

Meditation is a useful tool in reducing stress, anxiety, and physical and emotional discomfort. It is also a way to increase personal awareness of emotional and mental processes.

Following are some guidelines for beginning a meditation practice.

## Setting Up Your Meditation Practice\*

### THE PLACE

It is useful to set up an area in your home as your meditation area. It doesn't have to be large. As long as it is reasonably private and large enough to sit comfortably, it will serve the purpose. It may be helpful to have a small shelf or "altar" near your sitting space on which you place some inspirational objects – pictures, stones, or other natural articles that have meaning or a calming influence for you. As you begin to meditate regularly in this area, the surroundings will act as a natural cue for meditation.

### THE TIME

It is important to sit every day. The length of time is not as important as the regularity. Fifteen minutes is a good period to begin with, but it is worthwhile to experiment, and adapt your practice to suit your needs depending on your energy, the time available, and your family's routine. It is best to sit twice a day, even for short periods. In the morning at the start of the day, and in the evening or late afternoon is an ideal way to begin. A regular meditation time is a help if that is possible for you. The length of time is not as important as is giving yourself the time.

How do you know when your time is up? Some people use a kitchen timer or alarm watch or clock. If you use these it is helpful to muffle the sound by putting it under a blanket or a cushion. There are also meditation gong "apps" available for smart phones.

### THE POSTURE

The important thing is to find a position that is erect yet relaxed. The back should be straight and balanced with the head above the back as if someone is very gently pulling a string attached to the crown of the head. The hands should be on the thighs, with elbows bent, in a position that supports the back to stay relaxed and upright.

It is fine to sit in a chair, but choose a chair that supports you to sit upright, and keep the feet on the floor. Many people find sitting on a cushion, cross-legged or in a half – lotus comfortable. Some prefer to straddle the cushion with feet facing behind. There are small benches called seiza benches that some find to be comfortable. There are also special meditation cushions called zafus available for purchase.

## THE PRACTICE

For beginners it is helpful to choose one focal point as your object of concentration. The breath is good as it is always there but, if for some reason the breath doesn't work for you, any focal point will do. A touch point, such as where the feet touch the floor or where the hands touch the legs, is a neutral suggestion. Find a point to focus on which naturally presents itself in a neutral way.

Now just pay close attention to your experience. If you are meditation on the breath, notice where you feel it most strongly. Notice how each breath is different. The breath may be deep or shallow, smooth or rough, slow or fast. Bring a strong interest to your object of concentration. It can be very helpful to use a soft mental note such as "in-out" or "rising-falling" to help the mind stay with what's happening.

When you notice that the mind has wandered, gently and kindly bring your attention back. No need to judge or become frustrated. Mindfulness meditation means just being aware of what is actually happening, and letting what is happening be okay.

This is what is meant by The Middle Way. If we are too harsh with ourselves, we become frustrated and give up. If we are too lax, we lose concentration. The idea is to set our intention to be as aware and awake as possible, and to gently guide the mind back when we become lost in thought. A useful image is to think of training a puppy to stay on some newspaper. We don't want to be mean to it, just to gently push it back on the paper, over and over again, every time it goes off.

As you expand the practice, you will notice the mind will naturally be drawn to other objects of attention. These may be body sensations, thoughts, sounds or other sense perceptions, or emotions. This is perfectly natural. The object of mindfulness practice is to know what we are doing. It can be helpful to use very simple mental notes to describe the sensations (for instance, warm, prickly, pressing, etc.) or thoughts (such as planning, imagining, remembering, etc.). If you use a mental noting, it is important to keep the noting simple and quiet (for instance, only about a tenth of your awareness, while the rest of the awareness is with the bare experience). If you go off on a train of thought trying to come up with the perfect label, this defeats the purpose. Mindfulness is attending to the actual bare experience, not our ideas and concepts about the experience.

Adapted from an anonymous article made available by The Insight meditation Community of Colorado  
[www.insightcolorado.org/](http://www.insightcolorado.org/)