

Time Out



A Beginners Guide to Meditation for Self Care

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~ Introduction To Meditation ~

In this book you will be introduced to the very basics of meditation. Whether you are new to this practice or have been meditating for years, I hope that you will discover something to enhance your life and bring about a sense of peace in your body, mind and heart.

What is Meditation?

- There are numerous definitions explaining what meditation is. It can be defined as a practice of training the mind to bring about a state of peace as well as the techniques used to induce that state. Many descriptions lead to the understanding that meditation is a transformation from a state of doing to a place of being.
- *Ultimately, meditation is the practice of creating space in the integral self, body, mind and spirit where healing can take place.*

Who should Meditate?

- Everybody! Social workers, teachers and students, parents and children, law enforcement and inmates, health care providers, construction workers, and on and on. There is no demographic that would not benefit from the practice of meditation.
- Quietening the mind through meditation gives rest to the brain and soothes the central nervous system. Just as the body needs sleep to rest and restore, and water to hydrate, meditation is essential.

Why Meditate?

- Reasons to meditate are numerous and are as individual as the person who seeks the practice. According to National Institute of Health, "Meditation may be practiced for many reasons, such as to increase calmness and physical relaxation, to improve psychological balance, to cope with illness, or to enhance overall health and well-being." Continued meditation practice can produce a state of mindfulness in the practitioner. This wholesome state of awareness has been associated with numerous benefits, including improved psychological and physical wellbeing. Moreover, a study surveying 2,160 adults working at Head Start (approximately one-fourth of whom reported having 3 or more adverse childhood experiences) suggested that mindfulness may have the benefit of building resilience against the long-term health outcomes associated with adverse childhood experiences (Whitaker, et al., 2014). As ACE Response providers helping patients, clients and community members who have experienced accumulated adversity and trauma, meditation may be a self-care tool that can help promote our own resilience. As we promote our own resilience, this strengthens our capacity to engage in relationship-building and role modeling, which is an important element of ACE Response. Also, in helping others who may be in crisis, we may be vulnerable to the build up of empathic emotional residue known as vicarious trauma. This is often overlooked because the trauma is not directly impacting the caregiver. However, these events can accumulate over time, creating stress and un-ease in the caregiver. The series of small secondary events can be as harmful as a major traumatic event.
- Meditation allows the integral person the opportunity to process traumatic events so they are not stored and repressed but released and observed in a state of mindful awareness.

When & Where to Meditate

- The goal is to create a pattern of time and space that repeats so each time the student comes to meditation it becomes easier. Setting the stage for a meditation practice is important. However, once a student has gained some proficiency the setting becomes less necessary.
- In the beginning it is important to schedule meditation times. Start small and simple. The first week schedule at least three “time outs” for yourself. These should be 10 - 30 minutes long. Be sure to choose a time when you will not be interrupted. This means no technology or devices, with the exception of a clock and perhaps non lyrical music.
- Create a setting that is comfortable. If possible set this as your personal meditation space that you come to each time. This should include a comfortable place to sit up, either in a chair or on a meditation blanket/bolster/mat. If your space is on the floor and you feel you will need support for your back, set up close to a wall. The goal is to create a space that you can return to that induces a feeling of relaxation. Windows, plants, and soft non lyrical music can be helpful in getting you started, but are not required. In some cases these may serve to distract. Experiment with the setting as you would create any personal space that you are going to use on a regular basis.
- Always come to this space without expectation. Getting used to sitting without doing can be one of the biggest challenges in creating a practice. We are conditioned to constantly be “doing.” In meditation we are shifting to a place of “being.” Therefore it is essential to learn how to just “be” with yourself. These initial “timeouts” are intended to allow you to get used to that idea. There is no active meditation required until you are comfortable in this space. Just sit with yourself, perhaps observing your surroundings, or observing your thoughts. Let what ever comes, come. When time is up, be done. You may find you wish to sit longer. You are welcome to do so, but it can be good motivation for the next time to leave the space wanting more.

How to Meditate

- There are many styles of meditation. Finding one that works best for you can take some time. In the following pages you will be introduced to several techniques. It is a good idea to experiment to see what feels right. One of the goals of meditation is to relax the thinking mind. Not every style of meditation will work for every person. Once you find a style that works for you, you can stick with that one, but be open to try other techniques as well.
- You may find that different techniques work better under different circumstances such as time of day or environments.
- Always be patient with yourself.

Groups

Look for a meditation group or start one. Meditation groups are often offered for free. Check with local churches, yoga studios and outreach groups. The energy in group meditation can be very empowering.

Getting Started

Getting into the routine of meditating can be a challenge all onto itself. Here is a guide to help get you where you need to be. If you follow these steps you should find it easier to develop a meditation practice.

Set a goal - In the beginning, set a doable, easy goal. Three times a week for 10 - 30 minutes each time is a good start, especially if you are limited with time.

Schedule It - Schedule your practice time like you would anything else. Add a little extra time to prepare.

Prepare a space - Select a space that is consistent and you can return to for this practice. Choose somewhere that feels comfortable, but not where you will fall asleep. A sturdy, supportive chair with some nice art work, a candle or flowers can add to the ambiance. This space can be a place that you or your family uses, but for the purpose of meditation it becomes something special.

Remove all distractions - This means turn off phones and television. Make sure you will not be disturbed by family or friends. If you have a pet that wants to be by you, that has been found to be helpful, as long as they are quiet and meditative as well.

Music - You may wish to have music depending on the style of meditation you are practicing. Whatever seems appropriate will work as long as it helps you feel relaxed.

Set a timer - It is recommended to come to this space without expectation. Don't even plan to meditate. Just get into the habit of being in the space. Get comfortable with it. We often overlook the restlessness of sitting still for 5 minutes thinking it is the practice. We need to train ourselves to first be still.

Choose a method to practice - Once you have created your space and become comfortable in a routine of being in that space, begin to practice using one of the techniques covered in the following chapter . Experiment with a few until you find one that you are comfortable with. Feel free to alter or adjust the practice to suit your needs.

Be consistent - If you are not feeling like doing the practice, sit in your sacred space anyway. Make an attempt or just be. It is said that it takes at least 3 weeks to form a habit. Once you establish a habit of being in your space, gradually increase your meditation time.

Monkey Mind

Are you a great multi-tasker?

If you said yes then that is Awesome!

...but can you do just one thing at a time?

Most often observed when one begins to learn meditation is not the breath or a mantra or some other prescribed point of focus. It is that there is a clutter of thoughts going on all the time, and like little children they all want your immediate attention. This can be very frustrating, but rest assured that it is normal. In meditation it is called “Monkey Mind”. The term originated from Tibetan monks. It is widely used to describe the constant chatter, or background noise we all hear in our head.

Envision a snow globe, like the kind that come out around the winter holidays. Imagine you are in the center of this globe and it’s all shook up. Those floating particles all around you are your thoughts. As you quiet your body and mind, they begin to settle. There is a clarity now surrounding you. All those particles, or thoughts are still there, but you can see your way past. You can decide to pick up any one of those thoughts or choose to let it be at rest until you are ready to address it.

A contributing factor to our stress is that we carry too much stuff. By stuff, I mean thoughts. Sort of like the woman that carries a huge purse full of everything but the kitchen sink. She complains that her back or shoulder hurts, yet she claims to carry this baggage because she might need something. True it is all in there, but she cannot seem to find anything in the clutter of it.

How big is your purse? How much do you carry with you? Begin to make conscious choices to bring only what you need. This applies to our thoughts. If we are dwelling on things we cannot do something about at this very moment, let it go. When students are in class I remind them: if you are not going to get up and walk out of here right now to take care of whatever it is that is nagging at you, then set the thought aside for right now.” I cite examples like “Did I feed the cat before I left?” or “I need to pay that bill.” These things will be still be there when meditation is over.

In meditation we learn to re-organize our thought patterns. For some of us it may not be a matter of “RE”, but a matter of organizing period. Meditation helps us to learn to do one thing at a time. This may be the single most important outcome of a meditation practice. In doing so we can focus and direct our energy to what really matters in any given moment. (as Albert Einstein said, “energy flows where attention goes.”).

As you begin to experiment with the different techniques offered here, you may be aware that the monkey mind is present. As a thought, or several thoughts, flash through your mind, notice it, but do not engage or analyze it. With practice this becomes easier.

As your meditation practice develops it begins to transfer over into your day-to-day living. Perhaps you will have less monkey mind, perhaps your purse will be much lighter, and your back won’t hurt as much from carrying such a heavy load.

An important idea we need to bring to the practice, any style of meditation practice, is to learn to do one thing at a time. As we proceed to the techniques part of this book, you will see that this is the theme in all forms of meditation. Therefore, one of the primary goals in learning to meditate is to practice doing ONE THING AT A TIME.

Journaling

It can be helpful to keep a journal of your meditations. Record the dates and times of your practice. You may wish to write about your experiences and observations within each session. Note what techniques work and which ones do not. You may also want to take note of things like your mood before and after meditating, as well as particular influencing factors such as experiences. (good day/bad day). Journaling gives us an object of connection that can be a useful tool.

Meditation Techniques

The following meditation techniques are described to help you discover a method or methods that work best for you as an individual. Although there are numerous forms of meditation such as Vipassana, Transcendental and Zen to name a few, the exercises here borrow from many styles and are rooted in the senses. This is by no means a complete listing. It serves as an offering of samples. Please feel free to adjust, add or delete whatever feels appropriate to aide you on your journey into meditation.

*Begin the practice as outlined in the Getting Started section. Set a timer for 5 - 10 minutes and begin. Take 2 - 3 minute silent stretch breaks as needed as you build up your ability to meditate for longer periods of time. You may wish to try different techniques within the same session.

Breathing

Breath is the most fundamental function of our body. It is always present. Connecting awareness to ones own breath is the easiest place to begin a meditation practice. Experiment with the following:

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- Counting breaths (in on 4, out on 4; in on 4, out on 8; pause between breaths)
 - Alternate Nostril breathing: Alternate nostrils are closed, generally by using the thumb, ring finger, and pinky finger. The thumb is used for closing the right nostril and the ring and pinky fingers are used to close the left nostril. The mouth is closed, and is not used for breathing. The cycle of practice is: The right nostril is closed with the thumb. Air is inhaled through the left nostril, and exhaled back through the same nostril. The left nostril is closed with the ring finger. Air is inhaled through the right nostril, and exhaled back through the same nostril. Pass breath back and forth between sides. Envision the breath traveling down the side of the body that it is being inhaled to and back out.
 - 3 Part Breathing - See full exercise attached

Mantra

Is a repeated phrase, or set of syllables. It is not important so much what is being said as it is that the phrase resonates a feeling of peace within as it is being recited. Experiment with the following:

- Count down beginning at a higher number such as 108. If you lose count begin at the top again until time is up. (attach to visualization: sheep, stairs)
- Recite a known and meaningful prayer such as the rosary or japa mala. Use rosary or mala beads if desired.
- Repeat a personally chosen mantra such as “I honor my innermost self” (Om Namah Shivaya).
- Create your own personal mantra such as “ Inhale Peace ~ Exhale Love” or “I am grateful”.

Gazing

Have you ever found yourself staring off into the distance, absorbed in thought, yet undisturbed by your surroundings? Using vision as the tool to focus, can be a very powerful means to meditation. This is especially true if you have time to be in nature. Experiment with the following:

Gaze softly using the following focal points

- Fire - Candle flame, fireplace or bonfire, coals and glowing embers mirror,
- Earth - Sand on a beach or in an hourglass, rock formations or crystals, plants & trees
- Water - Streams, fountains, oceans, waves, a bowl of water
- Air - Clouds, stars, wind over a field or in trees

Sound

One of the very first connections that comes to our awareness as infants in utero, even before breath is sound. The rhythmic beating of the heart can serve to bring order and balance where chaos prevails. Experiment with the following:

- Drumming - tap your finger or palm on your lap, drum or other surface. Try alternating left and right, experiment with different beats or tempos
- Music: ambient or highly rhythmic, no vocals
- White noise: wind, water, sound machines
- Silence - notice the quality of pure silence

Mindfulness Meditation

Also known as meditation in motion, mindful meditation brings awareness and focus to our activities and actions. Mindfulness helps us focus our attention, allowing us to order & arrange our thoughts. Nearly every act of everyday living can be used as an opportunity to engage mindfully. Experiment with the following:

Body Scan – Progressive Relaxation

- Lie down on your back face up, arms & legs comfortably apart.
- Place awareness in feet, then left foot & right foot separately, then together again
- Tense muscles in feet on inhale & relax on exhale
- Place awareness back in feet and notice change
- Repeat with legs, torso, shoulders & chest, arms & hands, head, neck & face

Eating Mindfully

- Fully engage the senses, deliberately interacting with your food
- Pay close attention to the sensations and purpose of each morsel

- When food is consumed, try at least 10-15 chews before swallowing
- Be attentive to thoughts and emotional state. Is there resistance? Pleasure? Where is focus? Internal or external?

Walking Meditation

- Slow walking: heel to toe, gaze down, synchronize breath. Practice walking around room at home or other familiar place.

Mindful Living – Focused attention in everyday tasks

- Be present vacuuming , washing dishes, folding laundry, mowing the lawn. Pay attention to all of the sensations involved with the task, observe the colors, textures, aroma, sounds and taste when appropriate.

Guided Imagery

This is a facilitated form of Meditation whereby the facilitator leads the student through a series of relaxation steps. There are many forms of guided imagery where stories can be intertwined, such as walks in nature or fining your animal spirit.

Yoga Nidra is Non movement, guided meditative form of self exploration and relaxation. It is a literal road map into the physical body through the senses, and then a road map out of the body to become the observer of the self; the mental and emotional states and ultimately bringing us to rest in the state of higher self.

Integrative Restoration iRest is a transformative meditative practice that is derived from the ancient teachings of Yoga Nidra that leads to psychological, physical and spiritual healing. The ultimate design of iRest is to help us live contented lives, free of conflict, anxiety, fear and suffering. The practice is integrative in that it heals traumas that are present in the body, mind and senses; its restorative in that it helps the practitioner to recognize their underlying ground of being, their true nature.

3 Part Breath

This exercise can be practiced for relaxation and meditation. It is a simple self care technique that in independent studies has shown to increase oxygen levels in the body thereby creating an environment of wellness within.

- Become aware of your breath. Notice how it feels. Do not change or alter it in any way.
- Is it shallow, or deep?
- Does it feel warm, or does it feel cool?
- Are there any restrictions or is it free and clear?
- Begin to shift your focus onto breathing into your head. Imagine breath coming in and filling your head and mind.
- Keep your lips slightly parted. As you inhale, let your tongue come to the roof of your mouth slightly pressing on the hard palette just behind your front teeth. This blocks breath coming into the mouth, allowing it to come only in through the nasal passage.
- As you exhale, relax your tongue allowing the breath to pass.
- Breath in through the nose, breath out through the nose and mouth.
- As you inhale imagine breath filling your head, nourishing the brain.
- As you exhale allow the breath to fall out of your body.
- Next place one hand on your chest, in the area of the collar bones or just below. Become aware of the sensation of that hand. Feel the warmth or coolness of it. Notice if you feel anything else such as your heart beating. Pressing the tongue deeper into the roof of your mouth, As you draw breath in deeper, feel the rise and fall of your chest. Imagine the breath coming into the heart space. Feel the breath expand beneath your hand, filling the heart space. Feel an ease of effort as the breath falls out of your body.
- Breath comes into the head, nourishing the mind and brain. Breath deepens into the chest filling the heart and with an ease of effort, breath falls out of the body.

- Place your other hand on your belly just below the rib cage. One hand is on your chest , one hand on your belly. Feel the sensation of the lower hand. Begin to draw the breath deep into the body beneath that hand. Feel expansion in the lungs as you draw breath deep. Imagine the breath filling the body, down into the legs and feet and out into arms and hands. As you exhale, consciously draw the belly towards the backbone.
 - Three part breathing, head - mind , chest - heart , belly - body
 - As you breath fully, draw breath in to the head, then into the chest and deep into the belly, pressing the tongue slightly deeper as the breath goes deeper. Relax the tongue as the breath relaxes out of the body.
 - Each inhale lengthens, expands and opens the body. Each exhale is a release, an ease of effort, a letting go. Each inhale contracts the body, and moves awareness toward your center. Each exhale expands the body and moves awareness away from the center. Set the intention here to link this breath with the movements of your practice/body.
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Notes:

About the Author

Andrea Fortuin, a member of the HEARTS Initiative for ACE Response in the Capital Region of New York, has been studying alternative wellness practices for over 25 years. She has trained in many forms of meditation including Mindfulness, Integrated Restoration (iRest), Guided Imagery, and several others. She works extensively as a meditation coach and yoga instructor offering classes, workshops and lectures to groups and individuals of all ages and demographics seeking inner peace.

The Executive Director of Orenda Healing Arts, LLC, Andrea has a special focus on promoting the resilience of ACE Response providers across fields of practice.

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