

healthy habits

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MEDITATE Your Way to BETTER HEALTH

Om sweet om:
why clearing your mind
is the best thing you
can do for your body

BY KAREN ASP

One of the quickest things you can do to improve your health takes little thought: meditation. Experts agree that the practice can have profound effects, both immediate and long-term, on your life. "Early on, you notice that you're calmer, you handle stress better, you're less reactive, your relationships improve, and you sleep better," says John Yates, PhD, director of Dharma Treasure Buddhist Sangha in Tucson, Arizona, and author of *The Mind Illuminated: A Complete Meditation Guide Using Buddhist Wisdom and Brain Science*.

Why is meditation so great? Just like when you exercise, physiological changes take place in your body when you meditate. Studies show that just eight

weeks of meditation can increase density in the area of your brain responsible for executive function, which helps regulate emotions, holds information, and allows you to perform at your highest level. And meanwhile, the amygdala, the part of your brain that acts like a stress button,

shrinks. It's like going to the gym for your brain.

"Meditation changes the way the brain responds to stressful situations," says Beth Darnall, PhD, clinical associate professor at Stanford University and author of *Less Pain, Fewer Pills*.

How much meditation do you need to reap these

rewards? That's up for debate. While studies often look at 30-minute sessions, shorter amounts of 5 to 10 minutes, or even just 1 minute, can also do you good, says Bonnie Marks, PsyD, psychologist at Rusk Rehabilitation at NYU Langone in New York City. In fact, how long you meditate may



“Meditation is like going to the gym for your brain.”

not be as important as how frequently you meditate—daily, ideally.

If every day sounds like a challenge, know this: “Meditation can be done anywhere, anytime,” Marks says. While sitting in a comfortable position in a quiet atmosphere is ideal, you can meditate anywhere, including in an elevator, while walking your dog, or when you’re washing dishes. “Whenever you can be more mindful, no matter what you’re doing, you’re meditating and, as a result, gaining little pockets of mental freedom throughout the day,” she says.

And for all of the naysayers who say their mind is too busy to meditate, that’s actually the point. “You’re not trying to keep your mind still when you meditate,” Yates says. “Instead, you’re trying, in a very gentle way, to keep your attention anchored to something, the breath being the most common anchor.”

Your mind *will* wander, especially when you first start out with a meditation practice, but those periods of wandering will eventually get shorter, and soon you’ll be able to stay focused on your breath for longer periods. “Don’t worry about how many times your mind wanders,” Yates says. “Instead, take a positive attitude and tell yourself that’s just one less time you have to pull it back in.”

Ready to take the plunge?

Follow these five steps to start your meditation habit.

1 SCHEDULE IT

First thing in the morning is best, as you’ll stand a greater chance of getting it done. If necessary, rise a little earlier than usual. If morning doesn’t work for you, find another time that you can sneak away for a few minutes.

3 ASSUME THE POSITION

Keep your back straight, allowing its natural curve. Place your arms and legs in a comfortable position so they’re symmetrical, meaning that one arm isn’t higher than the other or your legs aren’t in different positions. Close your lips, with your teeth slightly parted and your tongue resting on the back of your upper teeth. Finally, angle your eyes slightly down like you’re reading a book.



2 QUIET DOWN

The ideal space has little noise besides natural sounds like barking dogs and chirping birds. Background conversation is even OK, as long as you can’t make out the words, Yates says.

4 JUST BREATHE

Decide how long you want to meditate—set a timer if you’d like—and then spend that period focusing on your breath. Breathe through your nose with your normal breathing pattern. Or try guided meditation, where an instructor leads you through the practice.

5 TRY TWO MONTHS

Meditating can often be a challenge when you start, which is why you might be tempted to call it quits after your first week or two. Yet habits generally take about eight weeks to form, Marks says. So challenge yourself to stick with it for that long, and it will no doubt become as routine as brushing your teeth, which means your day soon won’t feel right without it.

MEDITATION APPS

Looking for some guidance when meditating? Load these four apps on your smartphone so you can meditate wherever life takes you.

1 Buddify Comes with more than 80 guided meditations and a timer if you want to do your own meditation. (buddify.com)

2 Calm Provides sessions to meet any goal, like sleeping better, stressing less, or maintaining better focus. (calm.com)

3 Headspace A 10-day free course leads you through 10 minutes a day. Connect with friends for support. (headspace.com)

4 OMGI I Can Meditate Pay to access more than 180 meditations, or try dozens of free ones. (omgmeditate.com)