



Meditation

What is meditation? You might be thinking about a Yogi up on a mountainside, or have some idea that meditation is some kind of new age mind control technique better suited to a Buddhist retreat than your daily life, but in fact meditation can be used by anyone to bring a little calm into your everyday existence. The word meditation comes from the Latin words *meditari* (to think, to dwell upon, to exercise the mind) and *mederi* (to heal). Its Sanskrit derivation 'medha' means wisdom.

Meditation is certainly becoming more talked about, and it's gaining popularity in the west after many centuries of being considered part of eastern religion. Meditation is simply a way of using your thoughts, imagination and often words to help you to calm down, relax, and cope with daily life.

How do you meditate?

Like yoga and other popular eastern traditions, there are several different forms of meditation. But meditation isn't a difficult technique that you need to learn from a class or a book. Just practicing breathing techniques is a basic form of meditation that anyone can manage. Meditation in its simplest form could just mean sitting in your back garden, or on a quiet beach, away from distractions, listening to the birds or the sound of the sea.

Different types of meditation

There are a few recognised types of meditation that you can find out more about if you're interested in taking meditation to a higher level.

Transcendental meditation: This is a type of meditation made popular by the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, and designed to give the mind space to be quiet. While meditating, you'll repeat a sound, called a "mantra". Repeating this mantra gives your mind a chance to naturally calm down. At a higher level transcendental meditation is designed to quite literally transcend your thoughts, and connect you to the 'Transcendental being.'

Zen Meditation: Zen meditation is the meditation of self discovery – it involves sitting still and deliberately calming your body and mind – and so allowing you to become open to insight. You sit in prescribed meditation positions, and as thoughts and images enter your mind, you acknowledge them, then gently push them back out again. This takes some practice, but after a period of time, you should find that your

heart rate begins to slow down, your breathing will become shallow, and you will pass into a reflective meditative state.

Taoist meditation: This is a form of meditation originating from China, based on breathing exercises. Taoist breathing techniques are often also used in T'ai Chi or Chi Gung. Taoist meditation can take many forms, and is in essence very similar to Zen meditation, except for the use of a mantra, or occasionally a picture, object or image called a mandala. Candle flames are popular mandala objects – the idea is that you focus your mind on the mantra or the object to the exclusion of all other thoughts.

What are the benefits of meditation?

Meditation is a way of taking yourself away from it all for a while, and there's no denying that in the stressed out world that we live in, taking time out can only be good for us. There have been other medical and psychological claims made for the practice of meditation, too.

Scientists have looked at the brain responses of people who meditate regularly, and found that they seem to be able to cope with stress more effectively – and not just while they are meditating. It's thought that through regular practice they are better able to tune into their body's natural 'relaxation response' - a state of mind which allows them to think more calmly.

Very recent research seems to bolster claims that meditation is good for your health - In a study published in December 2008 in the Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology¹, a form of meditation-based therapy called Mindfulness Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT) proved to be just as effective as anti-depressants in preventing a relapse in symptoms of depression.

The study also showed MBCT to be as cost-effective as drugs when it came to supporting people who had a history of depression.

A small scale American study in 2003² also showed that meditation could have a biological effect on the body, when researchers at the University of Wisconsin-Madison enrolled 41 people in a trial of what they called "mindfulness meditation."

The participants reported higher levels of antibodies in their blood following an eight week programme of meditation classes and a retreat than a control group who did nothing. The electrical activity on the left side of their brains was also found to be higher – which is an indication of lower anxiety and a more positive emotional state.

Simple meditation technique

One simple way to tune into your own relaxation response is by following the technique below:

- Close your eyes and sit comfortably in a place where you won't be disturbed.
- Focus your mind on your breathing.
- Choose a word, or sound, and repeat this every time you breathe out.
- As your mind starts to wander, bring it back by re-focussing your attention onto your breathing.
- Practice this for around 20 minutes every day if you can.

If you fancy trying out the benefits of meditation, and finding out more about some of the more esoteric techniques, there are many websites where you can download free sample guided visualisations and meditations.

Summary

- Meditation is an ancient form of relaxation, and can be very simple to learn
- There are several different types of meditation you could try
- Studies have proved that meditation is beneficial for health and wellbeing

References:

1. Cognitive Therapy As Effective As Anti-depressant Medication, Study Suggests. *ScienceDaily*. Retrieved December 18, 2008, from <http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2008/11/081130201928.htm>
2. Alterations in brain and immune function produced by mindfulness meditation.by: RJ Davidson, J Kabat-Zinn, J Schumacher, M Rosenkranz, D Muller, SF Santorelli, F Urbanowski, A Harrington, K Bonus, JF Sheridan - *Psychosom Med*, Vol. 65, No. 4. (g 2003), pp. 564-570.

A wide range of women's health resources are available at www.healthywomen.org.uk

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