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MEDITATION – WOULD YOU LIKE TO HAVE A GO?

Eight years ago I was a very stressed-out woman. At the time I thought I was just a *bit* stressed. Nothing to be worried about. We are all stressed – aren't we? A bit of stress is good for us – *isn't it?* Now I smile at such thoughts because I know stress isn't good. Not at all. *Not even a little bit!* Although plenty of people will try and convince you otherwise. Stress is pressure. Stress is a state of mental or emotional unease. Stress is pain. **Nothing** is beneficial about stress. Anyway around 8 years ago I didn't know this, but a nagging doubt led me to buy: "The book of Stress Survival" by Alix Kirsta. The book is filled with good advice and includes a chapter on meditation. So I sat and tried to imagine the candle light in my mind and tried to stop thinking – and I was a total failure! I couldn't stop my thoughts from racing from one subject to another. So I gave up. Obviously, I thought, I'm not cut out for this meditation malarkey.

Several years later I finally 'got it'. I now know how incredibly powerful meditation can be. It can relieve stress, give you a deep sense of relaxation, enhance your intuition, as well as be used for your spiritual growth and psychic development. But there is so much mystery and misinformation surrounding meditation that lots of people are put off from even trying it. So let me tell you what I know, give you some tips on how to do it, plus provide some links to some websites where even more information can be found.

What is meditation?

Meditation is simply focusing your mind to achieve an altered state of consciousness. In other words, like going into a dream-like state whilst you are still awake. This allows your mind to be calm, makes your breathing slow down and deeply relaxes your body.

We think of meditation as sitting with legs crossed and eyes closed, but you can also reach a meditative state when you are being active too (for example when running or dancing), so then I would like to add that meditation is also about connecting your mind, body and soul together with your surroundings. In this state you experience a oneness with yourself and at the same time become part of everything around you (or as like I to think of it, becoming one with the universe).

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How to meditate

First of all, know that there are many, many different ways to meditate. There is not a definitive, right or wrong way to do it. So I'm going to go through some of the ways that I have experimented with and use and then encourage you to give some of them a try.

Meditation: Getting started

Meditation isn't necessarily about sitting crossed legged with your eyes closed, but lets start here. To help your body deeply relax, you need to breathe properly and allow for your energy to flow freely. For this, your back needs to be straight. If you do yoga or are flexible enough to sit comfortably in the Lotus position, this is good. However, it's not necessary. You can sit with your legs loosely crossed, or with your legs straight out in front of you (perhaps sitting on the floor with your back against a wall) or you can sit on a hard backed chair. Whatever position you choose, be aware of keeping your back straight (but not rigid) and your shoulders relaxed.

When you get the hang of it, you can meditate anywhere, even in the midst of a noisy environment, but initially choose somewhere quiet. In the summer when it's sunny, I love to meditate in my garden as feeling the sun or a gentle breeze on my face adds an extra dimension, but anywhere that is quiet will be fine. It doesn't have to be silent.

With practice, you can benefit from mini-meditations that last for just a minute or two, but initially it will take you longer to get into a meditative state, so allow for 10–20 minutes. Of course if you enjoy it and have the time, it's OK to spend much longer than this. Go with what feels right for you.

Meditation via breathing

The first time I reached a meditative state it was through a breathing exercise. In our everyday lives, we are not aware of breathing – unless we are out of breath from exercise. Sitting comfortably, in your mind, follow your breath in and out. Imagine your breath is nurturing and nourishing your body as you breathe in, and that on the out breath all of your worries are being carried gently away. After a while your mind might start to wander. This is OK – you'll get better at it! When you become aware that your mind has gone AWOL, just gently bring your mind back to your breathing.

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Another way to focus your mind is to begin with some very deep breathing using a technique I call “Haaa” breathing (so called because of the sound you make on the out breath). Start by breathing in through your nose. Breathe deeply filling the lower part of your lungs. If you’re not sure whether you’re doing this properly, simply place your hands on your lower ribs and feel them moving up and out. When your lungs are full, hold for a second, then let your breath out through your mouth by compressing the lower part of your lungs and allow yourself to make a natural “haaa” sound as you do it until your lungs feel empty. Doing this for even just 5 breaths will relax your body very quickly and then you can just begin to follow your breath as explained above. Doing this for 5 minutes will give your body a real boost. It might make you feel light headed and make you sway slightly. Don’t worry if this happens: you’re just getting a little high from the wonderful amounts of air you’re giving your body! When it feels right, simply drop into natural breathing again. As you reach a deeper state of meditation, you will notice your breathing becomes slower and more measured. This is normal.

Meditation: What’s going on in your mind?

The biggest myth about meditation is that it’s about emptying your mind. This isn’t true. Yes, it’s about quietening your mind, but not by forcing your mind to be blank. I read a great analogy that might help you – it went something like this. Think of your thoughts as if they were a puppy. Now imagine that what you’re trying to do is ask the puppy to sit quietly on a cushion in the middle of a room for a while. But like all puppies, they soon get bored with just sitting, especially as there are lots of interesting ideas to investigate in the corners of the room. So the puppy will get up to investigate these things! When this happens, gently, scoop the puppy up and place the him back on the cushion. In time the puppy will learn that by sitting quietly and becoming still, the things in the corner that once intrigued him, can now be seen more clearly and dealt with far more effectively after having spent some time just becoming one with his mind, body and soul. And so will you – just give yourself time to practice connecting with yourself.

Guided Meditation

Another way of meditating is to create your own visualisations or follow guided meditations on cassette tapes or in books. Following a guided meditation to begin with is a very easy way to get going with meditation.

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Meditation whilst running

If any of you are keen joggers, you maybe reaching a form of meditation without even realising it! If you are like me, then the first half mile of running is hard work. Then around the 1 mile mark, you hit a rhythm, your breathing returns to normal and you feel like you could run forever. It's at this moment you can, and possibly already do step into the flow of being totally at peace with yourself and the world around you. If you want to expand your mediation in this way, wait until your rhythm kicks in then let your mind notice the beauty in everything – like this morning's frost, the weak sunshine and a whole world transformed by a frosting of ice.

5 Rhythms Dancing

This involves dancing to 5 different rhythms – Flowing, Staccato, Chaos, Lyrical and Stillness. The music is chosen to reach into your very being. As you dance, the music takes you on a journey that connects the mind, body and soul. There are 5 Rhythms dance classes up and down the country: see www.5rhythmsuk.com for more information. For those of you local to Oxford, contact Hilary for class times on 07799 694546 or hilarykneale@hotmail.com

To find out more...

There are a huge number of websites on the subject of meditation that will tell you far more than I've covered here. These are some of the sites I have found useful:

www.how-to-meditate.org
www.relax7.com/7.php
www.meditationcenter.com

And finally...

I hope this article has inspired you to 'have a go' at meditation. Remember there is no wrong or right way and with practice, you will find a way that works for you. And as always I love to hear how you have got on – so please do let me know.

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