

meditation: just the basics

Today, 10 million Americans—more than twice as many as a decade ago—practice some form of meditation, according to *TIME* magazine. And with contemporary medical experts claiming that regular practice of this ancient activity improves well-being and health, the trend may well continue.

Would meditation help *you*? Discover what meditation is, the benefits of doing it and a few examples of meditation styles below from Shirley Archer, JD, MA, IDEA's mind-body spokesperson, a health and wellness educator based at Stanford University School of Medicine and author of books such as *Pilates Fusion: Well-Being for Body, Mind, and Spirit*.

[1] What Is Meditation?

Meditation is an approach to training the mind. A person with an untrained mind may think the power that his thoughts and emotions wield over his life is inevitable, rather than seeing it as something that can change through meditation. Long-term meditators come to see that thoughts and emotions are drifting by, much like clouds in the sky. And little by little, as practitioners become less invested in their mindless chatter, they can live with a more open awareness of present experience. With this awareness, they tend to react less impulsively to life's pressures and are able to respond to them with greater equanimity.

[2] Benefits of Meditation

While relaxation is not the goal of meditation, it is often one result of it. Back in the 1970s, Herbert Benson, MD, a researcher at Harvard University Medical School, coined the term *the relaxation response* after conducting research on people who practiced transcendental meditation. The relaxation response, in Benson's words, is "an

opposite, involuntary response that causes a reduction in the activity of the sympathetic nervous system."

Since then, studies on the relaxation response have documented the following short-term benefits to the nervous system:

- lower blood pressure
- improved blood circulation
- lower heart rate
- less perspiration
- slower respiratory rate
- less anxiety
- lower blood cortisol levels
- feelings of well-being
- less stress
- improved deep relaxation

object of attention each time you notice your mind wandering. Rather than pursuing random thoughts, you simply let them go. Through this process, your ability to concentrate improves.

Mindfulness meditation, in contrast, encourages you to observe wandering thoughts as they drift through the mind. The intention is *not* to get involved with the thoughts or to judge them, but simply to be aware of each mental note as it arises. Through this process, you see how your thoughts and feelings tend to move in particular patterns. Over time, you become more familiar with the impermanence of emotional states and with the

observing the breath

This exercise is an excellent introduction to meditation techniques.



1. Sit or lie comfortably.
2. Close your eyes.
3. Make no effort to control the breath; simply breathe naturally.
4. Focus your attention on the breath and on how the body moves with each inhalation and exhalation. Notice the movement of your body as you breathe. Observe your chest, shoulders, rib cage and belly. Make no effort to control your breath; simply focus your attention. If your mind wanders, return your focus back to your breath. Maintain this practice for 2–3 minutes to start, and then try it for longer periods.

[3] Multiple Methods of Meditation

Many methods of meditation exist. A **concentrative practice** involves focusing on a single point. This could entail observing the breath (see sidebar), repeating a single word or *mantra*, staring at a candle flame, listening to a repetitive gong or counting beads on a rosary. Since focusing the mind is challenging, as a beginner you might meditate for only a few minutes and then work up to longer durations. In this form of meditation, you refocus your awareness on the chosen

human tendency to quickly judge experience as "good" or "bad" ("pleasant" or "unpleasant"). With practice, an inner balance develops. ■

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