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Meditating in a Modern World: 8 Tips to Start & Maintain a Meditation Practice



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Posted 06-18-2021



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Many uncited articles circulating the internet suggest we can have up to 80,000 thoughts per day. But according to recent [research](#) published in *Nature Communications*, psychologists have measured an average of **6,200 thought transitions in the human brain daily**. Whether it's 6,000 or 80,000, it doesn't take much science to know our brains are busy with chatter that's not always conducive to stress-free living.

Meditation may help us weed out unnecessary and self-defeating thoughts faster so that we can get back to the business of being ourselves. If you're brand new to meditation or you've briefly tried meditating before giving up in frustration, you've found the perfect place to get the knowledge and support to meditate in a way that works for you. While there isn't one *right* way to meditate, these simple guidelines will help you get started and also secure your chance of sticking with the practice long enough to experience the benefits.

Defining Meditation

The word "meditate" can take on different meanings for different people, with common impressions of meditation including the act of emptying our minds of thought. The dictionary defines [meditating](#) as:

1. **an act of contemplation or reflection.**
2. **a mental exercise with the intent to achieve spiritual awareness.**

The latter definition leaves room to conclude meditation could be some form of religion or spiritual practice, causing hesitation for people that view meditation as something that goes against their belief system — but it's not so black and white. With deep [roots](#) in China and India stemming as far back as 1500 BC, meditating is certainly a central component of religions like Taoism and Buddhism. However, **other religions meditate**

in various forms, such as with prayer, worship, or reflective study of sacred scriptures like the Bible, Torah, or Qu’ran, to name a few.

In fact, it’s likely you’ve practiced some form of meditation in ways you may not realize, such as taking a walk without your phone or napping. Originally getting into meditation to ease [insomnia symptoms](#) years ago, Vital Plan’s co-founder Dr. Bill Rawls continues to meditate even after his sleep issues subsided. **“Whether it’s a formal meditation, a guided relaxation exercise on my phone, or simply taking a nap, I try to take time in the middle of every day to bring adrenaline back down.”**

Who Should Meditate?

You don’t need to be religious or spiritual to meditate, and you don’t even need to call it meditation to experience its benefits. Ironically, technological advancements meant to connect us around the globe and make our lives easier have, according to a [review](#) in *Nature*, left many feeling more disconnected than ever due to the constant influx of information. If you feel scattered, apathetic, out of balance, or simply want to continue your quest for self-improvement, **a meditation routine may help [lower stress](#), ease anxiety and depression, or boost energy through improved sleep and balanced digestion** — all of which lead to a happier and healthier you.

Before walking through the steps to start your personal journey with meditation, let’s first look at a few proven benefits of meditation in hopes they will spark and sustain your motivation to practice.

What Science Says About Meditation

Historically considered too woo-woo for the Western world, meditation is gaining validation through scientific [studies](#). However, there is still so much we don’t understand yet about the brain — the organ responsible for managing our thoughts, [memory](#), emotions, motor skills, sight, body temperature, appetite, and just about every process necessary for our body to function. Here is what we know so far.

It decreases stress hormones

Adrenaline and Norepinephrine. These two hormones act similarly and are directly responsible for spurring us into a fight-or-flight response — the rush of energy and alertness we get in the face of a perceived threat. Unfortunately, unlike our friends in the animal kingdom, humans today aren’t as capable of shutting down this alert system after the danger has passed, and we also view non-threatening events as a cause for alarm — like a difficult client at the office or an unplanned bill.

Cortisol. Produced by the adrenal glands after receiving important signals from the hypothalamus and the pituitary gland, cortisol is considered more of a delayed alarm to long-standing stress — not as quick to respond as adrenaline and norepinephrine. Problems arise when there is too much (or too little) cortisol due to a faulty stress response in the brain. [Studies](#) have shown meditation can significantly reduce cortisol levels in the blood and may be responsible for lowering the risk of imbalances such as psychiatric stress, ulcers, high blood pressure, and migraines.

8 Steps to Begin Meditating

1. Know Your Why



There is a commonly understood goal of meditation, and that's to [lower stress](#). But what's your *why*? Before beginning a meditation practice, Dr. Rawls suggests asking yourself, **"What do you want to gain?"** Perhaps you want to decrease anxiety so you can connect with your community and have more fun, or maybe you want to boost your concentration to improve your work performance. Dr. Rawls' goal is simple: balance stress hormones like cortisol and adrenaline. Health and Wellness Coach, Belinda Macri, also originally focused on the scientific data to help define her goals. **"I wanted to relax my breathing and improve my immune system so that I wouldn't be stuck in fight-or-flight," says Macri.**

Why I Meditate



2. Commit

Whatever your goals are with meditation, **commit — every day**. Repetition is the cornerstone of creating [lasting habits](#) and beneficial beliefs. **Start small** with something you know is doable. If five minutes during a work break is all you can commit to, start there and challenge yourself to increase by a minute every week. As you consistently achieve small goals with baby steps, your confidence grows, as does your inspiration to take larger leaps. Macri learned to love practicing consistently with the *RPM* motto in mind: **Rise. Pee. Meditate**. "After committing to just ten minutes a day first thing in the morning, I noticed I really started living life. Magic awaited, and I was excited to embrace each morning simply sitting in my chair."



3. Create a Sacred Space

After knowing your why and committing to a small start, craft a comfortable space to visit for each session. Having a dedicated location trains your mind and body to go into meditation more deeply (and more quickly) because your mind becomes accustomed to the activity that happens when entering this zone, Macri mentions. If you're a busy body, set up multiple meditation havens. Dress the space with your favorite items reminding you of your goal, while encouraging surrender. **Candles, photos, music, incense, flowers, and a comfortable chair or meditation pillow** are all popular items that will make you look forward to this time with yourself. Don't complicate the process — make your space a sanctuary.



4. Decide How Long You Will Meditate

Think of your meditation practice as if you're building a skyscraper. To enjoy the view at the top, you must start at the bottom — and the taller the skyscraper, the deeper the foundation must be. Everyone will end up with a different-looking skyscraper, but the steps are relatively the same. **When you commit to building a meditation practice, the most important thing you can do is decide to start slowly.** Climb each floor and spend some time enjoying those views first. If you have never meditated before, or have tried but gotten frustrated by sitting still for even five minutes, there is no rule saying you can't start with one minute. Start wherever you feel you can sustain it. Then, keep building at your pace.



5. Decide When You Will Meditate

There is no specific time you *must* meditate, but popular techniques like the well-[studied](#) Transcendental Meditation suggest practicing 20 minutes in the morning and evening. If twice daily is too much, try just once in the afternoon — especially if you reach for [coffee](#) to avoid the dreaded afternoon crash. If you're a twice-daily person, Macri suggests doing your evening meditation right after getting home from work. **"Meditating before bed is okay, but it can either make you fall asleep or give you a second wind,"** she states. No matter what time of day you choose to meditate, stick with that time for at least 3-5 days to notice results before trying something different. Then, play around with different times of the day to see if another time feels better for you.



6. Find the Most Comfortable Way to Sit

As mentioned, meditation is traditionally practiced in a seated position. While it's not wrong to lay down, know that you might fall asleep — and that may be completely appropriate for you. If you choose to sit, make sure to find the most comfortable position. Challenge yourself to keep the best posture you can, but if sitting is challenging for you due to health reasons, make whatever alterations necessary for comfort. If you're someone who really doesn't like to sit still, that's ok! Try mindful walking or incorporating basic body movements like those practiced in qigong.



7. Just Breathe.

Because our brains automatically perform this task without barely one thought from us, most people don't have breath awareness. Being mindful of our inhales and exhailes, and even controlling *how* we breathe during meditation is known as **focused breathing**. Weighing a mere 2% of our body weight and using a whopping [20%](#) of our body's oxygen and blood supply, our brains are powerful computing mechanisms that require adequate levels of oxygen. We all know inhalation brings in that much-needed oxygen, but exhalation is also responsible for eliminating roughly 70-80% of our body's toxins, making it an equally critical component for a healthy brain. In his book, *Breathe*, author James Nestor points out how we can alter our metabolism simply by breathing through our nose, even during exercise. Dr. Bill Rawls noted from the book, "breathing through your mouth burns glucose and increases adrenaline, while breathing through your nose slows adrenaline and burns fat." In short, focused breathing can alter our entire body for the better.



8. Inventory Your Tools

As you practice meditation, you're naturally going to want to explore new techniques and tools. Getting bored is normal, and experimenting is encouraged. Let your intuition guide you, learning each method

intimately before moving on to the next. Before long, you'll have a bag of meditation tools you can reach for with confidence that fit different moods and environments you find yourself in. This allows you to consistently practice with flexibility, not rigidity — making meditation a fun exploration, not another thing to stress about.

Tools + Techniques to Make Your Meditation Practice Stick

Choose a Mantra

The simpler, the better. We live in a fast-paced society, and you are not a guru in the Himalayas, so a complicated Sanskrit mantra is unnecessary to start with. The purpose of meditating is to relax your mind enough to regulate your stress hormones — and choosing a simple word or sound to focus on is all you need to accomplish that. You can repeat these mantras out loud or whisper them to yourself, or you can say them silently if you notice your mind is being overpowered by distracting mind chatter. Below are a few options you might consider starting with.

- **Om.** Pronounced *ah-oo-m*, this well-known sound has roots in Hinduism and symbolizes creation, preservation, and liberation. It can also be interpreted as “I am”. If you are a deep traditionalist, this is a great starter.
- **Let go.** Using this short phrase in your language might work as the reminder you need to relax.
- **Make up your own.** If you're more of a rebel, there is no reason you can't come up with your own sound or word. This doesn't have to be deeply complex, committing to a simple sound is enough.

Guided Mantra Meditation Practice



Focus on a Feeling

This borders on a visualization practice, but it's nonetheless effective at calming your [brain](#). Focus on a feeling you'd like to create by choosing a word for it, sending the vibration of that word to your mind and body. For example, let's take the emotion everyone wants to feel — happy. First, think about a time you felt *happy*, then feel into

that memory. What does happiness feel like to you? Remember as many details as you can, but focus on the feeling it creates in you. If you can't think of a happy memory, or too many negative experiences are attached to the happy memories you do have, consider creating a memory you would like to have in the future. This still gets you out of your thinking brain and into your feeling brain.

Open Focus Brain

One of Dr. Rawls' favorite ways to shut down stress hormones is with a guided awareness exercise that focuses on imagining what's happening in various parts of your body. This total body relaxation takes you out of left-brain analytical tasks we often use, encouraging the creative imagination to take over. This right-brain activity is often lacking in our structured society that seeks to prove facts with scientific evidence.

Do a Body Scan

Aside from mantras, Macri suggests body scans because it gives the mind something to do — with awareness. Scanning your body can help distract your mind in a different way, bringing much-needed attention to your internal workings. Once you start identifying feelings throughout your body, along with any emotions or ideas attached to those feelings, you can more easily let them go and relax.

Guided Body Scan Meditation



Experiment with Assisted Meditation

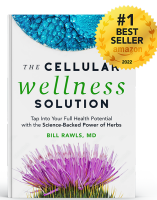
[Muse™](#) — This biofeedback device uses earbuds and your phone to measure sound feedback on an EEG. Muse monitors your mind to determine whether it's active or calm by sensing changes to your brain waves. If your mind is active, rain or thunder plays to calm you down; and when you're calm, you'll hear chirping birds. "Movement really helps the birds chirp," Dr. Rawls observed while incorporating relaxing qigong movements into his Muse experience — a tip for those who prefer meditative movement.

[Insight Timer™](#) — A phone app with plenty of options for guided meditations, custom timers, meditation music, courses, and ability to create a unique experience you can switch up as you expand your practice. Macri puts this up there with [Headspace®](#) as a favorite meditation app.

Key Takeaway

Life gets crazy and doesn't come with a manual, but meditation can help you balance the crazy. Start slow and commit to a few minutes per day. **Keep it simple, and keep with it.**

If you can do that for even two minutes a day, you're well on your way to enjoying the benefits of de-stressing your life through meditation.



Discover more in **Dr. Bill Rawls' new #1 Bestselling book: [The Cellular Wellness Solution](#): Tap Into Your Full Health Potential with the Science-Backed Power of Herbs.**

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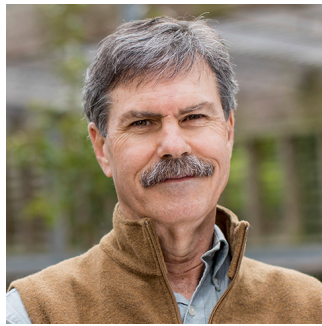
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Dr. Rawls is a licensed medical doctor in North Carolina and a leading expert in integrative health. He has extensive training in alternative therapies, and is the Medical Director of Vital Plan, a holistic health and herbal supplement company in Raleigh, NC.

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