

Meditation isn't just about relaxing

December 2 2010, By Julie Deardorff

Meditation is a brain-boosting, stress-busting activity that is now embraced by everyone from the U.S. military to corporate executives. And if you're living a busy, hectic life - and can't fathom finding time to sit cross-legged in a quiet room - you're an ideal candidate too.

"If you don't have 30 minutes to meditate, you probably need an hour," said Tamara Gerlach, a San Francisco-based meditation student and teacher. "The people who race through their life are usually the ones who could use some focus and serenity."

Your mind is a muscle you can train; meditation is the tool used to focus it or quiet it down. Every day thousands of thoughts zip through our heads, something Gerlach likens to a jar of dirty water: Keep shaking up the jar - or your head - and it will remain clouded. But "if we set the jar down, letting the dirt particles settle to the bottom, it leaves clarity at the top," she said.

Meditation will not stop your thoughts. It will not empty your mind. Instead, proponents say, it teaches you how to replace the mental chatter in your head with stillness. This ability helps us live more consciously in the present moment.

"Through more mindful attention, we can make wise choices," said Joseph Goldstein, who has been leading meditation retreats worldwide since 1974 and co-founded the Insight Meditation Society. "As the Vietnamese meditation master Thich Nhat Hanh remarked, 'Happiness is available. Please help yourselves to it.'"

Still confused? Take a long, slow, deep belly breath and read on.

Q: What is meditation, exactly?

A: It's the "art and practice of being present for your life," said meditation teacher Elisa Commerce. The key words here are "art and practice." Meditation requires effort and an ocean of patience, especially in the beginning. One of the biggest obstacles for beginners is that they get bored or expect Dalai Lama-like results overnight. Meditation can be relaxing, but relaxing isn't meditation. Meditation is sitting with a purpose.

Q: How does meditation work?

A: There are many forms, but all involve focusing on a single stimulus, such as your breath, a particular word, or an image. Get your body in a comfortable position. When random thoughts barge into your head, label it as "a thought" and bring your attention back to your chosen stimulus, such as your breath. "It's like training a puppy," Jack Kornfield said in "Meditation for Beginners." "You say 'stay' but after a few breaths, the puppy wanders away. You go back and gently pick it up and bring it back." Kornfield says the practice of learning how to sit still and become mindful is one of the most important forms of meditation.

Q: Who can benefit from meditation?

A: Anyone who feels stressed, tired, overburdened, has a chronic injury or illness or who doesn't want to miss out on their life. "Meditation is a way to plug people back into the deepest part of who they are," said executive meditation coach Mark Thornton. "It will reconnect you to parts of yourself you've forgotten about or lost." Meditation is increasingly being used in the health care field; Doctors treat stress-related illnesses using a meditation technique called mindfulness-based

stress reduction, created by meditation teacher Jon Kabat-Zinn.

Q: When should I meditate?

A: Whenever you can; when you wake up, in the shower, during your morning commute, or during a board meeting. Once chief operating officer for JP Morgan, Thornton found that taking micro-meditation breaks while moving during the day could be just as profound as going on a retreat. "I thought meditation was something you did on your own; in fact it can be an integral part of the day," he said. Constantly interrupting the mind to make a stillness connection can "interrupt suffering and create peace," said Thornton, author of "Meditation in a New York Minute."

Q: Can I meditate while I ride a bike or run?

A: It's possible to practice mindfulness in any activity, said Goldstein. "It means paying attention to what we're doing, rather than having our minds wander."

Q: How do I fight boredom?

A: Actually, boredom is a sign that meditation is working. "It means you're learning to shift your attention away from your mind, which wants complex puzzles to solve," said Thornton. If you're bored, you may have lost sight that every moment in life is unique, Commerce said. "When you're in the present moment, "every leaf, blade of grass, brush of wind, bird song, baby's cry, every everything becomes magical, alive, discoverable and infused with the ability to transform your life," she said.

No time to meditate?

You can use meditation techniques wherever you are, including the shower, said corporate [meditation](#) coach Mark Thornton.

Start by noticing sensations. Listen to the sound of the water, notice the fragrances of soaps and shampoos. How do your shoulders, neck, legs and arms feel as you bathe them? Then, try to "widen your attention" and to experience all the sensations at once.

Make a conscious decision to take a complete break from your mind. If you're bombarded by thoughts, choose to return to them later.

Try tai chi showering. Move your body in slow motion and notice the sensations. Take a moment to be still, close your eyes and notice how the body responds.

Sing! Notice the vibration in your throat, chest and other body parts.

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