

MEDITATION: THE IMPORTANCE OF MENTAL SILENCE

Meditation can provide the magic pause button we so often wish for. By **Dini Martinez**

Why training your mind to think less benefits your health and happiness

Terrorism; wars; ecological disasters; economic inequalities; illegal immigration; personal tragedies; neighbourhood dramas; hatred; misunderstanding; never-ending catastrophes. Nowadays, the news often resembles a bombardment of negativity that can mean a constant stress factor for our overwhelmed minds. Add to this the competitive world of internet and social media – through which we are always connected to everything and everyone,

plus the additional challenges and demands of ‘real life’ and it is hard to find some time out. Good never seems to be good enough and ‘being’ instead of relentlessly ‘doing’ is frowned upon. This lack of calm can drive our mental and bodily systems into burn-out mode. The consequences of this are omnipresent in our society, including conditions such as stress, insomnia, depression, indigestion, infertility and cancer.»

MEDITATION IMPROVES REALTIONSHPIS AND COMMUNICATION INCLUDING MARITAL QUALITY, AS WELL AS HEALTHIER INTERACTION WITH CHILDREN, FRIENDS AND COLLEAGUES



« How too much of it all affects our health

Like the illustrious rat in the rat race, we forget what we are chasing, yet keep on sprinting nevertheless, putting our own health and well-being at significant risk. With little or no time to unwind, our body starts to tense up and our mind goes into perpetual flight and fight response. That reduces the amount of happy hormones and increases adrenalin which, in excess, can cause hypertension and disease.

With little or no time to take a break, our systems start to shut down. The digestive tract often takes the lead. In fact, your metabolism is one of the best indicators of your body's ability to relax. If it cannot relax, your body cannot take in vital nutrition and life-flow blocks up.

Apart from wholesome nutrition and healthy lifestyles, meditation is one of the most effective ways of assuring a balanced life where all your systems can work optimally. It is secular, it is flexible, it is readily available and, most of all, it's free!

Science proves the benefits of quieting the mind

Put simply, meditation is the quieting of the mind. According to science, this has a vast array of benefits. Technically, it increases the grey matter volume, slows down brain decay, increases connections between neurons, enhances connectivity between brain regions, increases cortical thickness in the hippocampus (in charge of emotional regulation, learning and memory) and reduces brain cell volume in the amygdala (responsible for fear, anxiety and stress).

Practically, it reduces the activity of the 'monkey mind' which tends to jump from thought to thought in a mind-blowing pace at its own will. Since this mind-wandering is typically associated with over-thinking, being less happy and worrying about the past and future, it is the goal for many people to dial it down. Worldwide studies have shown that meditation appears to do just this.

Anxiety

Researchers at Harvard and Johns Hopkins universities have recently shown that as little as eight weeks of regular mind-training can result in physical changes to the brain – activating the rest and digest response of the nervous system. Psychologically, 90 per cent of research studies observed an effect equal to chemical anti-depressants in terms of anxiety levels, stress, depression, attention and concentration.

Focus and creativity

The strong focus of attention on an idea, object or activity is one of the central aims of meditation.

Neuroscientists have found that after just 11 hours of meditation, practitioners display structural changes in the part of the brain involved in monitoring our focus and self-control.

Through regular meditation, children, the middle-aged and the elderly alike stay focused on tasks longer and make fewer task switches. Moreover, research has found mindfulness to promote divergent thinking which allows many new ideas to be generated. Not surprisingly, successful companies such as Google, Apple and Target have integrated meditation into their schedules to improve employees' cognitive skills 'on the job'.

Relationships

Another aspect of meditation is that it helps you become more comfortable with yourself. It teaches the acceptance of what there is, rather than what you would

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like there to be. This not only helps switch off destructive voices in your head, but also makes it easier to accept others as they are.

Research has found that increased mindfulness through meditation improves relationships and communication. This includes better marital quality as well as healthier interaction with children, friends and colleagues.

How to meditate

Many people have the idea that meditation means sitting down and doing nothing. This is not quite true. In actual fact, it is an active training of the mind to eliminate thoughts and increase concentration and awareness. Those skilled at meditating can experience the immersion of themselves in the object of their meditation. In other words, they experience the oneness of everything on an experiential, rather than intellectual, level.

Different meditation programmes approach this in different ways. Some focus on physical sensations, others on a particular area of the body. Some use the visualisation of colours, objects or images, while others use prayers, mantras or chanting.

We all experience natural moments of meditation, when our awareness is one-pointed, our whole attention is in the here and now, our emotions are in harmony and our body-mind in bliss. These can include a heart-felt hug from a friend, the birth of a new baby, a deep immersion in music, a prayer, moments in nature, an orgasm or a conscious indulgence in your favourite food. However, the bliss of these moments comes and goes at its own will. Through regular training of the mind, you are able to access a tool that provides the ability to be in a more harmonious and blissful state more persistently. Even in moments of overwhelming rage or sadness, this tool will enable you to remain the master of your mind – not the other way around.

Why not give it a try?

Meditation is not a panacea, but there is plenty of evidence that it helps those who practice it regularly. Even better, it is free and its benefits can be noticed after a relatively short amount of practice. It is certainly worth a go. Take a few minutes in the morning or evening or both. Rather than turning on your phone or going online, see what happens if you try quieting down your mind, or at least observing your thoughts and letting them pass without reacting to them. If the research and thousands of years of experience is correct, a mere few minutes of daily meditation could make a big difference.

Switch off your phone. Find an undisturbed space. Sit comfortably. Imagine a sky full of clouds. Now try and focus on the blue sky behind the clouds. Allow the clouds to pass without getting caught up in them: like thoughts in the mind, they come and go. Sometimes it is cloudier than others, but the clear blue sky, like the calm and clear mind, is always there. If the mind is distracted, gently draw it back to the previous observation and focus on the space between the thoughts. 🧘