



Meditation for Stress Management

What is Meditation for Stress Management?

Meditation is the focusing of attention on one thing to the exclusion of all other thoughts. Often, people are able to relieve their stress through meditation, because by focusing on only one thing, they find it very difficult, if not impossible, to worry about or be focused on anything else, such as what's causing the stress. This type of focusing is also helpful in choosing *what thoughts* to think about, as well as in gaining insight into persistent *patterns* of thinking.

The primary purpose and benefit of meditation is that it enables the user to stay focused *in this moment*. All too often we become wrapped up in thoughts, worries and concerns about the future, or replay the past by going over how things should have been or what we might have done. By spending so much of our time in the future or the past, we lose far too many of the moments in front of us *right now*. We become lost in thought and miss the highway exit; we spend hours worrying about something that never happens; we stay angry over something that happened years ago and has no bearing on our life anymore. In the process, we spend far less time focused on those things truly meaningful in our lives *right now*.

Is Meditation Widely Used?

Meditation has been used around the world for thousands of years. While it has been most commonly associated with various religious practices ranging from Zen Buddhism to Hindu, meditation's value as a powerful tool for stress reduction is rapidly increasing in the United States.

In 1968, Dr. Herbert Benson conducted detailed research at Harvard, finding that the regular and disciplined practice of meditation predictably produced the following outcomes:

- Decreased heart and breathing rates
- 20% decrease in oxygen consumption

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- Decrease in blood lactate levels, which normally rise with stress and fatigue
- Fourfold increase in skin resistance to electrical current, a sign of relaxation
- Pronounced increase in alpha brain waves, yet another sign of relaxation

Benson's research indicated that these results were obtainable by most anyone as long as four factors were present:

- A relatively quiet environment
- Something specific to focus on: one's breath, a mantra or phrase repeated over and over, silently counting, fixing one's gaze on an object
- A comfortable position – most often sitting (though meditation can also be done lying down)
- A passive, or non-striving, and non-judgmental attitude, allowing the person to let go of thoughts as they enter the mind, and repeatedly returning to the object of focus

What are the Benefits?

The obvious benefits of meditation are the physiological ones listed above: a general slowing of body functions and general reduction of stress and fatigue. But the benefits of stress reduction go far beyond simply feeling more relaxed and more focused, and have been shown to have a possibly profound effect on the body and its health as well.

By decreasing heart and respiration rates, lowering oxygen consumption and blood lactate levels, and decreasing other physiological results of stress, meditation can assist you in achieving better overall health.

Consider the following:

- Dean Ornish MD, found that through strict dieting, mild exercise and regular yoga and/or meditation, his patients were able to *reverse* the effects of heart disease, dramatically dropping cholesterol levels in the process
- Jon Kabat-Zinn PhD, working at the University of Massachusetts Medical Center, helped people with chronic pain significantly reduce both pain and stress levels
- The National Institutes of Health now recommend meditation as a first-line treatment for mild hypertension (high blood pressure)

What are the Risks?

Perhaps the biggest risk involved with meditation is expecting big and immediate results, or expecting it to replace more traditional medical treatment of medical problems. Meditation must be viewed as a *supplemental or complementary* therapy, rather than a primary treatment.

What's Involved? How Do I Do It?

It would be foolish to try to give a meditation “how to” in a brochure this size; some general descriptions and a suggested reading list follow instead.

There are many different schools of meditation, and the primary thread throughout all of them is the attempt to empty the mind of all thought by focusing on one thing – a word, an image, simply counting breaths slowly, or focusing solely on the flow of breath in and out of the body. Many forms of meditation focus on the process of breathing, especially deep, abdominal breathing.

Basic Meditation:

Basic or generic meditation is what is normally presented in most books and community or adult education courses. This method involves choosing something to focus attention on – a mantra (a word or phrase, such as ‘*Ohm*’ or ‘*peace*’); counting breaths; or fixing your gaze on an object, such as a candle, a stone or a plant, without thinking about it in words.

After assuming a comfortable posture, continue to take deep and relaxed breaths while maintaining focus by either repeating the mantra, maintaining a gaze on the object of choice, counting the breaths, or focusing on the sensations involved with breathing – how the air feels coming in the nostrils, going down the throat, expanding the lungs and belly, leaving the chest. Each time you become aware that the mind has wandered, take note of it, and gently return to the task at hand.

Relaxation Meditation:

Relaxation meditation calls for a similar level of concentration to be directed, systematically, to every major muscle group of the body, and can be done either sitting up or lying down.

Beginning with the toes, imagine and visualize the breath traveling down to the toes and then slowly returning back up and out the lungs. Allow a dozen or so breaths to slowly “massage” and relax the bottoms of the feet, the heels, the tops of the feet, the ankles, and so forth, all the way up through the face and the top of the head. When you find yourself occupied in thought, take note of it, and gently return to relaxing the body.

Staying Present Meditation:

“Staying Present” meditation can be practiced anywhere and at any time, and consists of staying *totally present* and focused with whatever everyday task is at hand. Basically this is the complete opposite of multi-tasking, and requires that you focus all your attention on and think solely about the simple task that is in front of you.

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If you are eating, become totally engrossed in the act of eating, focusing on the hand and arm movements required to bring food to your mouth; the motions and sensations which accompany chewing, the tastes of various foods; and what it feels like to swallow different foods and liquids. The same can be done with any activity, whether it's preparing a meal, doing the laundry, brushing your teeth or listening to music. The key is to deeply and continuously focus attention on the task at hand. Each time you become aware of losing focus, take note of it, and gently return to your task with renewed concentration.

Getting it Right

While the basics might be learned in minutes, meditation requires daily *practice*, just like golf, playing a musical instrument or learning a foreign language. There's no *right* way to meditate. A common mistake is being overly concerned with doing it properly, striving for immediate results, or constantly evaluating experiences as good or bad, rather than letting go and focusing closely on seeing and accepting things as they are.

It's no accident that all three of the short descriptions above *anticipate* that you will lose concentration, as it's very difficult to keep the mind empty of thought. The challenge of meditation is continuing to try. The best attitude says, "I'm going to do this every day, and whatever happens is what's supposed to happen."

Benson and others have found that as little as 20-30 minutes a day of meditation can have a positive and calming effect for most people; two sessions of that length each day are better. Any amount of time spent meditating is usually more relaxing than not meditating at all.

Is There any Research about Meditation and Spinal Cord or Brain Injury?

While there's no extensive research on meditation and brain or spinal cord injury, research on meditation contains a good deal of information on positive results and outcomes for people with various disabilities, especially in the areas of pain management and stress reduction.

How Can I Learn More?

You can learn basic techniques and principles of many different types of meditations for the price of a book or two or an educational audio or video tape. Check out your local library, community or adult education center, community colleges, or recreation or wellness centers for classes they may offer. Listed below are some books which provide good, useful information for beginners.

The most important aspect of meditation is practice and regularity. Most any method will work, but all require months of persistent practice and commitment before they can be fully effective and appreciated.

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Resources:

Borysenko, J. (2009). *Minding the Body, Mending the Mind (Audio Book)*. Your Coach In A Box Publishers.

Davis, M., Eshelman, E.R., & McKay, M. (2000) *The Relaxation and Stress Reduction Workbook*. Oakland, CA: New Harbinger.

Harp, D. (2008). *The Three Minute Meditator: 30 Simple Ways to Unwind Your Mind While Enhancing Your Emotional Intelligence*. Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications.

Kabat-Zinn, J. (1990). *Full Catastrophe Living: Using the Wisdom of Your Body and Mind to Face Stress, Pain and Illness*. New York: Dell Publishing.