

# THE BENEFITS OF MEDITATION



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## Meditation: A Simple Fast Way to Reduce Stress

Meditation can wipe away the day's stress, bringing with inner peace. If stress has you anxious, tense and worried, consider trying meditation. Spending even a few minutes in meditation can restore your calm and inner peace.

Anyone can practice meditation. It's simple and inexpensive, and it doesn't require any special equipment. And you can practice meditation wherever you are - whether you're out for a walk, riding the bus, waiting at the doctor's office or even in the middle of a difficult business meeting.

## Understanding Meditation

Meditation has been practiced for thousands of years. Meditation originally was meant to help deepen understanding of the sacred and mystical forces of life. These days, meditation is commonly used for relaxation and stress reduction.

Meditation is considered a type of mind-body complementary medicine. Meditation produces a deep state of relaxation and a tranquil mind. During meditation, you focus your attention and eliminate the stream of jumbled thoughts that may be crowding your mind and causing stress. This process results in enhanced physical and emotional well-being.

Meditation can give you a sense of calm, peace and balance that benefits both your emotional well-being and your overall health. And these benefits don't end when your meditation session ends. Meditation can help carry you more calmly through your day and can even improve certain medical conditions.

## Meditation and Emotional Well-being

When you meditate, you clear away the information overload that builds up every day and contributes to your stress.

The emotional benefits of meditation include:

1. Gaining a new perspective on stressful situations
2. Building skills to manage your stress
3. Increasing self-awareness
4. Focusing on the present
5. Reducing negative emotions

## Meditation and Illness

Meditation also might be useful if you have a medical condition, especially one that may be worsened by stress, for example such conditions as:

1. Allergies
2. Anxiety disorders
3. Asthma
4. Binge eating
5. Cancer
6. Depression
7. Fatigue
8. Heart disease
9. High blood pressure
10. Pain
11. Sleep problems
12. Substance abuse

Be sure to talk to your health care provider about the pros and cons of using meditation if you have any of these conditions or other health problems. In some rare cases, meditation can worsen symptoms associated with certain mental health conditions. Meditation isn't a replacement for traditional medical treatment. But it may be a useful addition to your other treatment.

## Types of Meditation

Meditation is an umbrella term for the many ways to a relaxed state of being. There are many types of meditation and relaxation techniques that have meditation components. All share the same goal of achieving inner peace.

Ways to meditate can include:

1. **Guided meditation.** Sometimes called guided imagery or visualization, with this method of meditation you form mental images of places or situations you find relaxing. You try to use as many senses as possible, such as smells, sights, sounds and textures. You may be led through this process by a guide or teacher.
2. **Mantra meditation.** In this type of meditation, you silently repeat a calming word, thought or phrase to prevent distracting thoughts.
3. **Mindfulness meditation.** This type of meditation is based on being mindful or having an increased awareness and acceptance of living in the present moment. You broaden your conscious awareness. You focus on what you experience during meditation, such as the flow of your breath. You can observe your thoughts and emotions but let them pass without judgment.

Special kinds of meditation include:

1. **Qi gong**. This practice generally combines meditation, relaxation, physical movement and breathing exercises to restore and maintain balance. Qi gong (CHEE-gung) is part of traditional Chinese medicine.
2. **Tai chi**. This is a form of gentle Chinese martial arts. In tai chi (TIE-chee), you perform a self-paced series of postures or movements in a slow, graceful manner while practicing deep breathing.
3. **Transcendental meditation**. You use a mantra, such as a word, sound or phrase repeatedly silently, to narrow your conscious awareness and eliminate all thoughts from your mind. You focus exclusively on your mantra to achieve a state of perfect stillness and consciousness.
4. **Yoga**. You perform a series of postures and controlled breathing exercises to promote a more flexible body and a calm mind. As you move through poses that require balance and concentration, you're encouraged to focus less on your busy day and more on the moment.

### Elements of Meditation

Different types of meditation may include different features to help you meditate. These may vary depending on whose guidance you follow or who's teaching a class.

Some of the most common features in meditation include:

1. **Focused attention**. Focusing your attention is generally one of the most important elements of meditation. Focusing your attention is what helps free your mind from the many distractions that cause stress and worry. You can focus your attention on such things as a specific object, an image, a mantra, or even your breathing.
2. **Relaxed breathing**. This technique involves deep, even-paced breathing using the diaphragm muscle to expand your lungs. The purpose is to slow your breathing, take in more oxygen, and reduce the use of shoulder, neck and upper chest muscles while breathing so that you breathe more efficiently.
3. **A quiet setting**. If you're a beginner, practicing meditation may be easier if you're in a quiet spot with few distractions - no television, radios or cell phones. As you get more skilled at meditation, you may be able to do it anywhere, especially in high-stress situations where you benefit the most from meditation, such as a traffic jam, a stressful work meeting or a long line at the grocery store.
4. **A comfortable position**. You can practice meditation whether you're sitting, lying down, walking or in other positions or activities. Just try to be comfortable so that you can get the most out of your meditation.

## Everyday Ways to Practice Meditation

Don't let the thought of meditating the "right" way add to your stress. Sure, you can attend special meditation centres or group classes led by trained instructors. But you also can practice meditation easily on your own.

Here are some ways you can practice meditation on your own, whenever you choose:

1. **Breathe deeply.** This technique is good for beginners because breathing is a natural function. Focus all attention on your breathing. Concentrate on feeling and listening as you inhale and exhale through your nostrils. Breathe deeply and slowly. When your attention wanders, gently return your focus to your breathing.
2. **Scan your body.** When using this technique, focus attention on different parts of your body. Become aware of your body's various sensations, whether that's pain, tension, warmth or relaxation. Combine body scanning with breathing exercises and imagine breathing heat or relaxation into and out of different parts of your body.
3. **Repeat a mantra.** You can create your own mantra, whether it's religious or secular. Examples of religious mantras include the Jesus Prayer in the Christian tradition, the holy name of God in Judaism, or the om mantra of Hinduism, Buddhism and other Eastern religions.
4. **Walk and meditate.** Combining a walk with meditation is an efficient and healthy way to relax. You can use this technique anywhere you're walking - in a tranquil forest, on a city sidewalk or at the mall. When you use this method, slow down the pace of walking so that you can focus on each movement of your legs or feet. Don't focus on a particular destination. Concentrate on your legs and feet, repeating action words in your mind such as lifting, moving and placing as you lift each foot, move your leg forward and place your foot on the ground.
5. **Engage in prayer.** Prayer is the best known and most widely practiced example of meditation. Spoken and written prayers are found in most faith traditions. You can pray using your own words or read prayers written by others. Check the self-help or 12-step-recovery section of your local bookstore for examples. Talk with your rabbi, priest, pastor or other spiritual leader about resources.
6. **Read and reflect.** Many people report that they benefit from reading poems or sacred texts and taking a few moments to quietly reflect on their meaning. You also can listen to sacred music, spoken words or any music you find relaxing or inspiring. You may want to write your reflections in a journal or discuss them with a friend or spiritual leader.
7. **Focus your love and gratitude.** In this type of meditation, you focus your attention on a sacred object or being, weaving feelings of love and gratitude into your thoughts. You can also close your eyes and use your imagination or gaze at representations of the object.

## Building Your Meditation Skills

Don't judge your meditation skills, which may only increase your stress. Meditation takes practice. Keep in mind, for instance, that it's common for your mind to wander during meditation, no matter how long you've been practicing meditation. If you're meditating to calm your mind and your attention wanders, slowly return to the object, sensation or movement you're focusing on.

Experiment, and you'll likely find out what types of meditation work best for you and what you enjoy doing. Adapt meditation to your needs at the moment. Remember, there's no right way or wrong way to meditate. What matters is that meditation helps you with stress reduction and feeling better overall.

## Research Suggests Meditation Increases Gray Matter

### Want a bigger brain? Meditate!

Michael J. Formica, MS, MA, Ed.M. in *Enlightened Living*, says if you are a meditator, you are likely familiar with the more obvious benefits of practice, which include a reduction in stress, greater concentration and a lowered tendency toward immediate and excessive emotional dysregulation. Recent research suggests that, in addition to the anecdotal psycho-social benefits evidenced by a regular meditation practice, there is some empirical indication that meditation may contribute to a measurable differentiation between the brains of meditators and those of non-meditators.

A study published in *Neuroimage* presents findings by a group of researchers at UCLA who used high-resolution magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) to scan the brains of meditators. The researchers report having found differences between the scans, showing that certain brain areas of the long-term meditator group were larger than those of the non-meditating control group. Meditators displayed a significantly larger volume of hippocampal tissue, as well as a similarly increased volume of tissue in the orbito-frontal cortex, the thalamus and the inferior temporal gyrus. All of these areas are recognized as playing a role in emotional regulation.

## The Benefits of Meditation

The brain waves of meditators show why they're healthier. Neuroscientists have found that meditators shift their brain activity to different areas of the cortex - brain waves in the stress prone right frontal cortex move to the calmer left frontal cortex. This mental shift decreases the negative effects of stress, mild depression and anxiety.

There is also less activity in the amygdala, where the brain processes fear. In other words, they were calmer and happier than before.

Dr. Jon Kabat-Zinn developed the Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) program at the University of Massachusetts Medical Centre. Since its inception, MBSR has evolved into a common form of complementary medicine addressing a variety of health problems. The National Institutes of Health's National Centre for Complementary and Alternative Medicine has provided a number of grants to research the efficacy of the MBSR program in promoting healing. Completed studies have found that pain-related drug utilization was decreased, and activity levels and feelings of self-esteem increased, for a majority of participants.

### Six Other Reasons to Meditate

Linda Wasmer Andrews in *Minding the Body* reports on six other benefits of meditation, besides relaxing.

- **To Enhance Concentration**

Meditation has an undeserved reputation for being esoteric and difficult to learn. In truth, it's really nothing more than the practice of focusing the mind intently on a particular thing or activity. It seems logical that regular meditation would hone a person's powers of concentration, and a recent study in the *Journal of Neuroscience* found just that. In the study, three months of intensive meditation training led to improvements in attentional stability – the ability to sustain attention without frequent lapses.

- **To Lower Blood Pressure**

Research suggests that meditation may help lower blood pressure. In a study published in the *American Journal of Hypertension*, 298 college students were randomly assigned to either a Transcendental Meditation (TM) group or a waiting list (control) group. The study found that TM helped the students decrease psychological distress and increase coping ability. More interestingly, in a subgroup of students at risk for high blood pressure later in life, these changes were associated with a reduction in blood pressure. That's heartening news, because young adults with even slight elevations in blood pressure have a three times greater risk of developing full-blown high blood pressure within the next 30 years.

- **To Manage Pain**

One of the best-studied medical uses of meditation is for helping manage chronic pain. The form of meditation often employed for this purpose is mindfulness meditation, which involves fully focusing on whatever is being experienced from moment to moment. The idea is to take note of the here-and-now experience without judging or reacting to it.

For chronic pain sufferers, mindfulness may help them notice and accept their pain without becoming anxious and panicky, which just makes the pain worse. However, a study from the University of Montreal suggests that long-term practice of mindfulness meditation may also lead to physical changes in the brain that directly affect pain perception. The study matched 17 expert meditators with non-meditators of the same age and gender. Structural MRI brain scans showed that the meditators had a thicker cortex in certain pain-related areas of the brain. This cortical thickening was associated with lower pain sensitivity.

### How Meditation Changes Pain

Meditators process pain differently than non-meditators. The biggest difference? Meditators pay more attention to the direct sensation of pain. In laboratory studies that deliver painful stimulation, meditators' brains show more activity in areas associated with sensory processing (think: ankle throbbing!).

Non-meditators, on the other hand, showing more activity in areas associated with evaluation and language. It's the inner dialogue of "Holy \$!%@ that hurts! I'm such a klutz! This stinks! When is it going to stop?" Interestingly, the more a meditator's brain focuses on the pain experience, and the less activity in the evaluation system, the higher their pain tolerance. It's what we hear all the time from our wisest meditation teachers: Focus on the sensations, drop the story. It's the story that turns pain into suffering.

- ### To Improve Sleep

Research indicates that meditation may help fight insomnia. In a study from India's National Institute of Mental Health and Neurosciences, researchers looked at how sleep was affected by Vipassana meditation. This form of meditation involves focusing the mind on mental and physical processes in order to develop insight. The study included 105 healthy men between the ages of 30 and 60. Half were experienced Vipassana meditators, and half had no experience with any type of meditation. The meditators showed enhanced slow wave (deep) sleep and REM sleep across all age groups. In contrast, the non-meditators showed a pronounced decline in slow wave sleep with age, a sign of declining sleep quality in the older men.

- ### To Live Longer

Meditation may influence not only quality of life, but also quantity. Three converging lines of research explain why. One, meditation may help counter the body's stress response and all the physical wear and tear that goes along with chronic stress.



Two, meditation may help slow aging by decreasing oxidative stress - cellular damage caused by highly reactive molecules known as free radicals. Several studies have linked meditation to reductions in various measures of oxidative stress. There is also evidence of enhanced activity by antioxidants - molecules that defend the body against free radicals - during meditation. Three, meditation may help fight chronic inflammation throughout the body, which contributes to diseases as diverse as obesity, atherosclerosis, diabetes, cancer and Alzheimer's disease. Research indicates that meditation can dampen several inflammatory processes.

- **To Connect with Others**

Meditation might seem like the ultimate in self-absorption. But at least one form of meditation, known as loving-kindness meditation, also seems to help build a sense of social connectedness. In loving-kindness meditation, the mind is sharply focused on compassionate feelings and well wishes that are directed toward real or imagined others. A study in the journal *Emotion* found that just a few minutes of this form of meditation practice increased positive, connected feelings toward strangers.

### Rewire Your Brain for Love

Published on January 27, 2010, Marsha Lucas, Ph.D., in *Rewire Your Brain for Love*, says, "In my work as a psychologist, I see a lot of very bright, insightful people who still struggle with relationships, and when I suggest that they start practicing mindfulness meditation, they want to know why and how sitting and meditating can help their love lives. They may know that they "should" meditate because it's good for them, but how is it going to make things better between them and their [fill in the blank: Wife/Husband/Boyfriend/Girlfriend/Partner...]?"

Here are three of the many reasons, with some examples we can all relate to.

1. **A Date with Love.** When you're less stressed, your nervous system is less likely to overreact, less likely to be hypervigilant to potential "threats." You're less defensive, and better able to hear and respond to what's actually going on. As Jon Kabat-Zinn says, mindfulness leads people to be better at approaching stressful events as a challenge, rather than a threat.

Under threat, we're geared to quickly - and without much thinking - fight, flee, or freeze. With challenge, we see an increase in the brain's ability to pull ideas together and come up with informed, balanced solutions.

So, what does this do for improving relationships? Imagine that your brain is stressed out over deadlines at work. You're already late for your date with your girlfriend. Your body, thanks to the brain's messages that things are dangerous, is tight, prepared to fight, flee, or freeze, and in a magnificent feedback loop, your brain gets the body's tightness as a message to keep on the lookout for trouble.

*You walk into the restaurant for your date, aware that you're late, and you see a look of annoyance on her face - which your brain detects as an additional stressor-threat. Your girlfriend sees the body language of your stress even before you get to the table, and her fight/flight/flee response gets further ratcheted up. Add in the restaurant noise she's been sitting with, the problems she had finding a parking spot to meet you close to your office, and the fact that you're both hungry.*

In the bad date scenario above, we've got an overabundance of stress hormones raging through both bodies, tight muscles ready to react - basically, two hungry people with hypervigilant "danger detectors" in their brains chomping at the bit to help them rapidly and decisively defend themselves. And neither one of them is able to readily access perceiving any of this as a challenge, rather than a threat. How well do you think the date is going to go?

Now imagine that at least one of them practices mindfulness meditation regularly. At the very least, if all we're looking at is the benefit of overall decreased stress and an ability to recognize, let go of, and recover from stress more easily, we can see how much better the evening is going to be.

There's so much more to mindfulness meditation than stress reduction, though. Let's take a look at two other ways that mindfulness meditation gives your relationship a boost.

2. **Mind the Gap.** Research on the effects of mindfulness meditation on the brain is increasingly showing that there is a beefing up (in activation and even in size) of the middle prefrontal cortex (mPFC). The mPFC is an area which neuroscientists believe plays an important role in integrating our higher, "intellectual" brain areas (for example, your frontal cortex) with those down below in our more raw, "emotional" areas (like your amygdala).

Having a more formidable mPFC allows your brain to bridge the gap, as it were, between your "thinking" and your "feeling" areas. Your brain can better integrate what's going on in your "emotional" brain areas and your "intellectual" brain areas.

Here's an example of relationship argument, with emotions and intellect banging into one another instead of being integrated - as you read it, see how this plays out in each individual, as well as in the couple:

*A wife comes home, somewhat exasperated after being out with a good friend, but one who can be self-involved at times. "She did it again!" she exclaims to her husband. "Jane managed to make the whole evening about her!"*

*Afraid of losing a friend, and also tired, she begins to cry, bemoaning how hard it is to make friends, how alone she feels, and wondering what's wrong with her that she can't figure it out.*

*Her husband sees her distress and wants to scramble to respond, to help her "fix" the problem. So, he tells her, "First, you need to stop beating up on yourself. Jane's the problem, not you. I don't know why you stay friends with her, anyway; you're always upset after seeing her. Just go out and make some new friends who treat you better. Weren't you going to join that book club to meet new friends?"*

*She proceeds to lash out at her husband for being insensitive and overly intellectual and accuses him of not caring. He's hurt and angry that his attempt to help her solve the problem has gotten her angry at him - again - and he responds by yelling at her "Of course I care!" and that she's too emotional and can't think straight enough to remember that.*

Here, the wife came in the door with a flailing amygdala, almost pure, raw emotion. The husband responded with a rational frontal cortex, trying to help while also trying to avoid or staunch the emotions. The result is that they've completely missed each other.

Imagine if they could integrate the two: Being tuned in to the emotions, but not overwhelmed by them; searching for a calmer, rational response, without losing sight of the emotions. That integration and connection is what mindfulness meditation helps cultivate and grow, quite literally, in the brain - as well as between couples.

"Minding the gap" - shorthand for practicing mindfulness in order to bridge that gap between thinking and feeling - helps protect you from the dangers of having either your emotions or your intellect become a runaway horse, dragging your partner and your relationship in the dirt behind you.

3. **"Getting" Your Partner Better.** As you practice mindfulness meditation, you're practicing over and over again, the act of noticing when your mind has wandered off. (By the way, if you think your brain is too busy for you to meditate - think again (pun intended).

Being more aware of when your mind isn't "in the moment" lets you become more aware of what *is* going on in the moment. You get more attuned to what's going on inside you, instead of being on "autopilot" or in distracted-reactive mode. You also become more aware that even if you're feeling something in this moment, it'll feel a little different if you just sit with it a bit. Your emotions aren't bags of wet concrete sitting on your head (or in your heart); they're more like weather patterns moving through.

Getting to be more aware of your internal state allows you to be more attuned to yourself and your experiences - allows you to have greater understanding and empathy for yourself. (If a baby is upset and crying, the caregiver needs to "tune in" and empathize in order to effectively understand what's going on, and how best to respond - in effect, you're doing this for yourself when you practice mindfulness.)

As you increase your ability to be more attuned and more empathic with yourself, your capacity to be attuned and empathic with your partner increases as well.

### The Depression Revolution

Neurobiological views shed light on depression. Parts of the brain that connect to the body's stress system show that depression is physiological as well as emotional. Hare Estroff Marano says that the view of depression emerging from neurobiology labs is radically different from the conventional wisdom on several counts.

First, it overturns the widespread belief that depression is "just" a chemical imbalance. Yes, neurotransmitters like serotonin function abnormally in depression - but so do lots of other things. Second, it challenges the view that this is a disorder "merely" from the neck up. Depression affects the heart and the bones, too. And the body's stress system.

Third, it presents a picture of the brain that is startling even to those whose job is to track its operations (scrap the idea of a little computer with fixed circuitry toiling away inside your head; your brain is reconfiguring itself this very instant). The evidence that the adult brain is much more plastic than anyone recognized that experience and environment change the brain circuitry underlying emotion, is still, as Rockefeller University neurobiologist Bruce McEwen says, taking scientists by surprise.

The surprise is not just kicking off a revolution in our understanding of depression. It will force a revised view of all of human behaviour and the capacity for change.

This emerging revolution in understanding depression comes courtesy of refinements in brain imaging techniques - higher resolution in PET scans and magnetic resonance images. "The idea that there is a global derangement of the serotonin or norepinephrine system is not sustainable in light of the recent brain imaging data," the University of Wisconsin's imager-in-chief Richard Davidson reports. "What distinguishes depressed from nondepressed individuals are patterns of regional brain function, differences in specific circuits."

The psychological operations we've always thought of as mental are now traceable biologically to circuits - the brain's wiring and firing patterns - and to molecular mechanics inside brain cells. It's fairly obvious that this knowledge should lead to whole platoons of antidepressant drugs that take new and improved biological tacks to the disorder.

Less obvious may be that the new biology of depression also makes a strong case for nondrug therapies. "Nonpharmacological treatments may exert quite specific biological effects in being able to affect certain select brain regions," Davidson points out. "The deficit in activation of the prefrontal cortex that we and others have identified in depression may be something that can be changed with cognitive therapy." It may also be changed with meditation.

Eileen Luders, principal author of the study and post-doctoral fellow at the UCLA Laboratory of Neuro Imaging stated, "We know that people who consistently meditate have a singular ability to cultivate positive emotions, retain emotional stability, and [to] engage in mindful behaviour," adding, "The observed differences in brain anatomy might give us a clue [as to] why meditators have these exceptional abilities."

Previous research has posited the beneficial aspects of meditation, suggesting that people who meditate regularly enjoy better cognitive focus and control over their emotions, as well as displaying reduced levels of stress and bolstered immune systems. Until recently, much less was known about the link between the practice of meditation and actual brain structure.

In this study, Luders, et. al. looked at individuals who had been practicing various forms of meditation, including, among others, Zen, Transcendental and Vipassana (N=22), for terms ranging from five to 46 years (Mean=24). More than half of these reported deep concentration as an essential part of their practice, with most sitting anywhere from 10 to 90 minutes daily. These trial subjects were balanced against a control group of non-meditators (N=22).

Employing a high-resolution, three-dimensional form of MRI, researchers were able to measure differences in brain structure from two different perspectives; dividing the brain into several regions of interest, which allowed a size comparison between various brain structures, and segmenting the brain into different tissue types, allowing a comparison of grey matter volume and density within specific regions of the brain.

The researchers found significantly more developed cortical areas in the brains of meditators, as compared to those of control subjects. These findings included a larger volume of tissue in the right hippocampus, as well as increased grey matter in the right orbito-frontal cortex, the right thalamus and the left inferior temporal lobe. Within the control group, regions displaying significantly larger tissue volume than is typical were not found.

### Wired for Success

In *Wired for Success* (2010) Ray Williams says the role of a leader in organizations is one of constant pressure to perform and stress to solve problems. Leaders need to be at the top of their game to be alert and productive at all times. Unfortunately, far too many leaders use adrenalin-type of strategies to do so, such as caffeine, long working hours and poor nutrition. Certainly, the notion of slowing down and being in a peaceful state isn't commonly seen as an effective leadership strategy. Yet recent brain research shows that meditation can actually improve performance.

A study at American University and published in a special issue of *Cognitive Processing*, dedicated to meditation and consciousness in February 2010, concluded that meditation, carried out effectively, produced a unique state of "restful alertness," as seen in the markedly higher alpha power in the frontal cortex and lower beta and gamma waves in the same area.

The study also showed that meditation produced greater alpha wave coherence between the left and right hemispheres of the brain, showing that the brain's functioning actually improved. Finally, the study described how meditation enhanced an individual's sense of "self" by activating what neuroscientists call the "default node network" in the brain, the natural ground state of the brain that exists when you close your eyes but is much more enhanced during meditation.

### Meditation and the False Lure of Zoning Out

Marsha Lucas explains why meditation does not make you a self-involved, zoned-out bliss ninny. People sometimes ask, "Why are you encouraging people to zone out? Sitting around pretending they're above it all, and avoiding real feelings? Who wants to be in a relationship with a self-involved bliss-ninny?"

There are an awful lot of misconceptions about mindfulness meditation. This one, about how people who meditate are just using it as a place to "hide out" by just getting zoned, escaping into some blissed-out, checked-out place, is why a lot of people mistakenly decide that meditation is useless, or worse.

There are some merits to asking the question, though, because it's true that some people who meditate use it in ways which aren't beneficial, sometimes making them pretty obnoxious to spend time with.

Is it possible for people to hide out in meditation? Yes. People who "use" meditation to escape, just like using drugs or alcohol to escape, can closely resemble the "kindly, calm pod person" that Judith Warner wrote about in a *New York Times* blog post. The added "benefit" of using meditation as your drug of choice is that, unlike zoning out on alcohol or drugs (or TV, surfing the web, and so on), you can also adopt a "more enlightened than thou" stance that some meditators have been known to take, much to the annoyance of those around them.

Even Jack Kornfield, PhD, one of the pioneers and great teachers in the use of mindfulness meditation in the West (and also a psychologist), points out that "meditation and spiritual practice can easily be used to suppress and avoid feeling or to escape from difficult areas of our lives." He goes on to say that "the sitting practice itself... often provide[s] a way to hide, a way to actually separate the mind from difficult areas of heart and body."

### "The People I Know Who Meditate Just Ended Up Being More Self-Involved."

This can happen, too. In one variation of this, sometimes people who meditate profess that their practice is making them "more present" when in fact they're just more self-involved. Judith Warner again:

People who are embarked on this particular 'journey of self-exploration,' as Mary Pipher has called it, tend to want to talk, or write, about it. A lot. But what they don't realize – because they're so in the moment, caught in the wonder and fascination and totality of their self-experience - is that their stories are like dream sequences in movies, or college students' journal entries, or the excited accounts your children bring you of absolutely hilarious moments in cartoons - you really do have to be the one who's been there to tolerate it. For the truth is, however, admirable mindfulness may be, however much peace, grounding, stability and self-acceptance it can bring, as an experience to be shared, it's stultifying and boring.

What she's describing (okay, complaining about) is not "real" mindfulness, though.

Mindfulness isn't about droning on and on about your own inner exploration, ignoring the feelings of others (or your own), or gushing your newfound love for all of humanity. Mindfulness is about developing a larger capacity in yourself for empathic, attuned, contingent connection.

That last sentence is vital: *Mindfulness is about developing a larger capacity in yourself for empathic, attuned, contingent connection.*

- **empathic** = being able to see things from another's point of view, getting a sense of their intentions, and being able to imagine what something "means" to another person
- **attuned** = allowing our internal state to resonate with the inner world of another, to "get" someone else's inner state, allowing us to feel connected
- **contingent** = responding to another in a way which is informed by what we sense in them, not just what we think or feel

A thumbnail sketch of what this looks like: You talk to me, and I listen with an open heart and an open mind, tuned in to you while also being aware of my own internal state. And my response to you, if I'm being mindful, is contingent on what you're saying and feeling and communicating - not just my own internal experience. When I talk, I'm speaking with mindful awareness of my internal state as well as being attuned to you, and I pay attention to shifts in myself and in you while I speak, to be able to remain connected, attuned and empathic.

That would be a far cry from being self-involved.

### "Seems to Me That People Who Meditate Aren't Dealing with Their Real Problems."

It's also true that many who meditate may need additional help. As Jack Kornfield put it in his essay, "*Even the Best Meditators Have Old Wounds to Heal*":

There are many areas of growth (grief and other unfinished business, communication and maturing of relationships, sexuality and intimacy, career and work issues, certain fears and phobias, early wounds, and more) where good Western therapy is on the whole much quicker and more successful than meditation.... Meditation can help in these areas. But if, after sitting for a while, you discover that you still have work to do, find a good therapist or some other way to effectively address these issues.

Jack, in his honest wisdom, goes on to say that many American Vipassana (mindfulness meditation) teachers who have gotten stuck in disconnection, fear, or other unconscious places, have sought out psychotherapy.



(As a brief aside, I would say that the same seeking of good psychotherapy should be true of anyone leading others in a quest to better understand themselves, or to heal emotionally. That includes psychotherapists. It's my strong opinion that good psychotherapists have done (and continue to do) work in their own psychotherapy, and need to have the capacity for empathic, attuned, contingent communication.)

So, mindfulness meditation isn't a one-size-fits-all cure for everything that ails you. It is, however, powerfully helpful, whether on its own, or in conjunction with psychotherapy.

I've had people come into my practice who have been meditating for years, who have found that they've resolved much but can't seem to crack the core of the issue, and their meditation practice serves them well in the psychotherapeutic work.

I've also worked with people who have been in psychotherapy on and off for years with different therapists, benefitting from it but with the next level of growth seemingly out of reach. When we've added mindfulness meditation to the mix, they've begun to make some remarkable progress which they hadn't been able to before.

### Artistic Creativity and the Brain

Is art subject to frontal cortex censorship? Great artistic achievements must be free of all censorship, and above all self-censorship which may possibly be imposed by activity in the frontal lobes of the brain. In this context, Charles Limb and Allen Braun, published in PLoS One, report that they studied the activity in the brain of professional jazz pianists while they (the pianists) were improvising. They found that there was extensive de-activation in the frontal cortex as well as in those areas of the brain that are thought to regulate emotions. The authors write that the frontal areas that were de-activated in their study are thought to be important for the conscious monitoring, evaluation and correction of behaviour:

“The frontal cortex may be involved in assessing whether such behaviours conform to social demands, exerting inhibitory control over inappropriate or maladaptive performance”

And there you have it!

Any artistic achievement that is tailored to conform to social demands rather than to the real, uninhibited, feelings of its creator, is destined not to reach the heights of achievement, or even fail. It is only when an artist is disinhibited that he or she can reach the heights of artistic achievement.

This is perhaps what Wagner and Schopenhauer meant when they said that an artistic work must “flow from the sub-conscious”, which means without self-censorship. This is perhaps what Proust also meant when he wrote in his *Contre Sainte Beuve*, “Every day, I become more aware that it is only outside intelligence that the artist can attain something of himself and the only material of art”.

## HOW TO RELEASE PAINFUL EMOTIONS AND SEDUCE THE BRAIN INTO PRODUCING ITS OWN ANTIDEPRESSANTS AND SEDATIVES

Do this meditation / visualization (at least) twice a day.

Be sure to do it before you fall asleep, and also before you open your eyes to start the day.

### RELAX: BREATHE AND LISTEN

Sit comfortably with your back straight or lie down in a comfortable position. Close your eyes. Listen to all the all the sounds you can hear. As you relax, it becomes easier to also hear the silence between and behind the sounds.

Breathe deeply and slowly, using your stomach muscles and relaxing the chest. Slow down your breathing to a rate of five breaths per minute. This means that each breath cycle lasts for a count of 12 seconds. Inhale to a count of four seconds, exhale to a count of four seconds, and rest with the breath out for a count of four seconds. If you emphasize the exhalation, it helps the body to relax. Really relax into the gap after the exhalation, allowing your body to go completely limp and soft.

### PHASE ONE: MINDFULNESS / INSIGHT / VIPASSANA MEDITATION

Continue to breathe slowly and to hear the sounds and the silence behind the sounds. Now also begin to focus inward. Notice the sensations and emotions in your body. Also notice the thoughts that appear on the screen of your mind. Just observe and drop all resistance to where you are right now.

Remember that love, blessing and praise dissolve all negativity. On the other hand, whatever you resist will persist. So, accept, embrace, love, bless and celebrate each sensation, emotion, thought, memory, or plan, or whatever else appears in your awareness. Love, embrace, bless, and celebrate yourself for having those thoughts, sensations, and emotions.

Do this for about 10-15 minutes.

## PHASE TWO: INTENTIONAL FOCUS VISUALIZATION

Now that you are feeling a lot more peaceful, begin to use all your inner senses, and vividly imagine something that symbolizes the way you desire to feel, for example peaceful, joyous, confident, or loving. Use all your inner senses - sight, hearing, feeling, touch, and smell. This will help your brain to grow peace, joy, and love producing neuro-networks and to produce the chemical molecules you need to feel the way you want to feel.

You might, for example, imagine a beautiful tree or a fountain in the centre of your brain. As you imagine jets of brightly coloured, sparkling water or light cascading through your brain and down into your body, you can hold the intention that trillions of feel-good chemical molecules are being created and dispersed throughout your nervous system. Do this for about 10-15 minutes.

Be patient. It takes time, perhaps a few weeks, to permanently alter your brain's electrochemical pathways and physical architecture.

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*Artwork by Igor Morski*

