-breathing on your own, visit the site for the American Academy of Family Physicians at [www.familydoctor.org](http://www.familydoctor.org).* Search the site for "Steps to Deep Breathing," which gives five easy steps you can take to ease stress through deep breathing.

There may be other ways to learn meditation in your community and develop a greater sense of physical and emotional well-being. The program that provided this publication can help you explore the options.

This article was written with the help of Shawn Achor. Mr. Achor earned a B.A. from Harvard in religion, and a master's degree from Harvard Divinity School. He researches happiness and potential among Harvard students and travels nationwide giving lectures on positive psychology to corporations, schools, and nonprofits. He is the founder of Aspirant, which researches and trains executives on how to foster positive leadership and charisma.