




# FIND peace WITHIN

Meditation can help you feel calmer, be more present in the moment,  
and savor life to the fullest.

BY LISA FIELDS ILLUSTRATIONS BY KARLI INGERSOLL



A woman with dark hair in a ponytail, wearing a black long-sleeved shirt and purple leggings, is sitting in a meditative lotus position on a large, dark, mossy rock. She is facing left, looking out over a calm blue ocean. In the background, there are blue mountains under a pale, hazy sky. Overlaid on the image are several white, hand-drawn style line art elements: two large, thin, curved lines resembling parentheses or waves on either side of the woman, and two stylized leafy branches, one on each side of her head.

"Meditation is attention training," says Sharon Salzberg, author of *Real Happiness: The Power of Meditation* (Workman Publishing; 2011). "Using simple tools, like awareness of the breath, we train our attention to be calmer, more open, and more connected to our experience."

It is simply a calming daily exercise—not weird, not trendy. You don't need to be Buddhist or part of a group, sit in an

uncomfortable position, or buy special equipment. Sitting (or moving) quietly and concentrating on your breathing helps you focus on the present, instead of regretting the past or worrying about the future.

People all over the world from numerous religious and cultural backgrounds have practiced meditation for thousands of years. Meditation began gaining momentum in the United States in the 1960s.

Now more than 20 million Americans practice it. "Little by little, it starts to be a part of you," says Barb Schmidt, author of *The Practice: Simple Tools for Managing Stress, Finding Inner Peace, and Uncovering Happiness* (HCI Books; 2014). "You realize you are the boss of your own mind. You become a little more patient. You have the ability to bring yourself back to the moment. You start feeling good about yourself."





# Calm

## MIND-BODY BENEFITS

Many people meditate because it helps them feel more peaceful and balanced, but the practice is also linked with health benefits. It has been shown to reduce anxiety and depression and be good for the heart.

The American Heart Association recommends daily meditation as a possible way to lower your risk of cardiovascular disease. A study in the *Journal of Behavioral Medicine* found that mindful meditation reduces stress levels, which can lower blood pressure and may help reduce the risk of heart disease. "It's good for your blood pressure, but more importantly it clears your mind so you know that the challenges you face are the same challenges that everyone else faces," says Sylvia Boorstein, Ph.D., author of *Pay Attention, for Goodness' Sake: The Buddhist Path of Kindness* (Ballantine Books; 2003). "People are trying mindfulness because they want to feel better in their bodies and minds."

"Meditation doesn't solve all of our problems in life—it gives us a new

perspective to view them," Schmidt says. "Instead of dwelling on a thought, you intercept it with a breath. You're not running that same loop over and over in your mind; you're giving yourself permission to stop."

## GETTING STARTED

If you want to try meditation, commit to spending five minutes a day for a month, so you can see how the practice will affect your life.

"It's the emotional, psychological equivalent of exercising," says Salzberg, who cofounded the Insight Meditation Society in Massachusetts. "Not every day feels great, but if you have a commitment (to meditate), you just do it. You begin to see the changes in your life." Here's how to get started:

- **Make an appointment with yourself.** Many people meditate when they wake up, before they interact with anyone else. Scheduling a set time will help you make a consistent commitment. "We wouldn't go into a meeting without being prepared," Schmidt says. "The same is true for our life. Meditation is

preparation for our life. We're gaining balance and clarity."

- **Sit comfortably.** Pick a cozy chair, and sit up straight with your feet flat on the floor. Wear anything that's comfortable. "You don't have to sit in some pretzel-like pose," Salzberg says. "Some people lie down because they have back problems."

- **Focus on your breath.** Meditation helps you relax by bringing your attention to something that calms you. The sensation of your own breathing has been there your entire life, which is very reassuring. When you learn to relax to this sensation of breathing, you can meditate anywhere. "That's really handy, because the breath goes with us to work, to the doctor's office when we're nervous, to the job interview," Salzberg says. "In the middle of a complicated, tumultuous setting, we can remind ourselves: OK, just breathe, just take a few breaths. And it really works."

- **Keep your attention on breathing.** Close your eyes. Inhale and exhale slowly and evenly, and focus on a body



part that's involved in the process. (For example, your chest rises and falls and your nostrils feel the air passing through.) For a few minutes, focus on the sensation of breathing instead of your responsibilities. "When your attention wanders, which it probably will very quickly," Salzberg says, "gently let go and bring your attention back to the breath."

- **Let go of passing thoughts.** Don't worry that you can't zone out and erase all thoughts from your mind. Contrary to popular belief, that isn't the point of the exercise. "You're not trying to stop thinking," Schmidt says. "You learn to let the thoughts come and go. Your mind is going to take you off on a tangent, but instead of engaging it, you bring your attention back to your breath."

#### ALTERNATE APPROACHES

Meditation isn't one-size-fits-all; there are many different ways to practice. "It's like food or music—innumerable recipes or styles," says Lorin Roche, Ph.D., coauthor of *Meditation Secrets for Women* (HarperOne; 2001). Some people much prefer to meditate with their eyes open, gazing at something beautiful. And some people prefer to meditate in motion, while walking or dancing. "If sitting quietly doesn't appeal to you, consider these alternative options:

- **Repeat a mantra.** It can be helpful to have a soothing phrase or mantra to repeat in your mind as a reminder that you want to be more patient or calm. You can easily add such a phrase to a simple breathing meditation. "Some people like to say, 'Breathing in, I calm my body; breathing out, I smile,'" says Boorstein, a founding teacher of the Spirit Rock Meditation Center in California.

- **Gaze at beauty.** If you respond to visual cues, you may prefer to meditate with your eyes open. Focus on a candle's dancing flame or a blooming vase of flowers instead of your breath. If your gaze at a simple object allows you to focus, you'll reap the same benefits as focusing on breathing. "In order to meditate, you can use any of your senses," says Roche, who has taught meditation for 40 years. "You take the kind of attention that you use

when you are savoring life and you continue for a longer period of time. If you look at a bowl of flowers, you might look, inhale the scent, and appreciate them for five or 10 minutes. That's a natural meditative state."

- **Listen to guided meditation.**

Consider guided meditation, especially if you find silence off-putting. An instructor gives step-by-step instructions, usually with soothing background music. Look for guided meditation at local meditation centers and on CD. Try Deepak Chopra's and Oprah Winfrey's joint offering, *21-Day Meditation Experience: Desire & Destiny* (Chopra Center; 2013). Smartphone apps such as the free Insight Timer offer guided meditations from best-selling authors including Jon Kabat-Zinn and Thich Nhat Hanh.

- **Meditate while walking.** Can't sit still? Fidgety people can meditate while moving. When you take your morning walk in the neighborhood, focus your attention on your breathing and let go of any passing thoughts. "Your breath starts to match the rhythm of your footsteps," Schmidt says. "As you're walking, you're really being present in the moment. Most of the time, we're walking with headphones or caught up in our thoughts. You're really just being, allowing your senses to take in the beauty that's around you."

#### REAPING THE BENEFITS

After a few weeks of attempting to focus your thoughts and remain undistracted, you'll begin to notice that positive effects emerge naturally in your personal life.

"You respond to situations more wisely," Boorstein says. "You're not so thrown by the normal challenges of daily life. Your mind learns to stay more balanced." You'll begin to react differently when you are up against a deadline or you have to leave work early to pick up your sick child. One of the perks of meditation is that it increases your ability to deal skillfully with stressful situations. "The whole point is that you have a skill," Salzberg says. "You're at work, there's an argument going on, anxiety is starting to fill the room. You don't have to do anything that looks weird; you just rest your

attention on your breath to get calm and centered."

Practicing meditation can also help you improve your relationships, because you're more likely to focus fully on your friend, partner, or child. "You'll find that you're listening more to people," Salzberg says. "We learn how to concentrate. We feel more centered, grounded, and compassionate." ■

## MEDITATING MENTORS

Learn how these busy women benefit from regular meditation time.

#### ENJOYING QUALITY FAMILY TIME.

"When I'm playing a game with my kids, I'm actually playing the game, not worrying about what I need to do next. My husband says I seem happier and I laugh more often. I feel like I have more patience."

—ANDREA STEPHENSON, 46, SOLON, OHIO

#### RISING ABOVE THE SITUATION.

"The little things seem to roll off more easily, and the big things? Well, they just aren't as 'dramatic' as they once were."

—JANIS KUPFERER, 49, ATLANTA

**THINKING MORE CLEARLY.** "What I most get out of meditation is a chance to allow my brain to relax. It's amazing to me how my creativity flows and how I can solve issues when I do this regularly."

—DEZ STEPHENS, 49, NASHVILLE

#### UNPLUGGING FROM THE 21ST CENTURY.

"With all of the e-mail, Facebook, homework, housekeeping, and text messages, I'm easily overwhelmed. If I meditate, even for just a few minutes a day, I am happier. I am more effective. I am a better mother, wife, and businesswoman."

—LISA LARSON-KELLEY, 45, NYACK, NEW YORK

**DE-STRESSING.** "I find that no matter how little or how much time I spend on my meditation, my shoulders release down, I feel more calm and relaxed, my heart rate slows down, and I can focus more clearly."

—SHARI CZAR, 47, SOMERSET, NEW JERSEY