

Meditation

Meditation is a mind-body process that uses concentration or reflection to relax the body and calm the mind. It has been defined as the intentional self-regulation of attention, a mental focus on a particular aspect of one's inner or outer experience. One commonly practiced type is Transcendental Meditation, which involves repeating a word or phrase (mantra), either silently or aloud. Another is mindfulness meditation, in which a person observes sensations, perceptions, and thoughts without judgment as they arise. There are other types of meditation that focus attention by walking or visualizing. Meditations that focus on words or images and do not strive for a state of thoughtless awareness are sometimes called quasi-meditative.

Overview

Meditation is one of several relaxation methods approved by an independent panel, convened by the National Institutes of Health (NIH), as a useful complementary therapy for treating chronic pain and insomnia. In one survey, 65% of National Cancer Institute treatment centers offered meditation or relaxation therapy along with the usual medical care. There is no scientific evidence that meditation is effective in treating cancer or any other disease; however, it can help to improve the quality of life for people with cancer.

How is it used?

The NIH National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine reports that regular meditation can reduce chronic pain, anxiety, high blood pressure, cholesterol, health care use, substance abuse, post-traumatic stress syndrome in Vietnam veterans, and blood cortisol levels that were brought on by stress (sometimes called "stress hormones").

Practitioners also claim meditation improves mood, immune function, and fertility. Supporters further claim meditation increases mental efficiency and alertness, and raises self-awareness, which contributes to relaxation.

What does it involve?

There are different forms of meditation. Meditation may be done while sitting, but there are also moving forms of meditation, like tai chi, walking, and the Japanese martial art aikido. Meditation can be self-directed, or guided by doctors, psychiatrists, other mental health professionals, or yoga masters.

Meditation may be done by choosing a quiet place free from distraction, sitting or resting quietly with eyes closed, noticing breathing and physical sensations, noticing and then letting go of all intruding thoughts. The person may also achieve a relaxed yet alert state by focusing on a pleasant idea or thought, or by chanting a phrase or special sound silently or aloud. The ultimate goal of meditation is to separate oneself mentally from the outside world by suspending the usual stream of consciousness. Some practitioners recommend two 15 to 20 minute sessions a day.

What is the history behind it?

Meditation is an important part of ancient Eastern religious practices, particularly in India, China, and Japan, but can be found in all cultures of the world. Meditation began to attract attention in the West in

the 1960s when the Indian leader Maharishi Mahesh Yogi brought his method called Transcendental Meditation (TM) to the United States. In 1968, a Harvard cardiologist named Herbert Benson was asked by TM practitioners to test them on their ability to lower their own blood pressures. Benson later developed a popular relaxation technique called the relaxation response. Interest in the use of meditation in the treatment of people with cancer began in the 1970s and early 1980s, when Ainslie Meares, MD, an Australian psychiatrist, studied the use of meditation for enhancing the immune system in order to reduce the size of tumors.

Today, universities and continuing education programs provide training in behavioral medicine, including meditation. Some clinics at major medical centers and local hospitals offer meditation as a form of behavioral medicine.

What is the evidence?

In the last 20 years, meditation has been studied in clinical trials as a way of reducing stress on both the mind and body. Research shows that meditation can reduce anxiety, stress, blood pressure, chronic pain, and insomnia. An NIH panel found evidence that regular meditation can also reduce cholesterol levels, symptoms of post-traumatic stress syndrome in Vietnam veterans, substance abuse, health care use, and increase longevity and quality of life. However, more recent studies have not shown longer survival in people who meditate.

Studies of mindfulness meditation found that it seemed to help with symptoms of anxiety. One controlled study with a group of healthy workers found more brain activity in an area linked to positive emotional states in those who meditated. The same study found that those who meditated had a better immune response to the influenza vaccine than those who did not meditate.

A controlled study of 90 cancer patients who did mindfulness meditation for 7 weeks had 31% lower stress symptoms and 67% less mood disturbance than those who did not meditate.

Are there any complications?

Most experts agree that the positive effects of meditation outweigh any negative reactions. Complications are rare; however, a small number of people who meditate have become disoriented or anxious and experienced some negative feelings.

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