

Stress Management: Meditation Exercises



Meditation in its most straightforward form is the art of concentrating focus on a specific entity. Generally, this object is something simple such as a word or phrase, an object in the room, or simply the natural rhythms of your breathing.

As we go about our day-to-day lives, our minds are constantly active. The brain is forever processing the sensations that bombard our senses, as well as our emotions and our internal dialogue (thoughts).

When we meditate, we narrow our focus and limit the inputs being processed; thereby calming our minds.

Meditation is not a technique, so much as a way of being – a state of mind. There is a paradoxical aspect to meditation: while the practice of meditation results in the control of our rambling stream-of-consciousness thoughts, it also leads to the liberation of our minds from being controlled by those very thoughts. So, in a sense, it involves taking control to break control. The goal is to find a state of clarity, relaxation and serenity.

One variety of meditation that has been shown as very effective is mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) which has its roots in ancient Buddhist traditions. MBSR involves paying attention to the moment, staying in the present, and disengaging from judgment.

BREATHING.

The easiest and most effective way of practicing mindfulness as a meditative practice is to simply focus your attention on your breathing.

One of the locations on your body where your breath can be easily observed is the belly, which moves in and out with each breath if it is relaxed. No matter where you choose to focus, the idea is to be aware of the sensations that accompany your breathing and to hold them in the forefront of your awareness, moment to moment.

Paying attention to your breathing means just paying attention. Nothing more. It doesn't mean you should "push" or force your breathing, or try to make it deeper or change its pattern. It doesn't mean you need to think about your breathing but rather be aware of it and feel the sensations associated with it and their changing qualities.

In meditation, the breath acts as an anchor for our attention. When you notice that your mind has wandered and is no longer on your breathing, just bring it back. Each time you notice that your mind is off someplace else, you gently bring your attention back to your belly and back to your breathing. By doing so you are training your mind to be less reactive and more stable.

MEDITATION EXERCISES.

EXERCISE 1.

1. Assume a comfortable posture lying on your back or sitting.
2. Close your eyes if it feels comfortable.
3. Bring your attention to your belly, feeling it rise or expand gently on the inbreath and fall or recede on the outbreath.
4. Keep the focus on your breathing, "being with" each inbreath for its full duration and with each outbreath for its full duration, as is you were riding the waves of your own breathing.

5. Every time you notice that your mind has wandered off the breath, notice what it was that took you away and then gently bring your attention back to your belly and the feeling of breath coming in and out.

6. If your mind wanders away from the breath a hundred times, then your “job” is simply to bring it back to the breath every time, no matter what it becomes preoccupied with.

7. Practice this exercise for 15 minutes at a convenient time, every day, whether you feel like it or not, for one week and see how it feels to incorporate a disciplined meditation practice into your life. Be aware of how it feels to spend some time each day just being with your breath without having to do anything.

EXERCISE 2.

1. Tune in to your breathing at different times during the day, feeling the belly go through one or two risings and fallings.

2. Become aware of your thoughts and feelings at these moments, just observing them without judging them or yourself.

3. At the same time, be aware of any changes in the way you are seeing things and feeling about yourself.