

MEDITATION

*"You should meditate every day.
If you don't have time to meditate every day,
you should meditate twice a day"*
Buddhist Proverb.

Meditation offers time for relaxation and heightened awareness in a stressful world where our senses are often dulled. Research suggests that meditation has the potential for more than just temporary stress relief. Some studies show that regular meditators have lower rates of chronic disease and longer lifespan. The brain ages more slowly when you meditate.

The Amygdala is the part of the brain responsible for the "fight or flight" response. It's the "threat" center. The Amygdala gets hijacked during confrontation and the memory hierarchy gets re-shuffled to more recent types of memories. Relying on these "in the moment" may not be the most helpful when you are in a stressful situation. Meditation improves the function of the amygdala, allowing for more thoughtful reactions to things. It gives you the space to step back and then react in a more thoughtful way.

Furthermore, the parts of the brain responsible for the "ego", the Anterior Cingulate Cortex (ACC) and Fronto-Insular Cortex (FIC), shrink with meditation suggesting that meditation improves selfless behavior.

There are dozens of forms of meditation. There is a form of meditation to suit anyone, regardless of personality or lifestyle. For someone who meditates, the practice offers a chance to improve physical wellbeing, as well as emotional health. There is no "right way" to meditate, meaning people can explore the different types until they find one that works for them. All forms have been shown to be beneficial. You can even practice many different forms. The best one for you is the one you enjoy and will do regularly. That's the key.

Fast facts on types of meditation:

- Within each type of meditation, there are several subtypes to discover and practice.
- Meditation teachers have different ideas about how frequently a person should meditate.
- It is fine to blend types or to test different approaches until the right one is found. It's normal for your mind to wander. It's what it does! During meditation, the mind wanders at least 50% of the time. It decreases with practice but mind-wandering is always present.

What is the best type of meditation? It's the one you like the most and are going to do regularly. The following seven examples are some of the best-known ways to meditate:

1. LOVING-KINDNESS MEDITATION

Also known as [Metta meditation](#), the goal of loving-kindness meditation is to cultivate an attitude of love and kindness toward everyone and everything, even a person's enemies and sources of stress. While breathing deeply, practitioners open their minds to receiving loving kindness. They then send messages of loving kindness to the world, to specific people, or to their loved ones.

In most forms of this meditation, the key is to repeat the message (mantra) many times, until the practitioner feels an attitude of loving kindness. This form of meditation is designed to promote feelings of compassion and love, both for others and oneself. It can help those affected by:

- anger
- frustration
- resentment
- interpersonal conflict

This type of meditation may increase positive emotions and has been linked to reduced depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress (PTSD).

Although there are many mantras which can be repeated, a typical one is:

May I be HAPPY.

May I be HEALTHY.

May I be at PEACE.

In the spirit of sharing the good feelings, the mantra can progress to replace the "I" with "YOU", thinking about a specific individual and then to "EVERYONE", sharing the good vibrations and emotions with everyone and everything in the world.

2. BODY SCAN OR PROGRESSIVE RELAXATION

Sometimes called body scan meditation, this practice encourages people to scan their bodies for areas of tension. The goal is to notice tension and to allow it to release. During a progressive relaxation session, practitioners start at one end of their body, usually their feet, and work through the whole. Some forms of progressive relaxation require people to tense and then relax muscles. Others encourage a person to visualize a wave, drifting over their body to release tension.

Progressive relaxation can help to promote generalized feelings of calmness and relaxation. It may also help with chronic pain. Because it slowly and steadily relaxes the body, some people use this form of meditation to help them sleep.

3. MINDFULNESS MEDITATION

Mindfulness is a form of meditation that encourages practitioners to remain aware and present in the moment. Rather than dwelling on the past or dreading the future, mindfulness encourages awareness of a person's existing surroundings. Crucial to this is a lack of judgment. Rather than reflecting on the annoyance of a long wait, a practitioner will simply note the wait without judgment.

Mindfulness meditation can be practiced anywhere. While waiting in line at the grocery store, for example, a person might calmly notice their surroundings, including the sights, sounds, and smells they experience. A form of mindfulness is involved in most kinds of meditation. Breath awareness encourages practitioners to be aware of their breathing, while progressive relaxation draws attention to areas of tension in the body. Because mindfulness is a theme common to many forms of meditation, it has been extensively studied.

[Research has found](#) that mindfulness can:

- reduce fixation on negative emotions

- improve focus
- improve memory
- lessen impulsive, emotional reactions
- improve relationship satisfaction

Some evidence suggests mindfulness may improve health. [For example](#), a study of African-American men with chronic kidney disease found that mindfulness meditation could lower blood pressure.

4. BREATH AWARENESS MEDITATION

Breath awareness is a type of mindful meditation that encourages mindful breathing. Practitioners breathe slowly and deeply, counting their breaths or otherwise focusing on their breaths. The goal is to [focus only on breathing](#) and to ignore other thoughts that enter the mind. As a form of mindfulness meditation, breath awareness offers many of the same benefits as mindfulness. Those include reduced anxiety, improved concentration, and greater emotional flexibility.

Often, meditation regardless of the form, starts with taking a few mindful breaths, keeping the exhalation longer than the inhalation. This stimulates the *parasympathetic*, or “rest and digest” nervous system as opposed to the *sympathetic*, or “fight or flight” nervous system.

5. KUNDALINI YOGA

[Kundalini yoga](#) is a physically active form of meditation that blends movements with deep breathing and mantras. People usually learn from a teacher or do a class. However, someone can learn the poses and mantras at home. Similar to other forms of yoga, kundalini yoga can improve physical strength and reduce pain. It may also improve mental health by reducing anxiety and depression. A 2008 study of veterans with chronic low-back pain, for instance, found that yoga reduced pain, increased energy, and improved overall mental health.

6. ZEN MEDITATION

Sometimes called Zazen, Zen is a form of meditation that can be part of Buddhist practice. Many Zen practitioners study under a teacher because this kind of meditation involves specific steps and postures. The goal is to find a comfortable position, focus on breathing, and mindfully observe one's thoughts without judgment. Again, this form of meditation is similar to mindfulness meditation but requires more discipline and practice.

7. TRANSCENDENTAL MEDITATION

Transcendental Meditation is a spiritual form of meditation where practitioners remain seated and breathe slowly. The goal is to “transcend” or rise above the person's current state of being. During a meditation session, practitioners focus on a mantra or a repeated word or series of words. A [teacher determines the mantra](#) based on a complex set of factors. An alternative allows people to choose their mantra. This more contemporary version is not technically Transcendental Meditation, though it may look substantially similar. A practitioner might decide to repeat “I am not afraid of public speaking” while meditating. Traditional TM mantras are a single word without meaning. Words with meaning can actually create, rather than filter out extraneous thoughts. People who practice Transcendental Meditation report both spiritual experiences and heightened mindfulness.

How long does it take to work?

The various meditative disciplines encourage a focus on heightened awareness, slower breathing, and increased acceptance. Meditation is not a results-focused undertaking. Indeed, fixating too much on the results can provoke anxiety that undermines the benefits of meditation. Studies of meditation typically follow practitioners for weeks or months, not years. Many meditation practitioners report an immediate improvement following a meditation session, even with beginners. During meditation, it is common to feel less stressed, more accepting, and at greater peace. Over time and with practice, these sensations may continue outside of meditation sessions.

Choosing to meditate at the same time each day will help make meditating become a daily habit however, again, there is no definitive “right” time or frequency. Any meditation is better than no meditation. So, if a person is only able to meditate once a week, this should not be a barrier to trying out the therapy. Consider starting with a few sessions per week, working up to one session per day. Meditating around the same time each day can make meditation a habit that is easy to incorporate into daily life. If meditation is helpful, it may be beneficial to increase the frequency to twice or more per day or to use it to reduce stress whenever needed.

TIPS FOR BETTER MEDITATION

Those new to meditation may find it beneficial to enroll in a meditation class. Meditation is a process-oriented undertaking that focuses on the moment, not on the results. Enjoying the moment is key to successful meditation. An individual should not judge whether the meditation session is good or bad, right or wrong. Instead, they should simply remain in that moment. Meditation is a skill that takes time to master. Some people feel frustrated and even angry when they first attempt to meditate. Remaining present in the current moment can be challenging, as can focusing on a single mantra without getting distracted. As mentioned above, most of the time, random thoughts come and go but do decrease with practice. Whatever their immediate reaction, a person should persist with their meditation practice. Key is to accept the thoughts that appear without judgment or anger. Some novices may benefit from enrolling in a class or having the support of a teacher.