

Train Mindfulness with Meditation

There are many books and a mountain of scientific articles on meditation and its benefits. This article is a brief overview, and reflects my Buddhist training. Keep in mind however, that many traditions have forms of meditation, including Christian and Jewish.

The word, “meditation” is used for many activities, including contemplation, however, it actually refers to training in mindfulness, meaning being aware of and accepting all moment-to-moment experience, inner (thoughts, feelings, sensations) and outer (sounds, sights, events). Meditation can also be described as “relaxed focus.”

Meditation “practice” is just that: sitting day after day, intentionally focusing the mind on something, letting thoughts and feelings pass without evaluation, and bringing the attention back to the chosen focus when it inevitably strays into identifying with a thought or emotion.

Most regular meditators describe feeling more relaxed and less anxious and therefore less disturbed by negative thoughts, feelings, and perceptions. This enhanced relaxation and physical states that result is the basis for the many health and emotional benefits. Any condition or illness, including eating disorders, that is caused or worsened by stress could benefit from regular meditation practice.

We habitually “practice” being stressed, breathing shallowly and holding tension in our bodies. We think we are our ever-changing thoughts and feelings, many of which are disturbing. So the relaxed posture of meditation, and the repeated practice in letting go of thoughts and feelings as soon as we notice them, is a very powerful means of training the body/mind. This in turn changes the shape of the brain and its areas of activity.

With only 12 weeks of daily meditation practice, meditators show less activity in the parts of the brain associated with the perception of threat, anxiety, fear, distrust or hostility. They also had increased activity in the part of the brain associated with relaxation, compassion and acceptance. Even novice meditators show a thickening in the areas of the brain involved in memory, attention and focus, and decision-making. All meditation methods develop concentration and the ability to “abide” with feelings, events, or sensations, as they are, without needing to change them.

Although meditation can be profoundly helpful it is not for everyone. Meditation is deceptively simple. Anyone who has tried to develop a regular practice knows that it is easy to get discouraged and quit. Any meditation method enables us to experience all too clearly our habitual thoughts and feelings. Most people who begin meditation practice report feeling that their thoughts and feelings are “worse,” more intense and frequent, when actually we are just more aware of what is, and always was, there. It requires some emotional stability to be able to tolerate the recognition of our habitual states of mind. Meditation is not recommended for people who are severely depressed or vulnerable to psychosis. Some people might benefit more from hatha yoga or Tai Chi classes that prepare the mind and nervous system for meditation.

Never-the-less, meditation practice can be amazingly helpful for people with eating disorders. The relaxed, upright posture of meditation itself produces a calmer, more balanced emotional state. Watching the mind, being aware of thoughts, feelings and sensations, and bringing the mind back to a focus when it begins to identify with them, gradually trains us to be a “witness” rather than “victim” of our own states. Gradually over time, we actually recognize that thoughts and feelings are ephemeral, impermanent experiences that come and go like clouds in a breezy, sunny sky.

Getting Started

1. Experiment with finding a time and place that works for you. It can help to sit in front of something inspiring, like a table with a beautiful picture or object on it. It may take time to find the right place and time.
2. Sit with your spine as long as you can, your shoulders and chest broad, eyes gently closed or slightly open, right palm on top of the left. Sitting on a chair is fine if you can sit with your spine straight.
3. Begin to notice your breath, without trying to change it, as it is, coming and going. This is called “bare attention,” noticing your breath and the awareness that perceives it. You might count the breaths, beginning again at one when you bring the mind back. You can imagine your breath moving from your nose to the floor in front of you in an arc, or focus on the sensation of the breath in your nostrils or belly.
4. Some of your attention can be aware of, but not focused on, the stream of thoughts, feelings, sensations and sounds, (as you would be aware of yet ignore the tape that runs at the bottom of the CNN news.)
5. When you find you are distracted, bring your attention back to your breath. You will need to do this many times, like exercising a muscle. This is the activity that trains the mind to be aware of thoughts and feelings without judging or holding on.
6. Be kind to yourself and curious about how your mind is in any given session. Thoughts and feelings are natural, our goal isn’t to stop or quiet them, but rather to be aware when we are distracted by them and willing to come back to the breath.
7. Begin with five-minute sessions. Set a timer if necessary. Training the mind is like training a puppy. Short consistent sessions build a habit of meditating and can be gradually lengthened. It helps to end a session before you want to so that you feel the desire to do it again.
8. You can begin and end your practice by dedicating any benefit that results to help all beings. This broadens the scope from just one to many, and builds the motivation to help others.
9. You may want to find a teacher you trust and a group of people to practice with, just as we benefit from having an exercise class or music teacher.

Most people with eating disorders harbor an unexpressed hunger for higher meaning and purpose. Meditation can help us uncover the joy, fearlessness and

compassion that are our natural state. As the Buddha said, we can either try to cover the world with leather to minimize our disturbance, or, through meditation, we can gradually put on a pair of shoes.

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Book suggestion:

Breath Sweeps Mind: A First Guide to Meditation Practice

Edited by Jean Smith

A Tricycle Book, 1998