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Meditation ^[1]

Dear Alice,

How do you learn to meditate?

Answer

Dear Reader,

Meditation is a two thousand-year-old technique that originated in Asia as a means of communicating with one's spiritual and religious gods. Since then, it has taken many different forms; some still maintain a religious connection, while others have relaxation as the primary goal. Some people also find that meditation helps them to re-focus and re-energize at varying points in the day. Regardless of how or why you try meditation it can be a helpful part of daily life. In terms of practice, almost all forms of this ancient discipline are woven with the common thread of focused attention on a repetitive or unchanging sound or image.

Researchers at Harvard University have spent decades learning about how meditation, and specifically what's become known as the Relaxation Response, works. Essentially, meditation activates sections of the brain that control the autonomic nervous system, which regulates bodily functions we cannot control (such as digestion, blood pressure, and immune function). These are often the systems that are impacted by stress. What that means is that meditation, as a practice, counteracts stress by enhancing the body's ability to relax, including the parts of the body that we cannot usually control. Recent studies indicate that meditation can trigger significant effects just by regularly practicing a ten minute meditation. You can learn more about meditation and the relaxation response by visiting the [American Meditation Institute](#) ^[2].

More and more universities, hospitals, health clubs, adult education programs, and corporations are offering meditation classes as a perk to their students, employees, and/or clients. You can usually find programs in your neighborhood or nearby that suit your interests, schedule, and finances. Meditation comes in many forms, so you can also shop around for yoga, progressive muscle relaxation, and/or mindfulness sessions, for instance. Formal meditation programs require a few weeks of time, and a few hundred dollars to register. Other one-time, low-cost classes provide, at a minimum, an introduction to meditation. If you are a student, your school or college may offer stress management programs that could include meditation.

Here's one possible meditation approach:

1. Choose a quiet place. Limit potential distractions by placing a "Do Not Disturb" sign on your door, silencing your phone, and switching on a fan to block outside noise.
2. Sit in a chair with firm lower back support and rest your feet on the floor. Or, sit on the floor with your back against a wall and legs uncrossed.
3. Choose a simple word or sound, such as "ing" (also called a *mantra*). You will repeat this sound to yourself during your meditation session.
4. Close your eyes and sit quietly for one or two minutes. Then, begin to repeat your mantra in a rhythmic and relaxed way. You will soon realize that you are no longer reciting the mantra: this is fine, as it's impossible to keep your attention focused on any one thing for more than a brief time. At this point, once again, calmly bring your mantra back into focus.
5. Try this *meditation cycle* for ten to twenty minutes, once a day — always before a meal, such as breakfast or dinner. If you benefit from meditation (this can take a few weeks of regular practice), you can expand it to twenty to thirty minutes, twice daily.
6. Use a silent clock or watch to time your meditation and remain seated for at least a minute before you rise from your chair or the floor.

Adapted from The Stress Manager's Manual Copyright 1996 by Jordan Friedman, StressHelp Press, New York.

If this process seems different and/or complicated initially, know that it can produce real benefits, and gets easier over time. If you feel better at the end of a session, you are probably doing it right. Also know that there are many different strategies. You might consider trying a few to determine what works best for you!

Alice!

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