

12 Science-Based Benefits of Meditation

 [healthline.com/nutrition/12-benefits-of-meditation](https://www.healthline.com/nutrition/12-benefits-of-meditation)

Matthew Thorpe, MD, PhD



Nutrition



Written by Matthew Thorpe, MD, PhD and [Rachael Link, MS, RD](#) — Medically reviewed by [Marney A. White, PhD, MS, Psychology](#) — Updated on October 27, 2020

Meditation is the habitual process of training your mind to focus and redirect your thoughts.

The popularity of meditation is increasing as more people discover its many health benefits.

You can use it to increase awareness of yourself and your surroundings. Many people think of it as a way to reduce stress and develop concentration.

People also use the practice to develop other beneficial habits and feelings, such as a positive mood and outlook, self-discipline, healthy sleep patterns, and even increased pain tolerance.

This article reviews 12 health benefits of meditation.

1. Reduces stress

Stress reduction is one of the most common reasons people try meditation.

One review concluded that meditation lives up to its reputation for stress reduction (1).

Normally, mental and physical stress cause increased levels of the stress hormone cortisol. This produces many of the harmful effects of stress, such as the release of inflammatory chemicals called cytokines.

These effects can disrupt sleep, promote depression and anxiety, increase blood pressure, and contribute to fatigue and cloudy thinking.

In an 8-week study, a meditation style called “mindfulness meditation” reduced the inflammation response caused by stress (2).

Furthermore, research has shown that meditation may also improve symptoms of stress-related conditions, including irritable bowel syndrome, post-traumatic stress disorder, and fibromyalgia (3, 4, 5).

Summary

Many styles of meditation can help reduce stress. Meditation can likewise reduce symptoms in people with stress-triggered medical conditions.

2. Controls anxiety

Meditation can reduce stress levels, which translates to less anxiety.

A meta-analysis including nearly 1,300 adults found that meditation may decrease anxiety. Notably, this effect was strongest in those with the highest levels of anxiety (6).

Also, one study found that 8 weeks of mindfulness meditation helped reduce anxiety symptoms in people with generalized anxiety disorder, along with increasing positive self-statements and improving stress reactivity and coping (7).

Another study in 47 people with chronic pain found that completing an 8-week meditation program led to noticeable improvements in depression, anxiety, and pain over 1 year (8).

What’s more, some research suggests that a variety of mindfulness and meditation exercises may reduce anxiety levels (9).

For example, yoga has been shown to help people reduce anxiety. This is likely due to benefits from both meditative practice and physical activity (10).

Meditation may also help control job-related anxiety. One study found that employees who used a mindfulness meditation app for 8 weeks experienced improved feelings of well-being and decreased distress and job strain, compared with those in a control group ([11](#)).

Summary

Habitual meditation can help reduce anxiety and improve stress reactivity and coping skills.

3. Promotes emotional health

Some forms of meditation can lead to improved self-image and a more positive outlook on life.

For example, one review of treatments given to more than 3,500 adults found that mindfulness meditation improved symptoms of depression ([12](#)).

Similarly, a review of 18 studies showed that people receiving meditation therapies experienced reduced symptoms of depression, compared with those in a control group ([13](#)).

Another study found that people who completed a meditation exercise experienced fewer negative thoughts in response to viewing negative images, compared with those in a control group ([14](#)).

Furthermore, inflammatory chemicals called cytokines, which are released in response to stress, can affect mood, leading to depression. A review of several studies suggests meditation may also reduce depression by decreasing levels of these inflammatory chemicals ([15](#)).

Summary

Some forms of meditation can improve depression and reduce negative thoughts. It may also decrease levels of inflammatory cytokines, which could contribute to depression.

4. Enhances self-awareness

Some forms of meditation may help you develop a stronger understanding of yourself, helping you grow into your best self.

For example, self-inquiry meditation explicitly aims to help you develop a greater understanding of yourself and how you relate to those around you.

Other forms teach you to recognize thoughts that may be harmful or self-defeating. The idea is that as you gain greater awareness of your thought habits, you can steer them toward more constructive patterns ([16](#), [17](#), [18](#)).

One review of 27 studies showed that practicing tai chi may be associated with improved self-efficacy, which is a term used to describe a person's belief in their own capacity or ability to overcome challenges (19).

In another study, 153 adults who used a mindfulness meditation app for 2 weeks experienced reduced feelings of loneliness and increased social contact compared with those in a control group (20).

Additionally, experience in meditation may cultivate more creative problem-solving skills (21).

Summary

Self-inquiry and related styles of meditation can help you “know yourself.” This can be a starting point for making other positive changes.

5. Lengthens attention span

Focused-attention meditation is like weight lifting for your attention span. It helps increase the strength and endurance of your attention.

For example, one study found that people who listened to a meditation tape experienced improved attention and accuracy while completing a task, compared with those in a control group (22).

A similar study showed that people who regularly practiced meditation performed better on a visual task and had a greater attention span than those without any meditation experience (23).

Moreover, one review concluded that meditation may even reverse patterns in the brain that contribute to mind-wandering, worrying, and poor attention (24).

Even meditating for a short period each day may benefit you. One study found that meditating for just 13 minutes daily enhanced attention and memory after 8 weeks (25).

Summary

Several types of meditation may build your ability to redirect and maintain attention.

6. May reduce age-related memory loss

Improvements in attention and clarity of thinking may help keep your mind young.

Kirtan Kriya is a method of meditation that combines a mantra or chant with repetitive motion of the fingers to focus your thoughts. Studies in people with age-related memory loss have shown it improves performance on neuropsychological tests (26).

Furthermore, a review found preliminary evidence that multiple meditation styles can increase attention, memory, and mental quickness in older volunteers (27).

In addition to fighting normal age-related memory loss, meditation can at least partially improve memory in patients with dementia. It can likewise help control stress and improve coping in those caring for family members with dementia ([28](#), [29](#)).

Summary

The improved focus you can gain through regular meditation may boost your memory and mental clarity. These benefits can help fight age-related memory loss and dementia.

7. Can generate kindness

Some types of meditation may particularly increase positive feelings and actions toward yourself and others.

Metta, a type of meditation also known as loving-kindness meditation, begins with developing kind thoughts and feelings toward yourself.

Through practice, people learn to extend this kindness and forgiveness externally, first to friends, then acquaintances, and ultimately enemies.

A meta-analysis of 22 studies on this form of meditation demonstrated its ability to increase peoples' compassion toward themselves and others ([30](#)).

One study in 100 adults randomly assigned to a program that included loving-kindness meditation found that these benefits were dose-dependent.

In other words, the more time people spent in weekly metta meditation practice, the more positive feelings they experienced ([31](#)).

Another study in 50 college students showed that practicing metta meditation 3 times per week improved positive emotions, interpersonal interactions, and understanding of others after 4 weeks ([32](#)).

These benefits also appear to accumulate over time with the practice of loving-kindness meditation ([33](#)).

Summary

Metta, or loving-kindness meditation, is a practice of developing positive feelings, first toward yourself and then toward others. Metta increases positivity, empathy, and compassionate behavior toward others.

8. May help fight addictions

The mental discipline you can develop through meditation may help you break dependencies by increasing your self-control and awareness of triggers for addictive behaviors ([34](#)).

Research has shown that meditation may help people learn to redirect their attention, manage their emotions and impulses, and increase their understanding of the causes behind their (35, 36).

One study in 60 people receiving treatment for alcohol use disorder found that practicing transcendental meditation was associated with lower levels of stress, psychological distress, alcohol cravings, and alcohol use after 3 months (37).

Meditation may also help you control food cravings. A review of 14 studies found mindfulness meditation helped participants reduce emotional and binge eating (38).

Summary

Meditation develops mental awareness and can help you manage triggers for unwanted impulses. This can help you recover from addiction, manage unhealthy eating, and redirect other unwanted habits.

9. Improves sleep

Nearly half of the population will struggle with insomnia at some point.

One study compared mindfulness-based meditation programs and found that people who meditated stayed asleep longer and had improved insomnia severity, compared with those who had an unmedicated control condition (39).

Becoming skilled in meditation may help you control or redirect the racing or runaway thoughts that often lead to insomnia.

Additionally, it can help relax your body, releasing tension and placing you in a peaceful state in which you're more likely to fall asleep.

Summary

A variety of meditation techniques can help you relax and control runaway thoughts that can interfere with sleep. This can shorten the time it takes to fall asleep and increase sleep quality.

10. Helps control pain

Your perception of pain is connected to your state of mind, and it can be elevated in stressful conditions.

Some research suggests that incorporating meditation into your routine could be beneficial for controlling pain.

For example, one review of 38 studies concluded that mindfulness meditation could reduce pain, improve quality of life, and decrease symptoms of depression in people with chronic pain (40).

A large meta-analysis of studies enrolling nearly 3,500 participants concluded that meditation was associated with decreased pain (41).

Meditators and non-meditators experienced the same causes of pain, but meditators showed a greater ability to cope with pain and even experienced a reduced sensation of pain.

Summary

Meditation can diminish the perception of pain in the brain. This may help treat chronic pain when used to supplement medical care or physical therapy.

11. Can decrease blood pressure

Meditation can also improve physical health by reducing strain on the heart.

Over time, high blood pressure makes the heart work harder to pump blood, which can lead to poor heart function.

High blood pressure also contributes to atherosclerosis, or a narrowing of the arteries, which can lead to heart attack and stroke.

A meta-analysis of 12 studies enrolling nearly 1000 participants found that meditation helped reduce blood pressure. This was more effective among older volunteers and those who had higher blood pressure prior to the study (42).

One review concluded that several types of meditation produced similar improvements in blood pressure (43).

In part, meditation appears to control blood pressure by relaxing the nerve signals that coordinate heart function, blood vessel tension, and the “fight-or-flight” response that increases alertness in stressful situations (44).

Summary

Blood pressure decreases not only during meditation but also over time in individuals who meditate regularly. This can reduce strain on the heart and arteries, helping prevent heart disease.

12. Accessible anywhere

People practice many different forms of meditation, most of which don't require specialized equipment or space. You can practice with just a few minutes daily.

If you want to start meditating, try choosing a form of meditation based on what you want to get out of it.

There are two major styles of meditation:

- **Focused-attention meditation.** This style concentrates attention on a single object, thought, sound, or visualization. It emphasizes ridding your mind of distractions. Meditation may focus on breathing, a mantra, or calming sound.
- **Open-monitoring meditation.** This style encourages broadened awareness of all aspects of your environment, train of thought, and sense of self. It may include becoming aware of suppressed thoughts, feelings, or impulses.

To find out which styles you like best, check out the variety of free, guided meditation exercises offered by the [University of California Los Angeles](#). It's an excellent way to try different styles and find one that suits you.

If your regular work and home environments do not allow for consistent, quiet alone time, consider participating in a class. This can also improve your chances of success by providing a supportive community.

Alternatively, consider setting your alarm a few minutes early to take advantage of quiet time in the morning. This may help you develop a consistent habit and allow you to start the day positively.

Summary

If you're interested in incorporating meditation into your routine, try a few different styles and consider guided exercises to get started with one that suits you.

The bottom line

Meditation is something everyone can do to improve their mental and emotional health.

You can do it anywhere, without special equipment or memberships.

Alternatively, meditation courses and support groups are widely available.

There's a great variety of styles too, each with different strengths and benefits.

Trying out a style of meditation suited to your goals is a great way to improve your quality of life, even if you only have a few minutes to do it each day.

Last medically reviewed on October 27, 2020