

Meditation Methods

Once viewed as a mystical Eastern discipline, the art of meditation is quickly developing strong roots among Westerners. Yoga and meditation expert Michele Hébert provides an introduction to meditation and offers suggestions on how to start.

1 Know What Research Shows.

A landmark study of patients with heart disease—conducted by Dean Ornish, MD, a decade ago—documented significant health improvements when meditation was combined with diet and exercise. Now, research indicates that meditation *alone* can provide significant health benefits. A study reported in *Stroke* found that meditation by itself reduced the incidence of atherosclerosis even when subjects made no changes to their diets and fitness routines.

2 Stop Mental Chatter.

With life's challenges, it is likely that you feel you have a constantly "chattering mind"; and you are focused on the past or the future. Meditation can help you focus on the present, which naturally transfers into your daily activities. You become more present and aware in your interactions with others.

3 Direct Your Mind Inward.

When practicing meditation, your mind becomes peaceful as you shift your focus from the busy outer world and direct it inward. The goal of meditation is to achieve union with the essence of

who you are in the deepest part of yourself.

4 Find a Quiet Spot. To make the most of your meditation practice, find a peaceful spot in your home, in a place of worship or in nature. Choose a place where you won't be disturbed by others.

5 Sit to Meditate. To help you stay alert while meditating, sit in a chair or in a simple cross-legged position on the floor or a pillow. Sit with a straight spine.

6 Know How Long to Meditate. While some experts recommend meditating for 20 minutes at a time, the length of each session is up to you and is not as important as simply meditating daily. Just as you train your body through a consistent exercise program, in meditation you train your mind through consistent practice.

7 "Watch" Your Breath. How do you meditate? Use this technique or one of the next two described. This first technique is also referred to as vipasana, or mindfulness meditation. To begin, sit quietly. Thoughts will move through your mind, but keep your attention focused on your breath. Mentally "follow" your breath as it flows in and out of your body. Notice the space between the inhalation and exhalation. If your mind begins to wander (which is very natural), simply bring it back by concentrating on your breathing. Approach this practice as a calm observer.

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8 Concentrate on an Object.

In this method, focus your gaze on a real object, such as a flower, a candle flame or the ocean. Try to hold your concentration on the object until you feel you are completely present with it in the moment. Start out doing this for five minutes at a time until you notice your mind calming. You can increase the time as you become more comfortable with the practice.

9 Recite a Mantra.

Mantra is a Sanskrit word that means "control of the mind." To practice mantra meditation, repeat a special word or series of words to help you discipline your mind and bring it into the present moment. Yoga and meditation teacher Walt Baptiste recommends words such as peace, harmony and joy. Repeat the mantra 10 times, counting on the fingers of both hands. With practice, you can gradually increase the time you meditate using this method.

10 Know When It's Best to Meditate.

Meditation can be done at any time. However, many people meditate in the morning to align themselves physically, mentally and emotionally for the day ahead and to ensure a daily practice. In addition, meditation before exercise can clear the mind and help you enter a "zone" of focused awareness, which can help maximize physical performance.

