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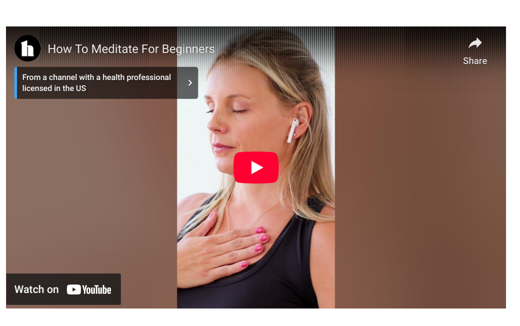
# How Meditation Benefits Your Mind and Body

Medically reviewed by Joslyn Jelinek, LCSW, ACSW, RDDP — Written by Matthew Thorpe, MD, PhD and Rachael Ajmera, MS, RD — Updated on August 15, 2024

Stress | Anxiety | Emotional health | Self-awareness | Attention span | Memory | Kindness | Addiction | Sleep | Pain | Blood pressure | Accessibility | Takeaway

While meditation is well known as a technique to reduce stress and anxiety, it may also help enhance your mood, promote healthy sleep patterns, and boost cognitive skills.




Meditation is the habitual process of training your mind to focus and redirect your thoughts.

The popularity of meditation is increasing as more people discover its many health benefits.

You can use it to increase awareness of yourself and your surroundings. Many think of it as a way to reduce stress and develop concentration.

People also use the practice to develop other beneficial habits and feelings, such as a positive mood and outlook, self-discipline, healthy sleep patterns, and even increased pain tolerance.

This article reviews 12 health benefits of meditation.

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## 1. Reduces stress

Stress reduction is one of the most common reasons people try meditation.

Over time, physiological markers of stress, like increased cortisol and heart rate, can have wide-ranging impacts on everything from sleep to blood pressure.

A 2017 review of 45 studies suggests various forms of mediation can help to decrease physiological markers of stress.

Other research suggests that meditation may also improve symptoms of certain conditions that are impacted by stress, including:

- irritable bowel syndrome
- post-traumatic stress disorder
- fibromyalgia

## 2. Controls anxiety

Meditation can reduce stress levels, which translates to less anxiety.

An older 2014 meta-analysis including nearly 1,300 adults found that meditation may decrease anxiety. Notably, this effect was strongest in those with the highest levels of anxiety.

Another study found that 8 weeks of mindfulness meditation helped reduce anxiety symptoms in people with generalized anxiety disorder, along with increasing positive self-statements and improving stress reactivity and coping.

Meditation may also help control job-related anxiety. One study found that employees who used a mindfulness meditation app for 8 weeks experienced improved feelings of well-being and decreased distress and job strain, compared with those in a control group.

## 3. Supports emotional health

Some forms of meditation can lead to improved self-image and a more positive outlook on life.

For example, one review of treatments given to more than 3,500 adults found that mindfulness meditation improved symptoms of depression.

A 2015 study found that people who completed a meditation exercise experienced fewer negative thoughts in response to viewing negative images than those in a control group).

## 4. Enhances self-awareness

Some forms of meditation may help you develop a stronger understanding of yourself, helping you grow into your best self.

For example, self-inquiry meditation aims to help you develop a greater understanding of yourself and how you relate to those around you.

Other forms teach you to recognize harmful or self-defeating thoughts. The idea is that as you gain greater awareness of your thought habits, you can steer them toward more constructive patterns.

In a 2019 study, 153 adults who used a mindfulness meditation app for 2 weeks experienced reduced feelings of loneliness and increased social contact compared with those in a control group.

## 5. Lengthens attention span

Focused attention meditation is like weightlifting for your attention span. It helps increase your attention span's strength and endurance.

For example, one study found that people who listened to a meditation tape experienced improved attention and accuracy while completing a task, compared with those in a control group.

A different study found that people who regularly practiced meditation performed better on a visual task and had a greater attention span than those without any meditation experience.

Even meditating for a short period each day may benefit you. One study found that meditating for just 13 minutes daily enhanced attention and memory after 8 weeks.

## 6. May reduce age-related memory loss

Improvements in attention and clarity of thinking may help keep your mind young.

Kirtan Kriya is a method of meditation that combines a mantra or chant with repetitive finger motions to focus your thoughts. Older studies in people with age-related memory loss have shown it improves performance on neuropsychological tests.

An older 2014 review found preliminary evidence that multiple meditation styles can increase attention, memory, and mental quickness in older volunteers.

## 7. Can generate kindness

Some types of meditation may particularly increase positive feelings and actions toward yourself and others.

Metta meditation, a type of meditation also known as loving-kindness meditation, begins with developing kind thoughts and feelings toward yourself.

Through practice, people learn to extend this kindness and forgiveness externally, first to friends, then acquaintances, and ultimately enemies.

A meta-analysis of 22 studies on this form of meditation demonstrated its ability to increase peoples' compassion toward themselves and others.

These benefits appear to accumulate over time with the practice of loving-kindness meditation.

## 8. May help with addiction

The mental discipline you can develop through meditation may help you break dependencies by increasing your self-control and awareness of triggers for addictive behaviors.

A 2018 study involving 60 people receiving treatment for alcohol use disorder linked practicing transcendental meditation with lower levels of stress, psychological distress, alcohol cravings, and alcohol use after 3 months.

Meditation may also help you control food cravings. An older review of 14 studies found that mindfulness meditation helped participants reduce emotional stress and binge eating.

## 9. Improves sleep

An older 2014 study compared mindfulness-based meditation programs and found that people who meditated stayed asleep longer and had improved insomnia severity, compared with those who had an unmedicated control condition.

Becoming skilled in meditation may help you control or redirect the racing or runaway thoughts that often lead to insomnia.

Additionally, it can help relax your body, release tension, and ease you into a peaceful state in which you're more likely to fall asleep.

## 10. Helps control pain

Some research suggests that incorporating meditation into your routine could be beneficial for controlling pain.

For example, a 2017 review of 38 studies concluded that mindfulness meditation could reduce pain, improve quality of life, and decrease symptoms of depression in people with chronic pain.

A large 2014 meta-analysis of studies enrolling nearly 3,500 participants linked meditation with decreased pain.

## 11. Can decrease blood pressure

Meditation can also improve physical health by reducing strain on the heart.

Over time, high blood pressure makes the heart work harder to pump blood, leading to poor heart function.

High blood pressure also contributes to atherosclerosis, or a narrowing of the arteries, which can lead to heart attack and stroke.

A 2015 meta-analysis of 12 studies enrolling nearly 1,000 participants found that meditation helped reduce blood pressure. This was more effective among older participants and those with higher blood pressure before the study (42).

In part, meditation appears to control blood pressure by relaxing the nerve signals that coordinate heart function, blood vessel tension, and the "fight-or-flight" response that increases alertness in stressful situations.

## 12. Accessible anywhere

People practice many different forms of meditation, most of which don't require specialized equipment or space. You can practice with just a few minutes daily.

If you want to start meditating, try choosing a form of meditation based on what you want to get out of it.

There are two major styles of meditation:

- **Focused-attention meditation.** This style concentrates attention on a single object, thought, sound, or visualization. It emphasizes ridding your mind of distractions. Meditation may focus on breathing, a mantra, or a calming sound.
- **Open-monitoring meditation.** This style encourages broadened awareness of all aspects of your environment, train of thought, and sense of self. It may include becoming aware of suppressed thoughts, feelings, or impulses.

If your regular work and home environments do not allow for consistent, quiet alone time, consider participating in a class. This can also improve your chances of success by providing a supportive community.

Alternatively, consider setting your alarm a few minutes early to take advantage of quiet time in the morning. This may help you develop a consistent habit and allow you to start the day positively.

## The bottom line

Meditation is something everyone can do to improve their mental and emotional health without special equipment or costly memberships.

Trying out a style of meditation suited to your goals is a great way to improve your quality of life, even if you only have a few minutes to do it daily.

Last medically reviewed on August 15, 2024

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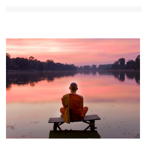
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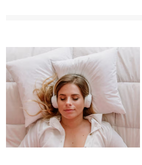
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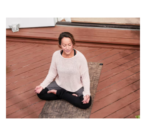
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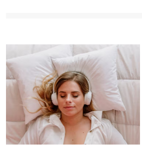
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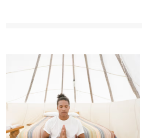
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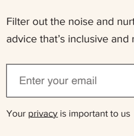
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