

# Meditation: A Beginner's Guide

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**What is meditation?** Put simply, meditation is the practice of attempting to focus the mind. It can be used for relaxation and stress management, as well as for spiritual growth and exploration.

**How do I meditate?** You can start meditating by focusing on your breath. Find a quiet environment, and sit comfortably in a chair or on the floor. You can close your eyes, or look at a spot on the floor a few feet in front of you. Breathe slowly in and out. Try to focus your attention on your breath. When you notice your mind wandering, do not dwell on this thought, and do not chastise yourself for losing focus. Instead, simply bring your attention back to your breath each time. Distracting thoughts are an inherent part of meditation, because they help us to practice focus.

Most of us find meditation difficult and unnatural, because our minds are used to jumping from one idea to the next. Like any other difficult skill, it takes practice. Even a few minutes every day can help you become more comfortable with meditation. Try not to be too goal-oriented during your practice, because the most valuable part of meditation is the *process* of attempting to focus your attention.

**Variations:** Now that you know the basics of meditation, there are plenty of variations you can try. A few are explained here, and you can get other ideas from books and websites.

- **Count your breaths.** For some people, the counting can make it easier to focus. Each time you exhale, count: 1...2...3...4... Count only up to 4 before starting again at 1, so that you won't get distracted trying to remember large numbers.
- **Notice thoughts.** Many people get frustrated during meditation because they don't know how to handle distracting thoughts. The key is to notice the thoughts, then move on and return to focus. Try imagining that you are sitting at the bottom of a deep pool of water. Each time you notice a thought, visualize it as a bubble that rises away from you and disappears. Other visualizations you can try are thoughts as leaves floating down a stream past you, or clouds drifting by.
- **Visualize colors.** This can be a fun way to customize your meditation experience. Pick two colors that you want to symbolize certain feelings or emotions during this meditation. Then, visualize yourself breathing one color in, and breathing the other color out. As an example, you could visualize breathing in blue for relaxation, and breathing out red for stress. Imagine the color you inhale spreading throughout your body, and the color you exhale coming from all parts of your body and leaving through your breath.
- **Body awareness.** Focus your attention on each part of your body in turn, starting at your feet and working slowly up to your head. Notice any sensation that you feel there. Then, imagine that your breath is flowing in and out of this part of your body. You can also combine this with "progressive relaxation", in which you tense and then relax each muscle of your body.