

## Why Meditate?

*by Deepak Chopra*

During most of our waking life our minds are engaged in a continuous internal dialogue in which the meaning and emotional associations of one thought trigger the next. We hear a snippet of music and suddenly we're thinking about the first time we heard that song with an old boyfriend or girlfriend and how that relationship ended. If we're still holding emotional pain over that ending, those feelings may bubble up and then our mind may veer into criticism, self-pity, or worries about the future.

All day long our mind spins stories about our work, our health, our finances, our family, and our future. Often we're not even conscious of the internal soundtrack unspooling in our mind and yet it is the greatest source of stress in our lives. Although the mind is capable of creating life-affirming stories, it has what neuroscientists refer to as a negativity bias, a tendency to pay more attention to negative experiences than to positive ones. The negativity bias evolved as a survival instinct millions of years ago, as our ancestors focused their attention on avoiding potential threats in their environment rather than on rewards. Stopping to savor a delicious meal or admire a Paleolithic sunset would have used valuable attentional resources, leaving our ancient ancestors more vulnerable to attack by a predator. Those who survived to pass on their genes paid a lot of attention to danger. Their legacy is a brain that is primed to focus on negative experiences and has a tendency to get stuck in conditioned patterns of thinking, returning again and again to thoughts of anxiety, depression, and limitation.

### The Healing Benefits of Meditation

Meditation is one of the best tools we have to counter the brain's negativity bias, release accumulated stress, foster positive experiences and intentions, and enjoy the peace of present moment awareness. A large body of research has established that having a regular meditation practice produces tangible benefits for mental and physical health, including:

- Decreased blood pressure and hypertension
- Lowered cholesterol levels
- Reduced production of "stress hormones," including cortisol and adrenaline
- More efficient oxygen use by the body
- Increased production of the anti-aging hormone DHEA
- Improved immune function
- Decreased anxiety, depression, and insomnia

Let's look in more detail at how meditation benefits mind-body health.

## Meditation Reduces Stress and Burnout

Chronic, unmanaged stress can make you sick and accelerate aging. As many scientific studies have found, prolonged stress can contribute to high blood pressure, heart disease, stomach ulcers, autoimmune diseases, anxiety, cancer, insomnia, chronic fatigue, obesity, depression, and accelerated aging.

In meditation, your body releases stress and reverses the effects of the fight-or-flight response—that ancient instinct we all have to either run from perceived danger or take it on in battle. Intended as a short-term protection mechanism, the fight-or-flight response causes our body to speed up our heart rate, increase our blood sugar, suppress our immune system, reduce insulin production, pump out stress hormones such as adrenaline and cortisol, and reduce the blood supply to our digestive organs. All of these reactions happen so that our body can focus on either running away as fast as it can—or staying to fight. Although few people reading this face daily threats to their bodily existence, many live in a prolonged state of fight or flight, generating stress in response to bad traffic, criticism, or a disagreement.

Regular meditation dissipates accumulated stress and cultivates a state of restful alertness. There are many compelling studies showing the power of meditation to relieve stress and promote inner calm. For example, a 2011 study published in the *Evidence-Based Complementary and Alternative Medicine Journal* found that full-time workers who spent a few hours each week practicing mindfulness meditation reported a significant decrease in job stress, anxiety, and depressed mood.

## Meditation Improves Your Brain, Including Your Focus, Memory, and Ability to Learn

As researchers have found, meditation can help you tap into your brain's deepest potential to focus, learn, and adapt. While scientists used to believe that beyond a certain age, the brain couldn't change or grow, we now know that brain has a quality known as *plasticity*, enabling it to grow new neurons and transform throughout our lives. Meditation is a powerful tool for awakening new neural connections and even transforming regions of the brain. A major study led by Harvard University and Massachusetts General Hospital found that after only eight weeks of meditation, participants experienced beneficial growth in the brain areas associated with memory, learning, empathy, self-awareness, and stress regulation (the insula, hippocampus, and prefrontal cortex). In addition, the meditators reported decreased feelings of anxiety and greater feelings of calm. This study adds to the expanding body of research about the brain's amazing plasticity and ability to change habitual stress patterns.

Many other studies provide evidence for the value of meditation in improving the ability to stay focused in a world filled with increasing distractions and demands on our attention. For example, research conducted by the UCLA Mindful Awareness Center showed that teenagers and adults with ADHD who practiced various forms of meditation for just eight weeks improved their ability to concentrate on tasks, even when attempts were made to distract them.

## Meditation Helps You Create More Harmonious, Loving Relationships

When you're feeling balanced and centered, it is much easier to respond with awareness rather than reacting in a knee-jerk way or saying something that creates toxicity in your relationships. Meditation cultivates equanimity and compassion, allowing you to be present with a loved one, client, or co-worker and really listen to what they are saying and what they may need.

As you meditate on a regular basis, you develop what is known as *witnessing awareness*—the ability to calmly and objectively observe a situation, notice when you are being triggered, and consciously choose how you want to respond. The ability to be present and aware is extremely valuable in every relationship.

## Meditation Improves Creativity and Problem Solving

We each have between 60,000 and 80,000 thoughts a day—unfortunately, many of them are the same thoughts we had yesterday, last week, and last year. The mind tends to get stuck in repetitive thought loops that squeeze out the possibility for new ideas and inspiration. Meditation is a powerful practice for going beyond habitual, conditioned thought patterns into a state of expanded awareness. We connect to the field of infinite possibilities or pure potentiality, and we open to new insights, intuition, and ideas.

The world's great innovators, athletes, and other high achievers have described this state of expanded awareness as "being in the flow," being in the right place at the right time, or a state of grace. Time seems to stand still and instead of struggling and trying to force things to happen, everything you need comes naturally to you. You do less and accomplish more. You aren't burdened by the past or worried about the future; you're flowing in the eternal now. This higher state of consciousness is the birthplace of all creativity. The mind is in an open, receptive state and is able to receive flashes of insight and fresh perspectives.

## Meditation Decreases Depression, Anxiety, and Insomnia

The emotional effects of sitting quietly and going within are profound. The deep state of rest produced by meditation triggers the brain to release neurotransmitters, including dopamine, serotonin, oxytocin, and endorphins. Each of these naturally occurring brain chemicals has been linked to different aspects of happiness:

- **Dopamine** plays a key role in the brain's ability to experience pleasure, feel rewarded, and maintain focus.
- **Serotonin** has a calming effect. It eases tension and helps us feel less stressed and more relaxed and focused. Low levels of this neurotransmitter have been linked to migraines, anxiety, bipolar disorder, apathy, feelings of worthlessness, fatigue, and insomnia.
- **Oxytocin** (the same chemical whose levels rise during sexual arousal and breastfeeding), is a pleasure hormone. It creates feelings of calm, contentment, and security, while reducing fear and anxiety.
- **Endorphins** are most commonly known as the chemicals that create the exhilaration referred to as "the runner's high." These neurotransmitters play many roles related to well-being, including decreasing feelings of pain and reducing the side effects of stress.

Meditation choreographs the simultaneous release of these neurotransmitters, something that no single drug can do—and all without side effects. A growing body of medical research is providing scientific evidence that meditation and mindfulness alleviates depression, anxiety, PTSD, and other mood-related disorders. For example, a pivotal study led by scientists at the University of California, San Francisco, found that participants who underwent a short, intensive meditation program were less depressed, anxious, and stressed, while also experiencing greater compassion and awareness of others' feelings.

Meditation also can benefit people suffering from chronic pain, potentially decreasing or eliminating the need for medication. A study conducted by Wake Forest University School of Medicine found that participants who attended four 20-minute training sessions over the course of four days experienced a sharp reduction in their sensitivity to pain. In fact, the reduction in pain ratings was significantly greater than those found in similar studies involving placebo pills, morphine, and other painkilling drugs.

## The Birthplace of Happiness

Beyond the substantial benefits meditation creates for the mind-body physiology, the greatest gift of meditation is the sense of calm and inner peace it brings into your daily life. When you meditate, you go beyond the mind's noisy chatter into an entirely different place: the silence of a mind that is not imprisoned by the past or the future. This is important because silence is the birthplace of happiness. Silence is where we get our bursts of inspiration, our tender feelings of compassion and empathy, and our sense of love. These are all delicate emotions, and the chaotic roar of the internal dialogue easily drowns them out. But when you discover the silence in your mind, you no longer have to pay undue attention to all the random images that trigger worry, anger, and pain. When you meditate on a regular basis, all of your thoughts, actions, and reactions are infused with a little more love and mindful attention. The result is a deeper appreciation and a profound awareness of the divine quality of existence.

### About Deepak Chopra, M.D., F.A.C.P.

Recognized as one of the world's foremost leaders in the field of mind-body medicine, Deepak Chopra, M.D. is a best-selling author, teacher, and co-founder of the Chopra Center for Wellbeing. His medical training is in internal medicine and endocrinology, and he is a Fellow of the American College of Physicians, a member of the American Association of Clinical Endocrinologists, and an adjunct professor of Executive Programs at the Kellogg School of Management at Northwestern University. Deepak is also an adjunct professor at Columbia Business School, Columbia University, a senior scientist at the Gallup organization, and an assistant clinical professor in the Family and Preventive Medicine Department at the University of California, San Diego. For more than a decade, he has participated as a lecturer at the Update in Internal Medicine, an annual event sponsored by Harvard Medical School's Department of Continuing Education and the Department of Medicine, Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center.