

What Is Meditation?

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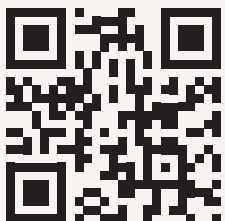


Meditation is the practice of turning your attention to a single point of reference. It can involve focusing on your breath, on bodily sensations or on a word or phrase. The aim is to shift your attention away from distracting thoughts and focus on the present. Meditation has been shown to be beneficial to both our physical and mental health - relieving stress and anxiety, improving our immune system, lowering our blood pressure, managing pain, regulating our emotions and helping control addictions. It has also been shown to improve our memory, focus and creativity, and increase grey matter in our brains - mitigating and even reversing the effects of ageing on cognitive functioning.

Meditation has its roots in religious practice, but today is more popularly practiced as an antidote to our busy, information saturated lives. Apps for guided meditations can be found online, but a simple breath-led meditation (gently counting your breath in and out) can be practiced by anyone, anywhere. Studies have shown that even a short daily meditation of 10-15 minutes can improve your sense of wellbeing, your health, and the quality of your life.

Psychologists are increasingly using 'mindful meditation' as a tool to help boost our resilience to stress and to relieve anxiety and depression. Meditation calms our minds and reduces overthinking and rumination, but it has also been shown to have a positive physiological impact on our brain structure. MRI scans on the brains of people on an eight-week course of mindfulness practice showed that the amygdala, the brain's "fight or flight" centre tuned to initiate the body's natural stress response, physically reduced in size in response to the practice. Studies on Buddhist monks have shown meditation also produces long-lasting changes in brain activity in the areas involved in attention, working memory, learning and conscious perception.

Regular practice is the key to getting the most positive benefit from meditation. It is a skill and, like all skills, the more we practice the better we become. One of the best things about meditation is that it requires no expensive equipment or specialist clothing – just a small investment of our time and attention.



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