

# Just Breathe

THE POWERFUL SIMPLICITY OF MEDITATION by Rhea Maze

*Imagine your thoughts as leaves on a river, clouds moving across the sun or cars on a train— with the goal being to watch the train go by without jumping onto any of the cars. Therein lies the inherent challenge of meditation.*

“Instead of trying not to think, the key to meditation is bringing the mind back,” says Stacey Freedenthal, Ph.D., psychotherapist and associate professor at University of Denver’s graduate school of social work.

Though meditation is basic in theory and simply requires the ability to breathe, it revolves around a state of “being,” which is tough to do in our “doing”-obsessed culture. Yet it’s never been more apparent how beneficial it can be to step off the treadmill of outward distractions and to-do lists in order to let the mind and body rejuvenate.

“Meditation results in physiological changes due to the relaxation it triggers,” Freedenthal says. “This can result in slower breathing and heart rate, lower blood pressure and, in general, a soothing feeling of relaxation. This response is very useful for people who struggle with stress, depression, anger, post-traumatic stress, anxiety and many other conditions.”

With some of the earliest records of meditation dating back to India some 5,000 years ago, the practice has since taken on a variety of forms and is gaining increasing recognition as an effective health practice. Not a religion, and defined in one way as concentrated focus on the breath to increase awareness of the present moment, reduce stress and promote relaxation, various studies link meditation and mindfulness practices to better overall health, a higher quality of life and lower health care costs.

“Mindfulness practices have proven beneficial for pain, heart disease, diabetes control, hypertension and more. This reinforces the power of a very simple technique which is free, doable by everyone, portable and effective,” says Dr. Monique Giroux of the Movement and NeuroPerformance Center at Swedish Medical Center.

Emerging science associates meditation and mindfulness practices with a host of health benefits including better sleep, improved memory, reduced cardiovascular risk and a healthier immune system—to name just a few. Researchers at UCLA linked mindfulness meditation to decreased feelings of loneliness among elderly populations and reduced inflammation in the body.



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“I take opportunities to practice ‘moments of mindfulness’ with my patients. This can include using breath work or guided imagery for stress reduction— or simply introducing a discussion on the power of the mind,” Giroux says. In addition to a wide array of health benefits, she has also seen a regular practice enhance patients’ ability to cope with disease and the fear associated with it.

“We tend to focus on the body and its accompanying aches and pains as we age or suffer from disease— but the mind is a part of ourselves. Traditional medical therapies will work better if we engage the mind and the body toward better healing and emotional well-being through stress reduction, enhanced attitude and emotional resiliency.”

And while meditation does take a bit of disciplined effort, it doesn’t mean having to sit cross-legged in an ashram for hours on end. “You can practice meditation techniques for just a few minutes a day,” Freedenthal says. “Of course, the more regularly it’s used, the better, but you don’t have to be all-or-nothing about it.” ■

## MEDITATION BASICS

1. Find a comfortable position with a straight spine.
2. Begin to focus on your breath.
3. When your mind drifts, watch the thoughts that arise pass by like leaves on a river and gently bring your focus back to your breath.

## TIPS

- Meditation can be done lying down or even while in motion. To get comfortable, use pillows, blankets and chairs, lean against a wall, etc.
- Slowly increase your time each session. If you only have three to five minutes, try to build on that and perhaps do seven minutes the next day.
- Seek out resources including books, articles and guided meditations.
- Take a beginning meditation class and ask the instructor questions. Try a variety of techniques to find methods that feel right for you.

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