

THE SCIENCE OF SELF-IMPROVEMENT

MEDITATION GUIDE



*Exercises to improve awareness in
your everyday life*

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Introduction

This guide is a collection of meditations that I've found helpful toward various aspects of our happiness, well-being, and self-improvement.

Most of these meditations have been influenced by books I've read on Buddhism and Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy. However, I have made small adjustments to some of these meditations based on what I've found works best for me.

You may find that making your own adjustments to these meditations will help them work better for you. Please consider the instructions for each meditation as guidelines; you don't need to practice them exactly as they are to see benefits, but these instructions are a valuable starting point.

Consider the meditations throughout this guide as your own experiments in self-discovery. In the end, the goal of meditation is to learn something about yourself that you didn't know before.

But before we get into the exercises, here is some interesting research into the benefits of meditation.

Meditation Can Change Your Brain

According to a [study](#) published in *Psychiatry Research: Neuroimaging*, just 8 weeks of meditation training can create significant changes in regions of the brain associated with attention, memory, stress, and empathy.

Two of these regions include the prefrontal cortex, which allows us control and shift our attention, and the insula, which makes us more self-aware and empathic.

This means that meditation can help *neuroplasticity*, which is our brain's ability to rewire itself based on new experiences and new information.

The basic idea is that the more often certain neural pathways fire, the stronger the connections will become. This is called long-term potentiation, and it is the basis of all learning and memory formation.

One famous quote about neuroplasticity is by the Canadian psychologist Donald Hebb, who said, "neurons that fire together wire together."

It makes sense that meditation would improve this process of neuroplasticity. By being more aware of our present experience as it is happening, we begin to form a secondary ability that UCLA psychiatrist Daniel Siegel calls “response flexibility” – the capacity to pause before we act. He describes it as follows:

“Meditation creates a spaciousness of the mind to notice that an impulse has arisen and to disconnect from the automatic behavior that usually follows when someone is an impulsive person. So meditation creates a space between impulse and action that allows us to be more flexible in our responses.”

Because meditation allows us this flexibility in our choices and decision-making, it also gives us more flexibility in how we choose our experiences, and thus a more plastic and growing brain.

Meditation Can Change Your Genes

According to a [study](#) published in *Conscious Cognition*, meditation can also lead to changes in the expression of our genes.

Here’s a good summary of what they found:

“We assessed the whole genome gene expression analysis of long-term meditators in four separate trials and detected significant differential gene expression in association with higher states of consciousness. The number of differently expressed genes as well as high proportion of genes themselves differed between meditators. Despite this, gene ontology enrichment analysis found significant biological and molecular processes shared among meditators’ higher state of consciousness.”

This is just more evidence that meditation can make profound changes in who we really are. It also tells us that human nature may be a lot more flexible than we initially thought.

Epigenetics is the study of how gene expression can change based on our environment, habits, and experiences. As it turns out, different genes can turn “ON” or “OFF” based on the information we are receiving from our environment.

Meditation allows us to change this gene expression in a big way, by changing the fundamental building blocks of how we experience the world around us.

For those of us that already meditate, these drastic physical changes shouldn’t be too much of a surprise. But perhaps this

evidence can motivate those who haven't tried meditation to begin starting a steady practice.

The Physical and Mental Health Benefits of Meditation

Research into meditation has really picked up over the past few decades. Here are some of the benefits we are just beginning to discover:

Improving Attention

One of the most obvious benefits from meditation is that it improves our attention. One [study](#) has shown that just 5 days of 20 minute training can show significant improvements in our ability to focus and concentrate. The fact that mindfulness meditation can improve our attention is one of the most well-documented benefits. And the practice of staying focused on our breath can build concentration that often spills over into many other activities.

Improving Cognition

Another interesting [study](#) showed that just 4 days of 20 minute training showed significant increases in cognitive functioning, especially memory and learning. Other related [research](#) indicates that meditation can help slow down Alzheimer's and dementia.

Some of this may in part be due to our increased attention, but it seems meditation also acts on other parts of the brain more directly related to learning and memory, such as increasing gray matter in the hippocampus.

Managing Stress and Anxiety

Meditation has also been [shown](#) to reduce grey matter in the amygdala, which is a part of the brain commonly associated with stress, anxiety, and emotional processing. This demonstrates why meditation does so well in relieving stress and increasing relaxation. Jon Kabat-Zinn, founder of The Stress Reduction Clinic and Center for Mindfulness in Medicine at the University of Massachusetts, is one of the leading teachers and researchers in Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR). [Here](#) you can find a wonderful lecture he gave to Google summarizing a lot of the research demonstrating how effective mindfulness meditation is for reducing stress and improving medical outcomes.

Improving Heart Rate and Blood Pressure

In light of meditation's ability to reduce stress, it has also been [reported](#) to lower your blood pressure and heart rate. This particular study followed 200 participants for 5 years who were at a "high risk" for heart attacks and strokes. They found that those

who practiced meditation regularly reduced their risk for heart attacks and strokes by almost 50%.

Reducing Pain

Mindful breathing has also been [discovered](#) to reduce pain, according to a recent study in the *Journal of Neuroscience*. After just four 20 minute mindfulness sessions, participants did better at reducing unpleasant sensations (such as 120 degrees of heat, a temperature that most people find painful) than those who did not receive mindfulness training. Researchers theorize that mindfulness trainees have an easier time keeping their focus directed toward their breathing and thereby ignoring the discomfort caused by the heat. It's likely that mindfulness can show similar effects on other types of pain as well.

Overcoming Depression

Surprisingly, mindfulness meditation is [said](#) to be on par with antidepressants in preventing depression relapse. According to researchers, mindfulness prevents excessive rumination (a common cause of depression) by teaching individuals how to reflect on thoughts and emotional states in a non-judgmental and non-attaching way. Instead of clinging to "negative" thoughts and feelings – and feeding into them – mindfulness

teaches us to sit back and watch these emotions and thoughts without needing to overreact or feel guilty about how we feel. This makes it a lot easier to fully experience these passing thoughts and emotions, and then let them go.

Overcoming Fear of Death

Another recent [study](#) published earlier this year found that mindfulness can also ease fears and anxieties related to death. Mindful people tend to be more accepting of their limited time while alive. They also tend to be less dependent on fantasy-filled beliefs and desires for self-preservation or immortality. They understand that death is not the opposite of life, but an integral part of it. Thus, they accept the reality of their impermanence, instead of being defensive.

Let's Get Started!

Now that you are familiar with the research on meditation, let's start putting this stuff to practice. The rest of this guide is going to share various meditations and valuable advice you can begin applying to start a meditation regimen of your own.

Breathing Meditation

This exercise will help increase concentration by using the breath as a focal point for meditation. It should take between 10-15 minutes depending on your natural pace of breathing. This is a great technique to use in the morning before you start your day or during a break at work.

Posture

Having the correct posture during meditation can be very important to help minimize discomfort or avoid falling asleep.



In this exercise, I want you to try the half lotus position (pictured above).

- First find a comfortable cushion or rug to sit on.
- Then, sit down and place your left foot above your right leg.
- Fold your hands and let them rest a couple inches below your navel.
- Try to keep your spine straight and head level throughout the exercise.

The only difference in the full lotus position is each foot is placed above each opposite leg (left foot over right leg, right foot over left leg).

If you find either of these positions too uncomfortable, try sitting in the traditional “cross-legged” form (in some of your grade schools they may have referred to this as “Indian style.”) Over time you will likely adjust your posture and find what works best for you.

This meditation can be done with your eyes open or closed. However, if you are just starting it out it is probably better to do it with eyes closed so that you minimize possible distractions.

Directions

- Start by bringing your attention to your breathing.
- Now, beginning at 100, countdown each breath until you reach 0.
- Keep in mind, you're not trying to breathe faster or slower – just let your breathing go at its natural pace.
- Use your internal dialogue to guide the counting, such as “100, 99, 98, 97, 96...” (if it helps, you can count out loud instead).
- The goal of this meditation is to keep your focus on your breathing until you reach the end of your countdown.
- If you get distracted (from other sensations, thoughts, feelings, etc.) just make a mental note of your distraction and then re-focus your attention on your breathing.
- For every new distraction, continue to re- focus your awareness on your breathing until the exercise is complete.
- If you want to try a more advanced version of this meditation: practice staying focused on your breathing without counting.

It's very probable that when you first start doing this exercise you will get distracted a lot. Don't get discouraged.

Noticing yourself getting distracted is actually one of the first steps toward increasing your focus and attention.

By practicing this exercise several times a week (maybe every morning or evening) you can begin to condition yourself to have better focus and concentration throughout your day. You should start seeing results within the first week or two.

Please Remember: As simple as this exercise sounds on paper, it definitely requires some practice. I promise you won't see any results if you don't first show some dedication.

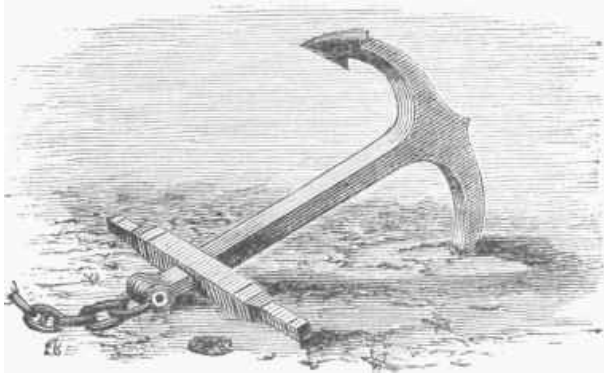
Breathing is like an anchor

Metaphors can often be very helpful in describing the meditative process. I like to sometimes think of breathing as like an anchor to a ship.

An anchor is a metal device used to prevent a boat from drifting due to wind or current. Its purpose is to keep the boat in place – so that it stays fixated in one position.

The Breathing Meditation works in a similar way, except its intent is to keep our mind fixated in one place, not a boat.

That's what staying focused is all about.



And no matter how far away our minds may drift during the course of a day, we can always remember to bring our awareness back to our breath.

By doing this, we help keep ourselves centered toward what's unfolding in the present moment.

3 Common Problems When First Starting Meditation

Meditation is simply a practice of developing inner awareness toward our experiences. It can be easy in theory, but difficult in practice.

Many people try meditating once or twice, but never develop a steady routine. A big part of this is beginners often get discouraged by common problems that they experience when first starting out.

There are 3 specific problems that I see people struggle with all of the time in meditation. This article is going to describe each one of these, then offer advice and guidelines on how to help you overcome these issues.

“I’m Easily Distracted”

One of the first types of meditation people usually try is a breathing meditation, where the main goal is to focus all of our awareness on the sensations of our breathing.

The problem is that whenever people find themselves being distracted away from their breathing (our focus and thoughts

drifting to other things), then they feel like they fail at meditation or they aren't good at it.

However, the whole point of beginning meditation is to first become more aware of just how distracted our minds can be.

That's why you are practicing meditation, so that you are able to better direct your awareness toward your object of focus. Getting distracted a lot when you first start out should be expected.

Whenever you find yourself distracted during a meditation, just make a mental note of your distraction. Say to yourself in a non-judgmental tone, "I got distracted," and then re-focus your awareness back toward your object of meditation.

As you continue practicing, you'll become less and less distracted. It'll still happen every now and then – no one is perfect – but the more aware you are of your distractions, the easier it becomes to overcome them.

"I Get Tired And Fall Asleep"

Another common problem when people first start meditating is that they find themselves quickly becoming bored and tired, and sometimes even falling asleep.

So instead of tuning into their awareness, many start tuning out, dozing off, or daydreaming – which isn't the type of consciousness normally associated with meditation.

Here are some valuable tips to help avoid falling asleep while meditating:

- Try meditating in the morning after a good night's sleep.
- Try meditating in a more stimulating environment (beach, park, nature). For some people, meditating at home might be too dull or boring.
- Try meditating with your eyes open (you can still focus on your breathing with your eyes closed). Closing our eyes is often associated with falling asleep, so this is one way to avoid that when first starting out.
- Try meditating on the sensations of being tired and falling asleep. Use your tiredness as an object of focus.
- Try meditating on a physical activity, such as walking. This will help keep both your body and mind awake while developing your awareness.

Different things will work differently for different people, be willing to try out new things in your meditation practice to discover what works best for you.

“Am I Meditating?”

Often while meditating we begin to ask ourselves, “Am I meditating?” or “Is *this* meditation?”

Beginners naturally don’t know what meditation is like, so anytime they experience a new sensation they wonder if it means they are being successful or not; it’s hard for someone to understand a completely subjective experience without first experiencing it themselves.

To overcome this problem, try to consider all of your experience a part of your meditation. In fact, the answer to the question “Am I meditating?” is always a “yes,” because the question itself is introspective and reflective.

As long as you are paying attention to your experiences – whether they be thoughts, emotions, or behaviors – then you are doing a type of meditation. This also means that every meditation is likely to be a little different from the last, so don’t get too attached to any single experience you have. Yes, you were meditating; but no, that’s not what meditation is going to be like every time: just keep practicing.

Sound Meditation

In this meditation, instead of focusing your awareness on your breathing, you will be opening your awareness toward sounds coming from your environment. This meditation is a different type of meditation compared to the “Breathing Meditation,” because you won’t be concentrating on any one particular stimulus. Instead, you will be cultivating a general sense of mindfulness toward your surroundings, which will probably include multiple stimuli at once (or multiple sounds).

Materials (optional)

- Paper
- Pen or pencil
- Timer

Directions

- Choose an environment to meditate in (such as at home, in nature, or in the city). You can practice this meditation virtually anywhere.
- Assume your meditation posture. You can also do this meditation sitting down, standing up, or walking. Whatever is comfortable and makes sense in your

environment. (For example, if you're practicing this on the bus ride home, it's not necessary to sit in a half lotus or full lotus position. Just meditate as you are.)

- Throughout the meditation, make a mental note of every sound that you become aware of. This is the main purpose of the meditation. You can also choose to write these down on a piece of paper (which can be interesting, because then you can count up all the different sounds you heard during the meditation).
- Try your best to make note of these sounds without judging them. Just think (or write) "car" or "plane" or "bird" – but try not to make judgements in your head on whether the sounds are pleasant or unpleasant. Just note what they are and listen to them with a non-judgmental awareness.
- When first starting out you may want to use a timer to see how many sounds you notice within a certain period of time. When I first did this, I would see how many different sounds I could hear within a 10 minute time frame.

An example

Here's a quick example of one time when I practiced this meditation.

September 23 2011 – 2PM – 2:05PM – Backyard – Sunny

1. Planes
2. Wind in trees
3. Wind pushing against fence
4. Birds chirping
5. Cricket chirping (faint)
6. Construction work
7. Wind chimes
8. Cars driving (in distance)
9. Fly buzzing
10. Motorcycle (going fast)
11. Helicopter
12. Water hose
13. Dog barking

Implications

This is another meditation that is very simple on paper, but can actually be very insightful in practice.

We often don't pay much attention to the sounds that pass us by on a daily basis, so it's interesting to become more aware of aspects of our environment that we are usually unconscious of. Sometimes it makes you wonder what else is around us that we aren't normally aware of.

You can practice this type of meditation with any other sense as well: vision, touch, taste, smell, etc. Exploring our world at a raw sensory level (without judgement) can really open our awareness to the nuances and complexities of life.

After practicing this meditation just a few times, I already noticed a difference in the way I perceived my environment. I felt more open to the different things around me. I also felt that this increased awareness improved various aspects of my creativity and problem-solving.

Walking Meditation

The first two meditations were focused on awareness of passive activities, such as breathing and listening. However, this same quality of focused awareness can also be applied to our actions. The “Walking Meditation” is a great beginner’s meditation that combines focused attention with deliberate action.

Directions

- Set a clear path to walk on (Point A → Point B)
- Walk the path while being completely focused on the sensations of walking.
- Try to maintain an upright posture while walking. Keep your head up and forward (parallel to the ground) whenever possible.
- If you get distracted by something, make note of your distraction (like in the “Breathing Meditation”) and then re-direct your focus back on walking.
- Pay attention to the mechanics and sensations of your movement as you walk. Notice the shifting of gravity from one side of your body to the other as you step from one foot to the next. Pay attention to how your body works as a whole, as well as any tension that shifts throughout your body as you walk (legs, back, abs, shoulders, arms, etc.).

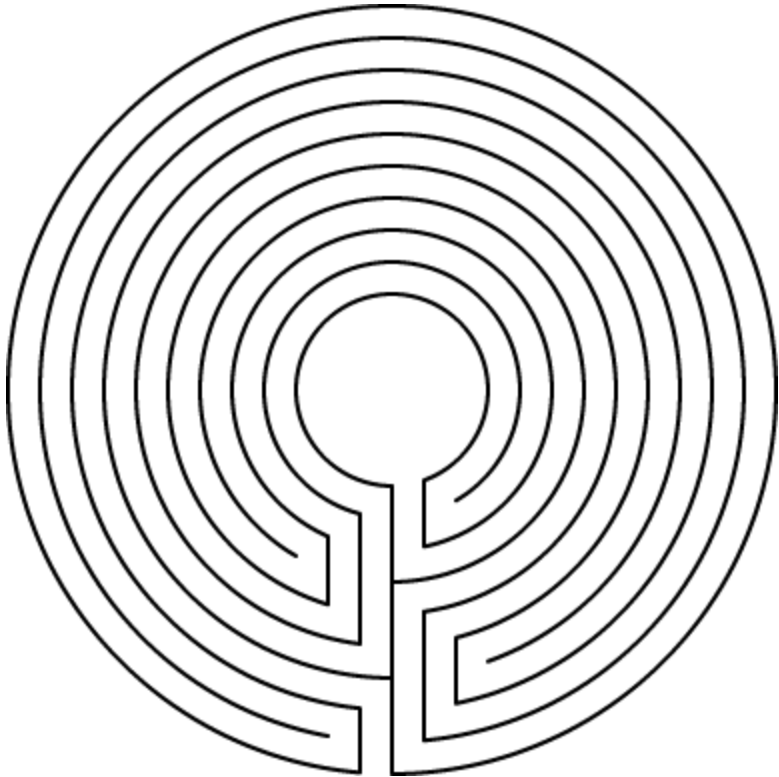
Also make note of any pain or soreness you may notice throughout your body.

- Continue sustaining awareness on your walking until you've reached your destination. From this moment the meditation has concluded.

Labyrinth – a popular tool for walking meditations.

A labyrinth is a simple pattern often constructed out of stones or rocks. It's a great tool to use during walking meditations.

A common labyrinth is shaped something like this.



Usually you start walking from the outside of the circle, and then the path gradually works its way to the center. From there, you can turn around and walk the path back toward the outside of the circle until you've exited (which is the same place you started).

Here is a picture of a hand-made labyrinth, using rocks to outline the path. You can choose to make a labyrinth of your own (in your backyard, or wherever). Or, you can probably find a professionally-made labyrinth at a local retreat center (some colleges and universities have them too).



Labyrinths aren't necessary for walking meditations, but they can enhance the experience. Often labyrinths are found in very serene and relaxing environments, which makes them a great place to meditate with few distractions.

Implications

Often walking is a very simple and unconscious activity, which makes it a great starting point when cultivating awareness toward your actions and behaviors.

One major lesson is that increasing awareness is not just for when we are sitting on meditation mats; the real benefits come when we begin applying this awareness to our daily lives and routines. Once you begin doing that, the potential benefits can be immeasurable.

Eating Meditation

We've meditated on breathing, listening, and walking – so why not eating too? Eating is an important part of our day, yet we often don't take the time to really become fully conscious and engaged while eating. Here are simple directions to help turn eating into a meditation of its own.

Directions

- Choose a meal to eat during your meditation.
- When ready to eat, minimize all possible distractions. Turn off the TV, computer, radio, or whatever. Don't read the newspaper. Don't eat with anyone else. Just focus all your attention on eating.
- Pay attention to all the sensations involved with eating. Make note of the different smells, tastes, and textures of the food while you're consuming it.
- Also make note of the mechanics of eating, such as the movement of your jaw while chewing, and how the food feels when you swallow it.
- Try to also become aware of the subtle cues your body sends you. For example, often by becoming more attuned to our bodies while eating we notice when we are full,

instead of continuing to gorge ourselves mindlessly. By paying more attention to how your body reacts to food, you might also find what types of food makes you feel good and healthy vs. what food makes you feel sick and bloated. This can sometimes lead to better and more conscious decisions when choosing meals to eat in the future.

- As with all other meditations, if you find yourself getting distracted then just make note of the distraction and re-direct your focus to the process of eating until the meal is finished (or your full).

Implications

Eating, like many common everyday activities, is something we tend to do while not being fully conscious. But when we do pay greater attention to the process of eating (and all the feelings and sensations that come with it) we can often develop a greater understanding of our eating habits. This increase in awareness can be a great first step in developing a healthier lifestyle.

Open Mind Meditation

Every meditation covered so far has been focusing on some object of meditation, such as our breathing, listening, walking, or eating. The “Open Mind Meditation” is a different kind of meditation, however, because it isn’t focused on any object or group of objects. Instead, it is an awareness of literally anything that comes into consciousness, whether it be sensations, feelings, thoughts, emotions, memories, or imaginations.

Directions

- Assume a meditative posture, such as the half lotus position discussed at the beginning of the e-book.
- The main goal of this meditation is to open your mind to anything that enters into consciousness – acknowledge any sensations, thoughts, emotions, memories, or imaginations that may arise.
- Continue to watch your conscious experience with a non-judgmental awareness. Don’t try to cling or avoid any sensation, thought, emotion, memory, or imagination. Just accept it as is and watch it without labeling it as “good” or “bad.”

- There is no telling where your awareness may bring you, and every meditation is going to be different. At times, your mind will shift to the sensations in your body, perhaps an itch on your nose, a pain in your lower back, or the growling of an empty stomach. Other times, your mind may shift inwards and reflect on passing thoughts, such as “What am I going to eat for dinner?” or “I need to put out the garbage tonight.” Or, perhaps your awareness will shift toward a sound in the room, a smell in the air, or a gust of wind against your skin.
- Again, try your best to be non-reactive toward whatever comes into mind. When in this state of “open awareness,” it is likely that some things will enter into consciousness that we may want to ignore or suppress. Perhaps an unpleasant thought, emotion, or memory will arise that we want to avoid. The difficult task, however, is to accept these experiences without putting a judgmental label on them. When we feel anger, depression, grief, or frustration, we should accept those feelings for what they are, and experience them in the moment without trying to cling or run away. Often times we may find there is actually something to learn from these perceived “negative experiences.”

- You can maintain this state of “open mind” for however long you like. When just starting out you may want to just do it for 15 minutes. As you get more experienced, you can begin extending the meditation to longer periods of time.

Implications

This is a great meditation for developing insight and peace of mind toward everything we experience. There are many different facets to our conscious experience, and being able to acknowledge and accept all of it (including both the “good” and “bad”) is a very important in improving our overall happiness and well-being.

You may also find during this meditation that your mind keeps going in certain directions (a particular memory, for example). This could be a sign that there is something you need to pay more attention to and try to learn from.

STOP Meditation

The STOP Meditation is a technique developed by Elisha Goldstein, a meditation teacher and psychotherapist. This exercise is a very simple, easy, and short meditation that you can apply at almost any time throughout your day. The goal is to take a momentary “step back” and re-evaluate what’s going on in the moment.

Directions

- **STOP** whatever it is you’re doing.
- **TAKE** a few deep breaths, focusing on the sensations of your breathing. This helps reconnect you with the present moment and also creates a buffer between your thoughts and your actions.
- **OBSERVE** what is happening in the moment. Ask yourself:
 - What am I thinking?
 - What am I feeling?
 - What am I doing?
 - What are my intentions?
- **PROCEED** with your day with this new sense of mindful awareness (based on how you answered the questions above). If you find there is something you need to adjust

in your attitude or actions, then make the appropriate changes.

Implications

This small injection of mindfulness allows us to live more consciously no matter where we are or what it is we are doing. I like to consider it a form of mini-meditation. The best part about this exercise is that it doesn't take up a lot of time (less than 30 seconds), and we can do it virtually anywhere: at work, home, school, on the bus, at a party, at the gym – wherever or whenever we may need to take a small “step back” and re-evaluate what it is we are doing.

Loving-Kindness Meditation

Loving-kindness meditation is a popular tradition in many schools of Buddhism. The aim of the meditation is to cultivate kindness and good intentions toward oneself and all others (even “enemies”). It is a wish that all conscious beings overcome suffering and achieve happiness. Scientific studies have shown that Loving-kindness Meditation can increase happiness and mental health, and can also create long-lasting changes in our brain.

Directions

- Assume a meditative posture.
- Focus on an individual that you want to cultivate feelings of love and kindness toward.
- Try to visualize the person in your mind’s eye and repeat mantras such as:
 - “I love _____.”
 - “May _____ be free from suffering.”
 - “May _____ find happiness.”

And here are some good mantras from Buddhist literature:

- “May all beings be free from enmity, affliction and anxiety, and live happily.” *Patisambhidamagga Mettakatha*
- “In gladness and in safety, may all beings be at ease.” *Karaniya Metta Sutta*
- During the loving-kindness meditation, a practitioner will focus on different people, beginning with their self and then expanding to others. Individuals you may wish to cultivate positive feelings toward include:
 - Self
 - Family
 - Friends
 - Loved Ones
 - Pets
 - Teachers
 - Coworkers
 - Acquaintances
 - Strangers
 - Enemies
 - People you’ve never met (other countries, etc.)
 - Future people
 - Animals
 - All known and unknown conscious beings.

- These mantras can help create what some Buddhists describe as a “blissful and boundless warm-hearted feeling” toward all conscious beings. However, one thing about mantras or affirmations: it’s important that we mean what we say, and we aren’t just reciting words. If a mantra or affirmation doesn’t stir up feelings, then try writing a mantra or affirmation of your own that resonates with you more.
- Empathy can also play an important role in your loving-kindness meditation. Empathy is an ability to understand and experience the world from another person’s point of view. To develop empathy it’s important that we can imagine ourselves experiencing the world through another person’s perspective – including experiencing one’s suffering as if it was happening to ourselves. When we see the world through another person’s eyes, it can often become much easier to sympathize with their struggles and show compassion and love toward them.

Try this: Try beginning your “Loving-Kindness Meditation” by first doing the “Breathing Meditation.” This will help you get into a more relaxed and focused state before repeating your mantras.

Implications

Research in neuroscience suggests that loving-kindness meditation can activate parts of the brain that are involved in how our body responds to emotions (insula), as well as a part of our brain that scientist believe is responsible for empathy (temporal parietal juncture). This effect was particularly strong in experts at meditation vs. novices.

Neuroscientists Richard Davidson and Antoine Lutz say that through practice we can train our brains to be more compassionate and kind: “People are not just stuck at their respective set points. We can take advantage of our brain’s plasticity and train it to enhance these qualities.”

Lutz believes that loving-kindness meditation may also help curtail some forms of depression. And further research by positive psychologists Barbara Fredrickson found that loving-kindness meditation can increase our daily experiences of positive emotions like amusement, awe, contentment, gratitude, hope, joy, interest, love and pride.

Urge Surfing

In mindfulness-based psychotherapy there's a technique called "urge surfing" that's used to help individuals overcome addictive and impulsive behaviors. The main assumption behind the technique is that an urge never lasts forever – usually, no more than 20-30 minutes. Individuals can therefore "ride out" these urges simply by becoming more aware of their impermanence.

While reflecting on an urge, such as smoking a cigarette or eating junk food, we can become more aware of the physical and mental sensations that create that craving experience. Then, instead of acting on these impulses, we can step back and observe them in a passive, non-reactive state of awareness. This can help disengage us from the craving experience and "ride it out" until it subsides.

Directions

- ***Identify the craving in the moment.*** The sooner you become aware of the craving the easier it will be to overcome it. You don't want to have to fight the craving when the object of desire is already in your reach; because, by that point, the craving may already be too strong for you to overcome it.

- ***Sit back and watch.*** The key component of urge surfing is your awareness. The goal is to sit back, watch these desires, and really become attuned to them. Don't act, just observe – like a scientist observing a specimen under a microscope.
- ***Make a mental note of the sensations.*** It really helps to pinpoint what it is that creates your craving experience. This includes both physical sensations, such as a twisting feeling in your gut when you want to eat a piece of cake, and mental sensations, including certain thought patterns that may be running through your head (“One more piece won't hurt me.”) or mental imagery (seeing yourself eating cake). Often the more aware you become of your craving experience, the more you understand the anatomy of your desires.
- ***Be aware of environmental triggers.*** Often times our addictive behaviors are influenced by certain triggers in our environment. For example, hanging around at a bar makes it harder to resist the temptation to drink alcohol than if you were hanging out at a cafe instead. In the same way, associating with certain people may make you more likely to engage in an addictive behavior than if you chose a different group of friends to associate with. Being mindful of these environmental triggers can be an

important part of urge surfing and better understanding your addiction. Learn to avoid these triggers in the future and you'll have an easier time overcoming these negative habits.

- ***Keep in mind the lesson of "impermanence."*** The takeaway lesson of urge surfing is that all of our thoughts and feelings are impermanent, including our desires. By showing a little patience, and remembering the inherent "transient nature" of our desires, we can remind ourselves that it is possible to ride out these cravings until they inevitably pass. Giving into these desires is not the only way to overcome them.
- ***Use a helpful mantra.*** If you want, you can also accommodate your urge surfing with a helpful mantra. Repeating an affirmation such as, "this too shall pass" or "I can ride out this desire" will help replace unhelpful thoughts with a more stable and non-reactive state of mind.
- ***Keep practicing.*** Like most of the techniques and tools I share on this site, "urge surfing" is something that you will get better at the more you practice. Don't expect to try this one time and be free from your addictive habits. It's more likely this will take a few trials and errors before you begin getting good at it.

Implications

Urge surfing can be a very helpful technique for overcoming impulsive behaviors, because it gives us a buffer between our thoughts and habits.

When urge surfing, we often find that the “craving experience” is temporary and impermanent. We don’t always need to give into our temptations in order to satisfy these unhealthy cravings.

Therefore, if we practice taking a step back and observing these urges – instead of unconsciously reacting to them – then we can often change our reactions to these impulses by “riding them out.” This can be a very effective way of overcoming negative habits.

Naked Meditation

Are you comfortable with your naked self? It's an interesting question that a lot of people struggle with.

Men and women alike are susceptible to low body image and low self-esteem. Even individuals who we often see as "attractive" can hold a negative perception of their bodies that affects their everyday life.

Our naked self is an important part of who we are. Nudity is a natural state, but it's often seen as something vulnerable and personal. Many cultures teach us that nudity is something to hide and to be ashamed of.

This makes us create a prison surrounding who we really are. It's also the main reason why so many people are disconnected to their physical bodies and sexual nature.

Back in 1967, there was a small, underground movement in psychology that was called "nude psychotherapy." The central concept was that by becoming more comfortable with our own nudity, we also become more comfortable with ourselves.

There's a great [review](#) of the history of the movement in the *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences* – the full article is available in PDF format if you want to read more about it.

The humanistic psychologist Abraham Maslow also reflected a keen interest in nude therapy. He saw it as a way for people to become more free, more spontaneous, and less guarded – an important part of “self-actualization,” which he saw as the ultimate goal of living a happy and satisfying life.

Loving our naked self is important, so how do we do it? The key is to become more comfortable with being naked, which means practicing being naked more often (not just when we need to take a shower or change clothes).

Directions

Naked meditation is a great way to become more comfortable with your naked self.

One of the main goals of meditation is to accept ourselves exactly as we are, so practicing a simple meditation while being completely naked can help us become more familiar and accepting of our naked self.

Here are steps to follow to practice a form of naked meditation on your own:

- Find a comfortable time and place where you can have alone time. This way you won't be interrupted or distracted, and you can let yourself become fully engaged in the meditation without any worries.
- Make sure you are completely 100% naked. Once you're ready, take off all clothes, make-up, and accessories before the meditation.
- Sit down in a comfortable posture that isn't going to irritate you if you sit for a long period of time.
- Start with 5-10 minutes of deep, slow breathing until you feel more relaxed and centered in yourself. Pay attention to the sensations of your breathing and any other sensations you feel in your body.
- Practice repeating small affirmations associated with a positive body image. For example:
 - "I love myself and my body.
 - "Nudity is a natural state of existence."
 - "There are no such thing as 'imperfections' just differences."
 - "Everyone has beauty in them."
 - "I am secure with my body and sexuality."

- Try doing this meditation in front of a full-length mirror with your eyes open to fully accept your body as it is. Look at your body honestly without making judgmental statements like, “I hate that part.” or “That looks weird.”
- If you begin to feel too insecure or judgmental while looking at your body, go back to the positive affirmations. The main goal is to begin to associate more positive thoughts and feelings with how you see yourself.

This meditation can help you become way more comfortable with your naked self. Try practicing it just 2-3 times a week and you’ll begin seeing long-term benefits in less than a month.

To make the exercise more effective, write your own “positive affirmations” that resonate with you more. The ones I provided are only suggestions.

Creating Your Own Meditation Regimen

Like many things in life, meditation takes practice before you start seeing benefits. This means taking small steps to make meditation an active part of your life.

I personally recommend that you begin with the “Breathing Meditation” and practice it everyday for two weeks before doing anything else. This takes no more than 15 minutes a day, but it’s a great start toward getting your mind more familiar with different aspects of your awareness.

After that, continue with the “Breathing Meditation” but also try out some of the other meditations (especially “Sound Meditation” and “Walking Meditation”). These will get you more familiar with the different ways and different contexts you can apply your awareness.

At some point you can even try combining different meditations. For example, begin your “Walking Meditation” with a “Breathing Meditation.

Or you can try ending your “Breathing Meditation” with an “Open Mind Meditation” – start by focusing on your breath, then

once you complete your Breathing Meditation, drop your object of focus and open your awareness toward any other sensations, thoughts, or emotions that may come into consciousness.

Meditation is about self-experimentation and self-discovery. Don't be afraid to try out different things and see what you can learn from them.

Eventually I think you should try out all of these meditations at least once. Just because it will give you a diverse experience of the different ways you can apply awareness to different areas of your life.

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