

Contemplative Practices, FAQs

by Gale Lyman, RN, BSN, HNB-BC

What are contemplative practices?

Contemplative practices are a variety of meditative experiences that help you to be calm and centered.

Are contemplative practices difficult to learn?

NO! Many are quite simple and in a matter of moments or a few minutes leave you calmer and more centered. That being said, it can take time to develop your focus, intentionality, and compassion. So you may find that your experience deepens over time, as you gain more experience with contemplative practices.

What kind of practices are contemplative?

Worldwide, there are many different contemplative practices. They may be either religious/cultural/secular, active/sedentary, solitary/groups, and indoors/outdoors. My personal favorites are being in nature, affirmation journaling, prayer, and a variety of guided meditations, including breathwork, guided imagery, walking meditations, labyrinth walking, and drumming meditations.

How do contemplative practices differ from relaxation activities?

Contemplative practices are often relaxing, but also so much more. Three elements are important to contemplative practices: focusing, setting your intention for connection and awareness, and cultivating compassion for yourself, for others, for and the world.

What am I connecting with?

That's up to you. You may connect with whatever is meaningful to you, along the thought lines of a higher power, source, or something greater than yourself. Depending on your beliefs, perhaps that is God or Nature or the Universe. Perhaps you feel your connection to all beings, or all that is. You choose.

What benefits can I anticipate?

Benefits that affect your body, your mind, and your spirit! “Contemplative practices can help develop greater empathy and communication skills, improve focus and attention, reduce stress and enhance creativity, supporting a loving and compassionate approach to life.” (The Center for Contemplative Mind in Society, retrieved 2/6/18). Contemplative practices may elicit a relaxation response. More than a feel-good response, the science of psychoneuroimmunology confirms that stress and relaxation affect our bodies in many ways. “As stress influences perceptions, the resulting thought processes are then communicated from the brain to the immune system via neuroendocrine and hormonal pathways.” (Hulett and Armer 2016)

Are there any cautions?

There are many contemplative practices from which you can choose, so talk with your health professional about which ones best for you. According to the National Center for

Complementary and Integrative Health, “Relaxation techniques are generally considered safe for healthy people.” (NCCIH, 2016)

Some practices can temporarily increase or create anxiety, especially if you are uncomfortable, unsure about your ability to do the activity. This happened to me when I began yoga; I eventually realized I was having shortness of breath not due to asthma but rather because I was afraid of falling during certain poses. With a supportive teacher, and poses appropriate to my skill level, my anxiety disappeared. Anxiety sometimes arises if you are having difficulty sitting still or being quiet. If so, try a different activity, for example a walking meditation instead of sitting meditation.

People with a history of post-traumatic stress syndrome may experience flashbacks to trauma. Dossey recommends, “Clients with a history of dissociated experiences, acute psychosis, borderline personal, and post-traumatic stress disorder are best cared for by professionals skilled in treating such clients.” (Dossey, p. 549) Medication needs may change if your health improves by consistently doing contemplative practices. Discuss this with your prescriber if you take any medication or remedies, especially insulin, thyroid replacement medications, anti hypertensives, cardiac medications, anti-anxiety agents, and sleep medications. Rare reports indicate that relaxation techniques might cause or worsen symptoms in people with epilepsy. (NCCIH, 2016) People with heart disease should seek medical advice before doing Jacobsen progressive muscle relaxation, which teaches to tighten and relax muscles (NCCIH, 2016)

It is always wise to carefully consider your needs, consult health professionals, and create a self care plan that is ideal and unique for you. With the broad scope of contemplative practices available, most people will find two or three practices that are just right for them.

What keeps you committed to continue contemplative practice?

For me, it's the sense of stillness during contemplative practices, during which the rest of the world recedes a bit. In stillness, I can center myself and connect with the Divine, over and over again. It's rather like having a reset button for my Self.

I still have questions...

For examples, demonstrations, and more information, you may visit the TLC Resource Center for Contemplative practices at www.LymanCenter.com. Or you may email me at info@lymancenter.com. I'd love to hear from you.

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TLC Resource Center

www.LymanCenter.com
Info@lymancenter.com

Calming and centering contemplative practices for senior citizens and family caregivers
from Gale Lyman, holistic nurse, freelance writer and guest speaker.