

Meditation 101

What is Meditation?

Meditation is the process of focusing your attention on something, becoming distracted with thoughts, realizing that you have become distracted, and then returning your attention to that which you were focusing on. This cycle of focus, distraction, realization, and refocus *is* meditation.

Meditation is *not* clearing your mind. Contrary to common belief, it is not even possible to clear your mind, that is to get your brain to stop thinking.

Focusing on What?

The three most common “somethings” that meditators focus on are:

1. The Breath. Meditators pay attention to the movement of the lungs or diaphragm as air enters and exits their body or the sensation felt in the nostrils with each breath.
2. A Mantra. Mantras are thought or spoken phrases repeated over and over. A mantra can be whatever you want. Some meditators use foreign Sanskrit words which are said to have a deep meaning, but this is not necessary. Your mantra can be something as simple and meaningless as, “I like peanut butter.”
3. The Flame of a Candle. Focusing on a candle flame is said to help the mediator develop his or her attention better than other objects of concentration. If you wish to use a candle flame as your object of concentration, put the candle at a height that will allow you to look straight at it without tilting your head and sit about two feet away from it. Stare at the flame for about three minutes then close your eyes and focus on the afterimage. When the afterimage disappears, open your eyes and resume staring at the candle. Repeat.

Components of the Typical Meditation Session

1. Positioning your body. There are four standard ways that people position themselves when they meditate. Some people lay flat on their back on a yoga mat or some other soft surface with their hands to their side; some sit on a chair; others use a special meditation bench or pillow; and some folks sit in the cross-legged, Lotus position. Position yourself in whatever way is comfortable for you.
2. Pre-Meditation Relaxation. Before jumping into the actual process of meditation, take a minute to simply relax and let go of any pervasive, obsessive thought patterns. In other words, prepare yourself for the session.
3. Commencement and Duration. As a beginning meditator, you should probably meditate for ten minutes. As you get used to the process, work your way up to fifteen minutes, and then maybe twenty minutes. The average session duration for an experienced meditator is twenty minutes. It is advised to use a timer so that you don't have to stop and look at a clock to monitor your remaining time. There are meditation timer apps such as Insight Timer, available for iPhone and Android, that can be set to issue a bell alert at preset intervals of your choosing during your session for the purpose of

reminding you that you are supposed to be refocusing your attention on your object of meditation. And, of course, these apps also let you know when your session has ended.

4. Ending the session. When your meditation session has ended, take a minute to simply relax and be present. Don't immediately get up and resume your to-do list for the day.

Why Meditate?

The purpose of meditation is to develop mindfulness, specifically a mindful awareness of our thoughts and impulses. Mood, speech, and behavior are preceded by thought and impulse, which influence our mental health, personality, and how we interact with others. When we are able to mindfully and objectively observe our thoughts and impulses, we can better judge them to be either constructive or destructive to our own well-being and that of others. If we deem them destructive, we can then opt to not act on them. Simply put, mindfulness developed through meditation is about self-analysis and introspection for the purpose of becoming a better person.

Meditation also has a calming effect on the brain which creates a sense of peace.

Miscellaneous Observations About Meditation

The brain is a thinking machine. Thinking is exactly what it is *supposed* to do. So don't be surprised to discover that your brain frequently gives in to the urge to stop focusing and resume thinking because the brain *does not* like to meditate. It would much rather engage in thought.

As a beginning meditator, you may find that as much as five minutes have elapsed before you realize that you are supposed to be focusing on your "something" of choice. This is normal. Don't become discouraged or frustrated with yourself. It takes time to develop the ability to maintain focus on an object of concentration. Even those who have meditated for years still lose focus and have to refocus. As stated earlier, losing concentration is part of the meditation process. So just hang in there and keep at it.

Drinking a cup of regular coffee thirty minutes before meditating will help keep you from falling asleep during meditation.