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Basic Meditation

Meditation has been around for a long time, traditionally as part of various religious or spiritual traditions. Luckily, the benefits of meditation transcend any tradition or religious/spiritual belief system. Meditation can help one to achieve a calm, relaxed mind and body, relieve stress, enhance mood and provides benefits to a number of chronic health conditions. This handout offers a basic, beginner's meditation that can be used by anyone.

Set the atmosphere

An important part of meditation, especially in the beginning, includes setting the appropriate atmosphere. Since the main purpose of meditation is to quiet/focus the mind, it is important to minimize outside distractions. This means finding an area that is relatively free from distractions, including extraneous noises & smells. This could be a room in your house that is set aside for such a purpose or perhaps a secluded outdoor location. Once you find a proper location, be sure that the ringer on your phone is off, others in the house know not to disturb you and pets are kept away. Traditionally, meditation is often done early in the morning or later

Assume the position

If you've ever researched meditation, perhaps you've seen yogis sitting in really awkward positions. You don't need to do this. What's most important as a beginning meditator, is to find a position that allows you to be relaxed and comfortable with your back straight. While one can meditate lying down, it is usually not recommended as this position is more conducive to sleep and may interfere with meditation. There are a couple of good positions for beginners - using a chair or sitting cross-legged on the floor.

To use a chair, simply sit on the end of a chair with your back straight, head facing forward, feet flat on the ground and legs about hip-width apart. Rest your hands either palms up or palms down on your thighs. Your hands should be closer to your torso (not near your knees) to allow the shoulders to relax rather than being hunched forward.

If you choose to sit cross-legged on the floor, be sure that this position doesn't place too much stress on your hips or knees. Additionally, it can be helpful to sit on one or several cushions to raise your hips above knee level and reduce the stress on your low-back. Again, sit with you back straight, head facing forward and your hands resting in your lap – palms face up or face down. Pull your shoulders back and allow them to relax.

Breathe

The breath plays a huge role in meditation. For one, proper breathing helps to relax the body and mind, getting it ready for meditation. Secondly, the breath can be a point of focus for meditation that allows the mind to quiet and relax. If you're not familiar with diaphragmatic breathing, see the handout on this for a detailed description.

Once you've set the atmosphere and assumed the position, it's time to begin. Close your eyes and focus on the breath. Breathe through your nose. Feel your belly rise on the inhale and fall on the exhale. The breath should be centered in your belly and you shouldn't feel much movement in your chest. Use the breath to relax your body completely. Sometimes it is helpful to do a relaxation exercise before meditating, but you can also do this while sitting at the beginning of your meditation. On each exhalation, feel your body becoming more and more relaxed. Survey each part of your body for any areas of tension and use the breath to release that tension. As you practice this on a regular basis, you will become more aware of your body and where the tension lies. Do this for a few minutes until you are feeling relaxed.

Now bring your attention back to the breath. Feel the cool air entering your nostrils on each inhalation and warm air leaving the nostrils on each exhalation. The breath should be smooth and steady.

Utilize a Mantra

While you can use the breath to relax and focus your mind, it can also be helpful to use a mantra. You've probably heard of the term and you may have various connotations that come up. In its most basic form, however, a mantra is simply a word or phrase that is mentally repeated during meditation to help quiet and focus the mind. Depending on where the tradition of meditation originates, the mantra used can vary. One basic mantra that beginners can use is "so hum".

To use this mantra, while you are breathing, begin to mentally hear the word "so" when you inhale and "hum" when you exhale. Do not actually say the words. Rather, simply hear them in your mind. Allow the words to become a point of focus and let them flow with the breath. You will continue to have thoughts and distractions come up in your mind. That's ok and it's perfectly normal. Don't try to suppress the thoughts. Instead, just witness their appearance. Observe them and bring your mind back to the mantra. Sometimes you will get caught up in the flow of thoughts. Again, this is ok. Simply recognize when this happens and bring your mind back to the mantra. Over time and practice, your mind will become quieter and distracted less with extraneous thoughts and you will be able to focus longer on the mantra.

Repeat Daily

You've just meditated! Meditation can seem very frustrating in the beginning for some of us. Your thoughts are wandering and you may feel that sitting there doing nothing is a waste of time when you have so many other things you could be doing. Over time, however, you'll notice that it becomes easier and you'll come to enjoy the moments of quiet. We all need time to ourselves, especially in a society that is so obsessed with productivity. We all know that things like exercise are good for our health. Think of meditation as a type of exercise for the mind, akin to stretching. Regular practice of meditation creates a peaceful atmosphere for the mind, reduces stress and can help to cultivate a sense of joy and purpose.

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