

Finding the Right Meditation Practice

If you want to start meditating, or if you have meditated for a long time, I wanted to provide you some ideas for simple meditation practices that might help to alter your brain's functions and change the way you think about your reality. These suggestions come from some of the research studies I have been involved in over the years as well as reviewing some basic approaches to these practices. But I wanted to share a few quick points to start. For any meditation you might select, find one that resonates with your goals and your overall approach to life. If you find it hard to concentrate, then try picking a meditation that is less concentration based and perhaps more movement based. If you have a lot of body pains, try a practice that does not require lots of unusual postures or movements. Look for practices that you can incorporate into your religious or spiritual belief system if you have them. Or look for practices that are more secular if you consider yourself agnostic or atheist. The important point is that you want to find something that you can truly engage. The research suggests that those practices that you can really “wrap your mind around” will be the ones that create the biggest effect. Also, try some of these practices for a little while, but if you find you don't like them, then move on. Not every meditation practice is right for every person.

For these practices it is helpful to have a muted timer to let you know when twenty minutes have passed. During long meditations, you will notice pains, itches, twitches, and periods of restlessness. Observe them the best you can, but if you feel impelled to move around or scratch, give yourself permission, then take several deep breaths and return to the meditation practice.

The worst thing you can do in meditation is to critically judge your performance—and yet you'll find that there's a little critical voice inside of all of us that is constantly judging every little thing we do. Meditation practices teach us how to be accepting of who we are, of weaknesses as well as our strengths.

Hopefully, you will find these suggestions helpful.

Exercise # 1: Breathing Awareness

Some meditations use passive techniques, in which the person simply pays attention to his or her natural breathing patterns. These gentle forms of breathing enhance awareness and

relaxation, while vigorous breathing actually can increase emotional intensity at the expense of feeling relaxed. Research has shown that breathing exercises lowers stress and anxiety, improves coping, improves one's general sense well being, and improves self-esteem. Breathing exercises may also help people with a variety of medical and psychological disorders.

So let's begin with a basic breathing meditation. We'll begin with you sitting in a chair, but later, you may want to try other postures, like lying down, or sitting upright on the floor.

1. Sit down in a comfortable chair, in a quiet place where nothing will disturb you. Rest your hands comfortably in your lap, and place your feet flat on the floor.
2. Now, simply pay attention to your breath. Breathe in slowly through your nose, and notice the cool temperature of the air.
3. Slowly exhale through your nose and notice the temperature as you breathe out. How warm is it as you breathe out?
4. Continue to slowly breathe in and out through your nose ten times, and notice how the sensations change.
5. Take nice, slow, deep breaths in and out. Try not to think about anything other than your breath.
6. Don't worry or get frustrated if your mind wanders, just return to focusing on your breathing in and out as soon as you realize your mind is wandering.
7. Now, shift your focus to your chest, and feel how it rises and falls with each breath you take. Slowly breathe in to the count of five, then slowly breathe out to the count of five. Do this ten times and then return to your normal breathing.
8. Now return to your normal breathing, and listen to the sounds in the room. Do they seem more intense? Now, return your awareness to your body. Does it feel more relaxed? Are there any parts of your body that seem tense or uncomfortable?
9. Now, slowly breathe through your mouth. Notice how this changes the movement of your belly and your chest.

10. Shift your attention to your mouth and feel the cold air across your tongue as you breathe in. Now feel the warmth when you breathe out. Shift your attention to roof of your mouth, and notice how different the temperature feels. Return to your natural pattern of breathing and notice any differences you feel.

11. Now bring this exercise to a close. Slowly look around the room, turning your head from one side to the other. Then slowly rise from your chair. Take a moment to see how you feel standing up, and consciously breathe in and out. Slowly start to walk, and see if you can continue to be mindful of your breath.

You can do this whole exercise in just a few minutes in your home, office, or almost anywhere and you can do it for as long as 20-30 minutes. The longer you do it, the more intense the sense of peace and relaxation you can achieve.

Exercise #2: The Relaxation Response

Dr. Herbert Benson at Harvard made this meditation famous thirty years ago, and is one of the most researched techniques in the world. Today it is used in hundreds of stress reduction programs throughout the country, generating neurological and psychological states of serenity and health. You simply focus on a word, phrase, or mantra—love, peace, God, etc.—that makes you feel happy, peaceful, or calm, and you repeat it as you breathe slowly and deeply.

1. Find a comfortable place to sit where you won't be disturbed, and close your eyes.

2. Take several deep breaths, and as you exhale, silently, or with a whisper, say a word, phrase or sound that gives you a feeling of serenity or joy ("peace," "love," "slow down," "relax," "God," etc.).

3. Stay with your breathing and the repetition of your personal mantra. Repeat the mantra slowly with your breathing for about 10 minutes.

4. If your mind wanders, as soon as you recognize that it has, just return to the repetition of your mantra. Don't try to achieve a particular goal or state; just keep focusing on your word for the full 10 minutes.

5. When you finish, sit quietly for a few moments and then open your eyes. Notice how you feel and slowly move about the room.

If you do this exercise once or twice a day, even for a few minutes, you should notice a significant shift in your awareness and behavior. You'll feel calmer, less anxious, and more receptive.

Exercise #3: Progressive Muscle Relaxation

This technique was developed in the 1920s by the American physiologist Edmund Jacobson. It is particularly effective with people who are unusually tense. It is useful in reducing stress and anxiety, helping with pain, fibromyalgia, heart disease, and a variety of neurological, psychological, and physical disorders. It has also been effectively used to help people relax before operations, and it speeds up post-operative recovery. The exercise is best done lying down, but you can do it in any large well-padded chair.

1. First, take a really deep breath, hold it as long as you can, then breathe out as much air as possible. Repeat this five times.

2. Next, take a deep breath in, and as you do this, tense all of the muscles in your body, from head to toe, and hold it for about 10-20 seconds. Then relax everything, expelling the air from your lungs. Do this three more times.

3. Take another deep breath, and starting at the top of your head, tighten up all of the muscles in your face, then let it go as you breathe out.

4. Breathe in deeply, scrunch up your forehead and hold it for five seconds. Then release the muscles as you breathe out.

5. Breathe in and tighten your mouth and jaw, hold it for five seconds, and release as you breathe out. Now stretch your mouth open as wide as you can. Hold it for five seconds, and release.

6. Take a deep breath and pull your shoulders up toward your head, and tighten all of the muscles in your neck. Hold for five seconds, then push your shoulders way down as you exhale.

7. Take another deep breath in and tighten the muscles in your arms and your hands. Clench your fists tightly hold them tight for as long as you can. Breathe out and relax your arms and hands. Breathe in, push your arms into the chair or floor, hold for ten seconds, and release, breathing out.

8. Take in a breath and tighten your abdominal muscles. Hold this for a count to ten, then relax, pushing out all of the air from your lungs.

9. Take another deep breath, and tighten your buttocks. Hold as long as you can, then breathe out and relax.

10. Breathe in and tighten your upper leg muscles, hold for 5 seconds, and then relax as you breathe out. Breathe in, tighten your calves, hold for five seconds, then release.

11. Breathe in again and scrunch up your toes, hold for 5 seconds, and release, then stretch your toes upward and apart as you slowly breathe out all of the air in your lungs.

12. When you feel ready, slowly stand up, and slowly walk around, feeling how each part of your body moves. But take it easy for a few minutes – you are very relaxed at this point, and your consciousness may be in a very altered state of awareness.

Exercise # 4: Visualization and Guided Imagery

Guided imagery simply refers to the process of using pleasant visions and memories to induce a deep state of relaxation, and it has been proven to be very effective in reducing pain. It effectively lowers anxiety and depression in people before and after they undergo a medical or surgical intervention. See how well you can visualize the following scenario, commonly used in self-hypnosis, guided-imagery therapy, and stress-relaxation programs.

1. Find a quiet place to lie or sit down. Close your eyes and take five deep breath.

2. Take another deep breath, and visualize yourself walking through a thick, humid, tropical rain forest. Take a deep breath and feel the warm damp air

blow across your face. Visualize the path, surrounded by lush, green, tropical plants.

3. Imagine hearing the birds chirping, the sound of running water from a stream, and other sounds of the forest.

4. As you walk down the path, you come around a bend. There, in front of you, is the most beautiful waterfall in the world. Watch how the water cascades down the mountain, over the rocks, and into a crystal clear pool of water.

5. Now step into the pool. Take a deep breath and feel the warm tropical water washing over your feet as you slowly step into the pool. Imagine stepping into the waterfall and feel the warm water gently flowing over your head, washing away all of your tension and cares.

6. Now feel your body melting into the pool. As you breathe in deeply, you feel yourself turning into a stream. As you and the water become one, you begin to slowly flow down the stream. Feel the sun shining overhead as you float down the stream, far, far away from all of the tensions of the world. Watch where the river takes you and when your journey is finished, notice how relaxed you feel.

When creating your personalized “vacation,” or when guiding a friend through these visualizations, remember to use repetitive words and phrases that evoke relaxation: “warm,” “soft,” “deep,” “heavy,” etc. For example, tell yourself that you are “feeling *more and more* relaxed...going *deeper and deeper* into relaxation...arms feeling *warm* and *heavy* and *relaxed*...” The repetition lulls you into a trance-like state of peace.

Exercise #5: Candle Meditation

The candle meditation is a simple concentration meditation, and neurologically, it is designed to interrupt endless stream of chaotic thinking that normally occurs in the frontal lobe. Ideally you should do this in a darkened room, but it isn't essential for the practice.

1. Begin by placing a candle that will burn for about 15 minutes in a safe holder, on a dining room table or coffee table, close to a comfortable chair. Smells can augment meditation experiences, so a scented candle may be used. Sit down, with your feet flat on the floor, with a lighter or matches in your hand.

2. Take a few deep breaths just focusing on the unlit candle. Then, in slow motion, light the candle, and take another deep breath of air. Slowly put the lighter down, and sitting up straight, begin to gaze at the candle. Try to blink as little as possible. Even though your eyes may water, this is OK since your tears can help cleanse your eyes.

3. Now bring your visual focus to the flame. Let it fill your entire consciousness as you observe how it dances and flutters. What colors does it make? Does the flame grow taller? Keep watching all of the qualities of the flame for three or four minutes.

4. If interruptive thoughts come into your mind, just let them be there, acknowledge them, and let them go. Then bring your focus back to the candle flame.

5. Now close your eyes, and visualize the flame in your mind. Watch how it dances and flutters in your own imagination. If the image of the flame fades, open your eyes, study the flame again for several minutes and then close your eyes again. Keep doing this until you hold the image of the flame in your mind for five minutes with your eyes closed

That's it! It's simple, powerful and enjoyable. Each time you do the meditation, try to extend the duration. In some practices, you can try to use your imagination to become one with the candle. To do this, imagine that the flame is coming closer and closer to your closed eyes. Then imagine that you are actually inside of the flame.

Exercise # 6: The Centering Prayer

We performed brain scans on a group of Franciscan nuns who practiced the Centering Prayer, a contemplative method that was first described in the 14th century text, *The Cloud of Unknowing*. According to Friar Thomas Keating, one of three Trappist monks who reintroduced

this technique to the Catholic community in the 1970s, it brings the practitioner “into the presence of God” by “reducing the obstacles caused by the hyperactivity of our minds and of our lives.” This practice is very similar to various forms of Eastern contemplation, and, as we discovered in our lab, the neurological effects of the Centering Prayer are similar to some of the meditation practices in Buddhism. It is also similar to Benson’s relaxation response, but the goal has a more religious or spiritual overtone. The practice is supposed to help you feel connected, immersed, and unified with God. In a Centering Prayer, you allow your mind to reflect on all the qualities associated with a particular idea, and you allow the thoughts and feelings to freely flow through your mind, taking you where they will. The form of the practice below is slightly modified so that you can adapt the practice to your specific faith or goal. Begin by finding a comfortable place to sit where you will not be disturbed for twenty minutes.

1. First, identify what your objective of your practice will be (finding inner peace, experiencing compassion for others, receiving the gift of God’s presence, etc.) Or, if you prefer, you can pick a particularly meaningful quote, poem, or passage from a sacred text such as the Bible.

2. When you have found a concept or passage that you wish to explore on a deeper level, sit down in a comfortable chair. Close your eyes and take 5 deep breaths, slowly and deeply.

3. Now focus your awareness on your selected object of contemplation. Do not repeat any words or expressions to yourself. Just be aware of all the thoughts, perceptions, feelings, images, and memories that your contemplation evokes.

4. Notice how the idea or passage makes you feel. Are you happy? Joyful? Sad? Now bring your attention back to your goal, and again watch what feelings and thoughts emerge.

5. If your mind wanders, gently return your awareness by taking several deep breaths, and bring your focus back to the phrase or prayer. Again, let your thoughts take you wherever they want to go.

6. If the object of your contemplation becomes vague or disappears; simply watch what happens next. Don’t “do” anything or “make” anything happen—just

let the experience naturally unfold. After several minutes, again return to the object of your contemplation.

7. Continue this process for about twenty minutes. Then slowly open your eyes. Remain silent for two more minutes, while you take slow, deep breaths.

You can try this another time with a different focus, a different passage or phrase and see how it is similar or different. The goal is ultimately to feel deeply connected with the meaning or idea that is the focus of the practice.

Exercise #7: Walking Meditation

Another important type of meditation is to bring your awareness and relaxation into the world through action. By walking and focusing on your breathing and awareness of the world around you, you can achieve a very calm and balanced state at work, and in relationships with others. In particular, this state allows you to actually experience the world in a very pleasant and engaging way. You'll even perceive the world more intensely than in your usual state of mind. Since walking is a well established aerobic exercise to enhance your physical fitness, walking meditation has the added benefit of providing a mild form of exercise, which may be especially beneficial for people with heart and lung disease.

The exercise is relatively simple, but it does require concentrated attention and awareness, so take your time with this and be patient.

1. First, find a place where you can walk for about ten or twenty paces. A long hallway will do, or a lawn or open park, but try to find a quiet and pleasant place, like a garden.

2. Stand up, and gently shift your weight back and forth between each foot. But really take your time. Notice at what point the heel of one foot comes off the ground, and how your weight shifts onto the various parts of your other foot. Continue to shift your weight back and forth for at least 60 seconds.

3. Now shift your weight forward and backward, and notice what happens to your toes. Repeat this for another minute.

4. Next, in an ultra-slow motion, begin to take a single step forward. But only lift your heel a couple of inches keeping your toes on the ground. In which muscle does the step begin – in your foot, or leg, or knee?

6. Now change to the other foot and lift your heel but keep your toes on the ground. Notice how different it feels.

7. Slowly, *very slowly*, lift your entire foot a few inches from the ground, and pay attention to all the subtle body adjustments that must be made for balance. Lower your foot and raise the other foot two inches. Continue to alternate 20 times as you study which parts of your body are involved.

8. Now begin to take slow steps forward, taking 3-4 steps with every breath in, and 3-4 steps with every breath out. After a few minutes, take two steps with each inhalation and exhalation. Do this for another two minutes.

9. Practice integrating your breathing with your walking for the next five minutes, walking as slowly as you can.

10. When you reach the end of the hall or yard (or after about 20 steps), turn around in ultra-slow motion. Take two minutes to turn around, watching how your balance works, then slowly walk back to where you began.

11. As you walk slowly, begin to bring your attention to the world around you. What is the texture of the ground? What colors do you see in the hall or in the garden? Can you feel any air or wind? Whatever you perceive, focus on it, and then come back to your breathing and take another step.

With just a little practice, you'll find that you can take your relaxation with you anywhere. To really appreciate the depth of this meditation, do it with your partner or a friend. From a spiritual perspective, walking meditation encourages you bring your inner values into play with the world, and it helps you to experience everything around you with greater depth and unity.

Exercise # 8: Kirtan Kriya Meditation

We studied the effects of Kirtan Kriya meditation in people with memory loss and found that it helped change brain function, improved memory, and reduced stress and anxiety. It is a

mantra based meditation that includes four different sounds – SA, TA, NA, and MA – that are sung, not said (technically there are five sounds with the “ah” being the 5th). While you make these sounds, you touch different fingers with each sound (you do this on both hands at the same time). Touch your thumb and index finger when you say SA, your thumb and middle finger when you say TA, your thumb and ring finger when you say NA, and your thumb and pinky when you say MA. You can find recordings of this practice to follow on line.

1. Start by finding a comfortable place to sit where you can sit upright with good posture. Take two minutes to focus on your breathing, watching how your chest rises and falls.

2. Begin singing the sounds: SA, TA, NA, MA while you touch your fingers in succession on both hands. Continue for 2 minutes.

3. Next, repeat the sounds in a whisper while continuing the finger movements. You can still sing it, but just in a whisper. Do this for another 2 minutes.

4. Now, repeat the sounds internally. Say them silently to yourself while continuing the finger movements, and do this for 4 minutes.

5. Repeat the sounds in a whisper for another 2 minutes as you continue to touch your fingers on both hands.

6. Finally, sing the sounds out loud for the final 2 minutes as touch your fingers in succession. Then rest and pay attention to how you feel.

Exercise #9: Sending Kindness and Forgiveness to Others

The basis for this meditation is the golden rule of loving your neighbors as you would love yourself. But the Buddha and Jesus went one step further: they recommended that you practice forgiveness by loving your enemies as well. Forgiveness improves family relationships, decreases depressive symptoms while enhancing empathy and life satisfaction, and it can heal a wounded romantic heart. You can do this practice thinking about a person you love deeply or even consider trying it by thinking about the person you hate the most, and imagine sending him or her love. It may not be easy, but the practice could result in some very intense feelings.

1. Begin by sitting quietly. First, send love to yourself by repeating the following prayer/phrase ten times, out loud, or silently to yourself:

May I be happy.

May I be well.

May I be filled with kindness and peace.

2. Notice how it makes you feel. If you feel uncomfortable, repeat this prayer by sending love to someone who you love – a family member, friend, or even a pet: “May you be happy, may you be well, may you be filled with kindness and peace.” Keep repeating it until you are filled with a warm, compassionate attitude toward that person.

3. Now, turn that energy around and direct it to yourself: “May I be happy, may I be well, may I be filled with kindness and peace.” Since self-love is a very important feeling, if you still have difficulty with this step, it could be very helpful to make this meditation a priority in your life.

4. Next, turn your attention to the person you like the most. Smile as you visualize his or her face, and repeat the prayer above. Then return the love to yourself.

5. Then move on to another person, perhaps a family member or friend, and send that person your prayer. Notice how the feelings change when you think about this person.

6. Keep enlarging your circle by generating love to as many different people as you can: colleagues, neighbors, the mailman, etc. Again notice how the feelings change your mood.

7. Now extend your feelings to the people you find more difficult to love or forgive. Try saying the prayer and sending a loving thought to a person who has hurt you in the past. If you feel resistance, don't fight it. Just acknowledge your feelings, and come back to loving yourself.

8. Pick one person who you find difficult to forgive. Look for one small quality that you like about them and focus your entire attention on that single trait. Try to recall one kind thing he or she once did or said, and concentrate on that.

9. Hold the positive thought as long as you can, then notice if your feelings have changed. Do you feel less anger? Less hurt?

10. Finally extend your love, kindness, and forgiveness to the world: “May everyone be happy, may everyone be well, and may everyone be filled with kindness and peace.” Hold a vision in your mind of all the different people in the world, all cultures, all colors, all religions, and all political groups. Imagine everyone getting along with each other and living together in peace.

It doesn't take much effort to practice kindness and forgiveness, and if you make an internal commitment to do so a few minutes every day, you'll train your brain to suppress anger and fear.