

MEDITATION: BENEFITS & HOW-TO

Meditation has been practiced for thousands of years by a myriad of cultures across Asia, the Middle East and Africa but it didn't make its way into the Western world until the 1960s after an explosion of interest in Eastern philosophies. It is important to understand the need for meditation. We live in an age where our present is filled with ideas and thoughts of the past and future. The overpowering presence of social media doesn't help, either. For some, life's moments lose all fulfillment unless they can be shared with the world and validated by a certain number of 'likes.'

Many of us feel surrounded by negativity from day to day, from the morning news to working with obstinate clients or frustrating colleagues. We end up living in a perpetual state of worry, or 'fight or flight,' all of which can lead to anxiety and depression.

Our 'fight or flight' response is activated by our sympathetic nervous system, and it's our evolutionary warning signal against danger. When our sympathetic nervous system activates, blood races away from all non-vital systems in our bodies, like our digestive system, and rushes to vital areas like the larger muscle groups so we can run faster or hit harder and to our hearts and lungs to oxygenate our blood, so we can breathe better while we escape the danger. Our eyes even dilate so we can see farther, and we get tunnel vision to remain focused on the danger.

While the sympathetic nervous systems helps keep us protected from danger, living in 'fight or flight' mode for too long can cause serious damage to both our bodies and our minds. It can lead to obesity, ulcers, type 2 diabetes, hardened arteries, and a lower sex drive. It can also cause anxiety, depression, loss of energy, and, for those trying to counteract those "down" feelings by self-medicating, it can lead to addiction.

The amazing thing about meditation is that it immediately activates our parasympathetic nervous system, or our 'rest and relaxation' response. Even simply breathing in for 3 to 4 seconds, then breathing out for 5 seconds, stimulates the parasympathetic nervous system to kick in and take control. Our blood returns to the non-vital systems in our bodies, our eyes return to normal, our heart rate slows down, and our blood vessels open to normal size. Through meditation, the parasympathetic nervous system increases oxygen and nutrient flow as well as circulation throughout the body. It also slows down our heart and breathing rates

and has been shown to lower blood pressure. Meditation counteracts the revolving door of anxiety brought on by 'fight or flight,' but of course it's a lot easier said than done.

Meditation takes patience, practice and an understanding that we cannot – no matter how hard we try – quiet the mind by willing it silent when its very nature is to constantly work to process our environments. A simple, but very effective trick to slowing down the mind is to anchor it to something else that is also moving, like music, mantras, or our breath.

- **Begin by sitting upright in a comfortable chair** with your feet flat on the ground, back straight, shoulders back, and head held level.
 - Place your hands on your lap, and gently close your eyes.
 - Take a deep breath in through your nose, and slowly let it out through your mouth. Repeat this breathing pattern a few times. You'll notice your mind running around, bringing different thoughts to you – this is referred to as "monkey mind." It is normal and it's okay.
 - Gently bring your concentration to your breathing. Feel the air flow through your nose and into your stomach.
 - Bring your attention to different parts of your body, starting with your feet and moving your way upward, feeling for any tight spots where you may be holding tension. If you find a point of tension, breathe in through your nose, concentrating on that tension, and as you release the breath, relax that area, feeling the tension leaving your body.

If you're listening to soft meditative music, continue breathing normally, but concentrate your mind on the music. Listen to the note changes, the length of the notes, and concentrate on the senses the music excites. Does your mind begin to paint a picture? If so, feel what it would be like to touch, smell, and hear your imaginary surroundings. If your mind begins to wander to different thoughts, gently guide it back to the music and keep your breathing steady and normal. Soon the mind, always moving, will meld with the music, which is always moving and changing and your thoughts will quiet and you will simply be. For beginners, even a quick five-minute guided meditation found on YouTube can kick start the practice that you need to begin a journey to a healthier, more peaceful mind.