



“IF JOE DOESN'T BUY SOMETHING FOR DINNER I'M GOING TO BE SO UPSET!”

“My knee itches. Maybe it will go away...it's not going away.”

“WHY DID STACY ACT THAT WAY IN THE MEETING? AM I GOING TO BE FIRED?”

“Inhale, two, three, four and exhale, two, three, four.”

“DID I TURN OFF THE STOVE BEFORE I LEFT THIS MORNING?”

It's perfectly normal for your mind to wander. Bringing it back is the hard part.

# BEGINNER'S GUIDE TO MEDITATION

Take the first step toward more inner peace, improved awareness and better health—starting right now. BY JANET LEE

So you want to start meditating. You're in good company. More than 18 million people in the U.S. do it, according to the National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health. New converts are discovering its powerful benefits every day thanks to research, social media and lives that are in desperate need of de-stimulation. Besides giving you a peaceful time out during a hectic day, meditation—and the awareness it ingrains—helps retrain the brain and nervous system, and along with that, your responses to everyday situations. It requires no equipment or preparation and you can do it anywhere, even in the shower.

Meditation looks different for everyone. There's no one right way to do it and as long as you're trying, it's hard to mess it up. It's like if you decided to travel to a far-off place that you'd never been. You buy the tickets and get on the plane or in the car, but maybe you experience some delays. You wouldn't say you're getting there wrong, or “you can't get there from here.” You *can* get there from here, but sometimes it takes longer than you expected.

## secret sauce

THE MORE YOU CAN DETACH FROM THE RUNNING COMMENTARY IN YOUR BRAIN, THE EASIER IT BECOMES FOR DEEPER THOUGHTS AND THAT INNER VOICE TO ARISE. IT'S LIKE CLEARING AWAY OLD LEAVES AND DEBRIS SO NEW PLANTS CAN POKE UP THROUGH THE SOIL.

When you're a meditation newbie, the biggest challenges ahead of you will be finding stillness and settling into a habit. “Having to sit and be still can be a struggle for many people,” says Allie Geer, e-RYT (experienced registered yoga teacher), who teaches yoga and meditation at Hidden Yoga Studio in Niwot, Colorado. “Often it's really difficult for that wandering mind to be in a seated position and to be comfortable.” Even when you're craving time to just be quiet, the brain may have other ideas—dozens of them, in fact. Once you make time and settle into a meditation, though, the real work begins: stepping outside the mind and becoming a casual, unattached observer.

The guide on the following pages will walk you through your first meditation experience, including learning about different types to try and how to create a peaceful place to practice. Once you get the hang of it, you may find yourself wanting to dive deeper and learn with an instructor or on a retreat (see pages 46-49). There are so many ways this simple practice can affect your life, whether you want to enhance your creativity or your 10K time. (For more on that, see pages 60-97.)

## PICK A TYPE

There are many different ways to approach meditation and you could spend the rest of your life exploring them all, which is both exciting and daunting. Depending on who you talk to, there can be rigid distinctions between different styles and specific rules to follow—but in this guide, we're trying to keep it simple, which is the overarching theme for any beginner. Most involve some sort of awareness and observing in the present moment, which is what's often known as "mindfulness."

"I recommend people first find out what's available to them in terms of learning about meditation, whether it's an app, something online or a book," says Christopher Key Chapple, PhD, the Doshi Professor of Indic and Comparative Theology at Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles. "The second step is to seek out different communities around you where people are gathering for the purpose of meditating and try a few of these before you settle down and commit to one type." The lines between different types can be murky and confusing but don't get too caught up in labels. The ultimate goal—cultivating more awareness—is the same.

"In meditation you're trying to be a neutral observer," says Devon Pipars, an instructor at WITHIN meditation studio

in San Francisco. "Think of your overall consciousness as the sky, and your thoughts, perceptions and feelings are the clouds or weather. During meditation (and eventually, in your day-to-day life), you're the sky; it's always there, unaffected. You're watching the weather but not participating in it."

Following are some common approaches to meditation, which can overlap:

**MINDFULNESS MEDITATION** This is a very popular type and you can do it in different ways. The mindfulness aspect means you're focused on something specific, which is often the breath (see below) and when thoughts rise up you notice them, maybe label them ("worry" or "planning" or "fear"), let them go and then re-focus.

**BREATH-BASED MEDITATION** During this type of practice, which is often part of mindfulness meditation, you focus on observing or counting your inhalations and exhalations, says Chapple. You might also pay attention to the sensation of the air in your nostrils or the movement of your chest or belly as you breathe. Many other types of meditation use the breath as a way to enter and exit meditation, kind of like wading into the shallow end of the pool. "As a beginner, developing a relationship with your breath and becoming aware of it is key," says Geer, who teaches meditation workshops.

**MANTRA RECITATION** Using a word or phrase—usually repeated silently to yourself—helps focus the mind in much the same way paying attention to the breath does. Teachers may pair the mantra with breathing, so you recite it during the inhale and/or exhale. In some meditation traditions mantras are Sanskrit words, but they don't have to be (see "Tools of the Trade," page 42).

**ACTIVE VISUALIZATION** During this type of meditation you picture in your mind's eye a calming locale or sensation, says Chapple. You might place yourself on a serene beach, in a white room or on top of a mountain. You might also visualize a white light in your hand or heart or some other image that helps your brain stay focused.

**LOVINGKINDNESS** Sometimes called Metta meditation, this approach focuses on cultivating love and kindness toward yourself and others. During the meditation, you recite a series of statements regarding being happy, safe, well and/or without pain; you repeat those both for your own well-being and also for those you care about, or with whom you'd like to have a better relationship.

**BODY SCAN/PROGRESSIVE RELAXATION** Often performed lying down and with someone guiding you, this practice involves focusing briefly on different parts of the body. During a body scan you notice sensations arising from various areas (a twinge, pressure or feeling of heaviness, perhaps), whereas with progressive relaxation you tense and then relax different muscles as you move along the body.

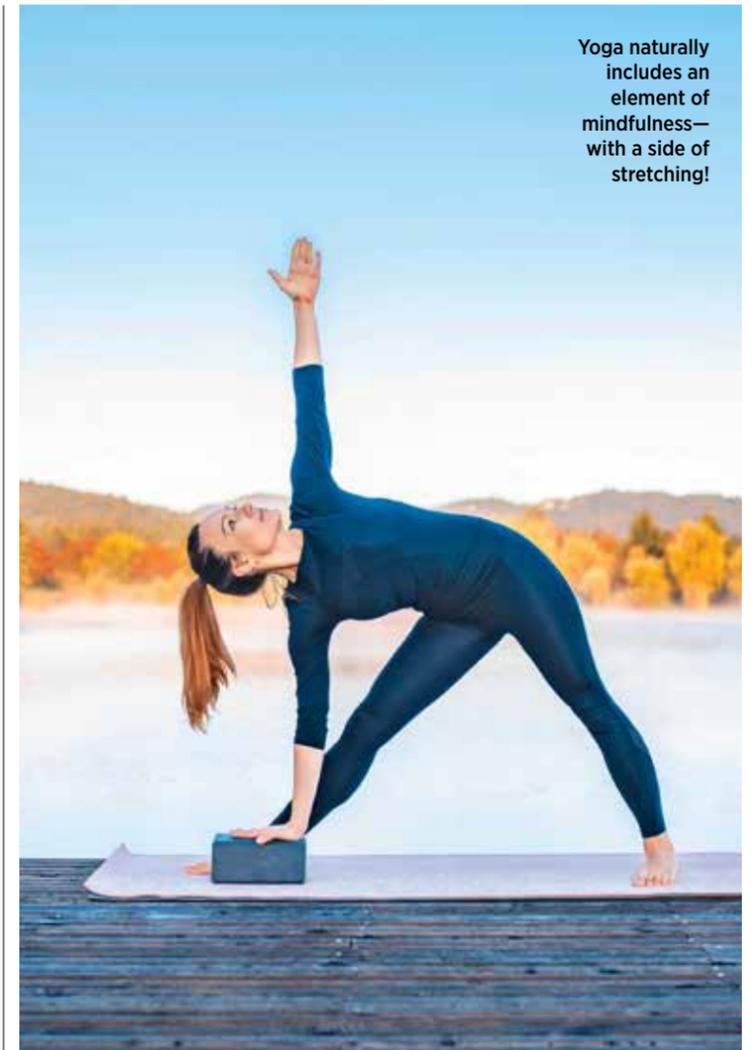
The common denominator here is that the mind will inevitably start to wander. It's the nature of the brain. When it does, you gently bring it back to the breath, visualization or whatever your focus was, without chastising yourself. Certain types of meditation have more spiritual or philosophical underpinnings or rules and as you become more astute at meditating, you can start to explore these and appreciate the nuances of different types. In the meantime, try not to attach expectations to your practice and just enjoy the experience.

### going zen

YOU MAY HAVE HEARD ABOUT A TYPE OF MEDITATION CALLED ZEN. WHILE THE WORD USUALLY CONNOTES A BLISSFUL STATE OF PEACE, IT REFERS TO A FORM OF BUDDHISM. ZEN BUDDHISTS PRACTICE MEDITATION WHILE SITTING UPRIGHT ON THE FLOOR OR A CUSHION WITH THE LEGS CROSSED (CALLED ZAZEN). WHILE SOME ZEN STYLES DO FOCUS ON THE BREATH, OTHERS ARE SIMPLY ABOUT SITTING AND LETTING THE THOUGHTS COME WITHOUT ATTACHMENT.



Some meditation practices can be rigid, but keep it simple at first.



Yoga naturally includes an element of mindfulness—with a side of stretching!

## YOGA AND MEDITATION

When people think about meditation the first thing that comes to mind is often yoga. You don't have to do yoga to meditate, but yoga always includes an element of mindfulness. It's like a moving meditation, with the mind focused on the breath and body while holding or flowing through different postures.

The specific movements or postures, called asanas, are only one aspect of yoga. The discipline actually includes eight "limbs" or principles, which are essentially guidelines for living, including how to get along with others, breath work (aka pranayama) and meditation. As with your meditation practice, the more you learn about yoga, the deeper you can go, exploring its spiritual and philosophical aspects.

Many studies have documented the health effects of yoga: It's beneficial for depression, high blood pressure, insomnia and high blood sugar, among others. Some of these benefits may be due to the breathing and focus required, as well as just being active, which is powerful medicine on its own. If you can't quite get yourself to sit still and meditate, yoga might be a good way to help direct your thoughts inward.

## THERE'S AN APP FOR THAT

Get your beginner groove on with these simple apps at your fingertips. (They all offer a free trial period and/or some free content.)



**10% HAPPIER** Based on Dan Harris' book of the same name, this app offers a free program for beginners as well as guided meditations and videos of varying lengths for stress, focus, sleep and more. (\$100 per year)



**INSIGHT TIMER** You'll find guided meditations from well-known teachers, as well as practices for specific purposes and levels of experience. In addition, you can customize the time and sounds (bells or background music) for every meditation. Best of all: It's free!



**MINDWORKS** This app features a variety of "modules," both for beginners and those wishing to go deeper into meditation, as well as programs for stress-busting and relationships. (\$8 per month)



**CALM** With more than 100 guided meditations, music to help you focus, and Masterclasses with meditation experts, this app will help deepen your practice. (\$60 per year)

Despite the connection to screens, apps can be super helpful for beginners.



## MAKE IT HAPPEN

**1 AVOID OVER-COMPLICATING THINGS** "Try to keep your meditation practice as simple as possible in the beginning, otherwise you can get overwhelmed," says Geer. If you have two minutes in your car before you head into the office, do it there. Sit at the kitchen table, in the bathtub or on a park bench on your lunch break. Don't put too many restrictions around your meditation time or place, or it will start to feel too cumbersome or daunting.

**2 FIND A CONSISTENT TIME** Ideally, you should choose a time to meditate when you have a break from work, kids and/or other distractions so you can be quiet and focus. Your brain is enough of a distraction when you're meditating; you don't need more things drawing your attention away. Some people try to do it in the morning, to set the stage for the day, and others prefer to practice at night—or both! It could change from day to day but eventually you may find a regular time that works best for you.

**3 SET THE SCENE** You can meditate in a dimly lit room just as easily as in a bright one. The temperature is up to you as well. Just make sure you're not sweating or shivering while you're meditating; that will divert your attention. Avoid playing music, as that presents an opportunity for distraction in your brain. Sometimes a little background noise can be beneficial in that it helps you 'flex' your ability to come back to the breath, says Geer. "In reality, you can meditate anywhere with anyone around you; it's all about becoming aware," she says. It (almost) goes without saying: Silence your phone—no ringing, buzzing or dinging, except for the timer.

**4 TAKE A SEAT** You can meditate lying on your back or taking a walk but the most common position is seated, whether in a chair or on the floor, a cushion or on a yoga block covered with a blanket. "There are so many different ways to find a comfortable position in your body. Just be aware that if you're lying on your back, you may struggle to stay awake," says Geer. If you are supine, she recommends placing your hands on your chest, belly or the sides of your rib cage to provide extra focus for your mind as you breathe so you don't nod off.

If sitting on the floor will make your knees or back ache within a few minutes, find a chair or use a bolster or block to elevate your hips. As a beginner, the less you have to listen to feedback from your body, the better it will be for your meditation practice, so just find a position that feels good. "You don't have to sit straight upright," says Geer. "The more I practice the more I've realized that meditation should be less effortful and more effortless."

**5 USE A TIMER** It's your first time meditating so you should set the clock for 20 minutes, right? No! Even just a few minutes will work. It might still feel like an eternity, says Geer. A commitment to just a few minutes a day is less intimidating and you can build up from there. Feel free to use the timer on your phone or an app.

“MEDITATION  
COULD  
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SIMPLICITY—  
SIMPLY SITTING,  
SIMPLY  
BREATHING  
AND SIMPLY  
BEING.”

DILGO KHYENTSE  
RINPOCHE, TIBETAN  
BUDDHIST SCHOLAR

**6 TRY THIS BASIC MEDITATION FROM GEER** Set your timer for five minutes. After you’ve settled into a comfortable position, start to bring your awareness to your body. Take a minute to feel your sit bones sinking into the support beneath you, grounding you. If you’re lying down, notice how your heels, hips and head sink into the Earth. Let your shoulders and lower back soften toward the floor or bed. Then begin to slowly guide your awareness internally. Notice your breath, but without trying to change it. Just breathe normally through your nose. Place your hands on your belly and feel how it moves with each breath, up and down, in and out. Notice any thoughts or sensations that are coming up. Maybe it’s a twinge in your knee or an itch on your neck. Let them pass, without attaching any frustration or judgment to them (or you), and gently guide your awareness back to your breath. Try to settle a little deeper into stillness. Each time the mind wanders you can always return to the breath. If you want, begin pacing your breathing, taking four counts for every inhale and four for each exhale. Take several breaths like this. Again, if the mind starts to become distracted, gently bring your focus back to the breath.

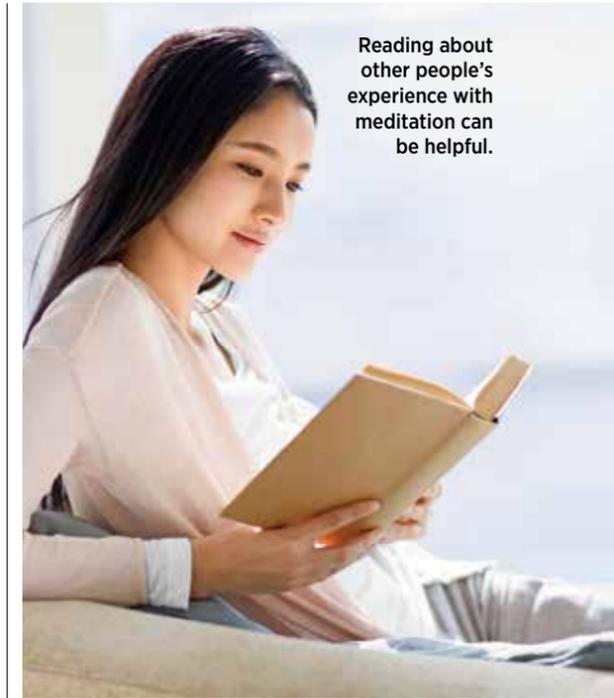
When you’re ready to come out of meditation (or the timer goes off), let go of counting each breath and just be still, breathing normally. Slowly start to wiggle your fingers and toes, feeling greater awareness surfacing in your body, and allow your eyes to gently flutter open. Inhale through your nose and exhale through the mouth three times to release any tension. You did it! Sit still for a little bit longer and just be present with any sensations you’re feeling before you get up and continue with your day.

**1 STICK WITH IT** Carve out time for meditation daily to create a consistent habit. You may not feel any different after the first several sessions, but over time, you will start to see subtle changes in your daily life. “When stress arises, you’ll be able to take a pause,” says Geer. “You won’t be as reactive in situations or with people. You’ll just notice a shift.” Even after you’ve been doing it for a long time you may still have sessions that just feel challenging; you can’t get comfortable or keep your mind from wandering. That’s perfectly normal. Just show up the next time and try again.



Feeling the heat of the sun and the grass on your skin can be its own form of meditation.

Reading about other people’s experience with meditation can be helpful.



## READ ALL ABOUT IT

These three books can help pave the path of your meditation journey.

***Meditation for Fidgety Skeptics: A 10% Happier How-To Book*** (Spiegel & Grau, 2017) The second book from news anchor Dan Harris (his first was *10% Happier*) offers a more hands-on (or mind-on?) approach. If you’re not sure what meditation is all about or what to expect, give this a read.

***Meditation Is Not What You Think*** (Hachette Books, 2018) Jon Kabat-Zinn, the father of Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction, or MBSR, is the go-to guy for meditation. He delves into the real-life benefits of mindfulness, what it really means and how to achieve it. If you love this book, check out his previous one, *Wherever You Go, There You Are* (Hyperion, 1994).

***Practical Meditation for Beginners*** (Althea Press, 2018) Author Benjamin W. Decker removes the intimidation factor with easy-to-follow, step-by-step instructions for a variety of different meditations, helping you find the right type for your brain and lifestyle.

## MY FIRST TIME

# "HOW I LEARNED TO MEDITATE"

A mindfulness-training program helped a Toronto woman calm her anxiety and gave her new tools for dealing with life. BY ALEAH LONGAPHIE (AS TOLD TO JANET LEE)

In May of 2018 I took stress leave from my job in Toronto due to anxiety and depression and my doctor referred me to a group therapy program led by a psychiatrist who specializes in cognitive behavioral therapy and mindfulness. I had downloaded meditation apps before but I didn't commit to doing them. Maybe this program felt more legitimate because my doctor recommended it.

During the eight-week program, all we did was meditate. We started with something called a body scan. We closed our eyes and then visualized different parts of our body with his guidance. Maybe we'd start with the left toes and feel them relaxing and then we'd gradually move on to the next area until we'd gone through our entire body. That process took about 40 to 45 minutes and it was hard. I think the most difficult thing initially was my mind was racing. I was trying to focus on his voice and instructions but my brain was just bouncing around, worrying about all sorts of things. He knew that would happen so every now and then he'd tell us to leave our thoughts outside of the room and bring our focus back to our body. The first session felt agonizingly long. All I could think was, "When is this going to be done?"

Each week, we also had two-and-a-half hours of homework to do, which helped the meditation get easier, to the point where I'd be able to shut my thoughts out for pretty much the entire time. Sometimes I'd get so relaxed that I would fall asleep, although that's not necessarily good.

Over the eight-week period we did different types of meditations, some shorter and some

longer. On a busy day it was nice to be able to do five-, 10- and 20-minute meditations if I didn't have time to do a body scan. When you feel anxiety creeping up on you, even a five-minute sitting meditation is really helpful.

Our instructor also had us do other forms of mindfulness, such as mindful walking or mindful eating. In the latter, you sit and have coffee or tea without staring at your phone or a book or the TV. You just focus on that cup of coffee and think about where the beans came from, who grew them, how it tastes or smells and how it feels in your mouth.

In addition to the eight-week program, our instructor held daylong silent retreats where we would do a lovingkindness meditation. You focus on what you love about yourself and what you're thankful for and then you'd focus on who's important to you. It was really centered on loving yourself and being grateful for the love in your life. This was my favorite type of meditation.

I've finished the program but I still meditate—not every single day, but when I can get a moment to myself, I try to do at least a five- to 10-minute session. Having the ability to calm myself down has made me more aware of the things I worry and stress about that aren't worth the time. It's helping me focus on what's more important. When I feel myself spiraling, I'll take that moment to ground myself and do a five-minute meditation and that seems to help.

I was skeptical at first but I definitely recommend it. I still attend those full-day retreats sometimes. It's very liberating to spend the day with people but not talk to anyone. It's very liberating.

*create  
a calm  
space*

AN ALTAR CAN PROVIDE A WELCOMING SPACE FOR YOUR MEDITATION HABIT. IT ALSO SERVES AS A TRIGGER FOR YOUR BRAIN TO SHIFT INTO RELAXATION MODE. TO CREATE ONE, YOU'LL NEED A COMFY PLACE TO SIT, LIKE A CUSHION OR CHAIR. THEN ADD THINGS TO THE SPACE THAT HAVE MEANING FOR YOU, SUCH AS A CANDLE, CRYSTAL, SAGE, ESSENTIAL OILS, A SPECIAL PHOTO, MALA BEADS OR FLOWERS.

A structured meditation program can put beginners on the right track.

