

Thoroughly MODERN MEDITATION

It's been practised for centuries by spiritual seekers. Now scientists

By **Bonnie Cleaver** Illustrations **Marta Antelo**

believe cultivating calm could be the ultimate wellness prescription

This may sound far-fetched, but you're just minutes away from a better life. You'll be calmer, less frazzled, more positive. After a few weeks, you'll have discovered an inner anchor you never knew you had, that keeps you centred despite the constant buffeting of life's many stresses. You'll be sleeping better, have more energy, think more clearly and feel more focused. In the course of a few months, more radical changes will transpire—some too subtle to feel or see—but that will leave you feeling healthier than you have in years. Think reduced inflammation levels, lower blood pressure, stronger immunity, a dampening down of chronic aches and pains plus less stress, anxiety and depression. And, even more exciting, you'll be experiencing change on a cellular and neural level that could actually help slow the ageing process. The key to unlocking these incredible wellness benefits? One simple habit that takes as little as five minutes a day: meditation. ►



Your brain & body on meditation

If you've ever wondered exactly what happens when you tap into stillness, read on. While some of the perks below are study-specific, based on particular techniques, any type of regular practice will deliver major wellbeing benefits. Result? A healthier body and mind.

BRAIN

Your ability to concentrate, learn, think sharply and remember is strengthened, and the brain 'shrinkage' that tends to occur with ageing is slowed.

MOOD

Stress, anxiety and depression can be reduced, while your ability to regulate negative emotions is also strengthened.

LUNGS

Your respiratory rate decreases, thanks to calmer breathing. Even better, your body starts to use oxygen more efficiently.

APPETITE

Mindfulness meditation in particular is thought to help curb appetite as you become more conscious of what—and how much—you eat.

PAIN

Muscle tension instantly reduces, which can help tame aches and pains. Over time, chronic pain may even become less intense.

IMMUNITY

Your ability to deflect colds and flus rises, and if you do catch a bug, you'll have less severe symptoms.

GENES AND CHROMOSOMES

Boosted gene function improves efficiency of the mitochondria (the 'energy powerhouse' of cells), while genes related to inflammation, stress and cancer are suppressed. Levels of telomerase (an enzyme that is important for cell health) shoots up.

HEART

Blood pressure, heart and pulse rate immediately slow. Over time hypertension is decreased and healthy blood pressure and cholesterol levels are promoted, curbing the risk of heart disease.

WOMEN'S HEALTH

PMS symptoms are lessened, while menopausal women may experience fewer hot flushes, according to a study of mental silence meditators. Your sex life gets a boost, with one study showing women tune in better to when they feel aroused.

HORMONES AND OTHER CHEMICALS

Stress hormone levels drop, while there is a surge in the anti-ageing hormone DHEA. Feel-good neurotransmitters like serotonin, oxytocin and endorphins are released.

THE NEW ZEN PRESCRIPTION

For thousands of years, meditation has been practised by different cultures across the globe, largely as a way of connecting with the sacred. But in recent decades, science has revealed that meditation isn't just the domain of spiritual seekers. In fact, it has very real, tangible benefits for physical and psychological wellbeing. At the heart of these wellbeing benefits is the power to tame one of the most insidious health saboteurs of modern times—stress.

"Stress eats away at the body, producing physiological wear and tear that, over time, leads to inflammation, reduced immunity, increased blood pressure and cholesterol, a rise in cortisol levels that causes calcium loss from the bones, increased risk of heart disease and accelerated ageing," explains Dr Craig Hassed, senior lecturer in the Monash University Department of General Practice and co-author of *Mindfulness For Life* (Exisle Publishing). Tame the stress response, and the opposite occurs—immune function improves, cortisol levels drop, and so on. And as a Harvard Medical School study published earlier this year revealed, the effects of deep relaxation trickle right down to a genetic level, triggering changes in the expression of genes involved in immunity levels, energy metabolism and insulin secretion. "Our results suggest that eliciting the relaxation response may dampen the impact of stress-activated pathways," explains study co-author, Dr Towia Libermann. "In turn, this could counteract stress-induced conditions involved in many disorders, like autoimmune diseases and hypertension." ▶

CAN MEDITATION SLOW AGEING?

Searching for the fountain of youth? Meditation may well be it.

YOUR BODY, ONLY YOUNGER

The feel-good boost you get from meditation isn't just relaxing. It can in turn bump up your telomerase—an enzyme important for cell longevity. In the Shamatha Project, a Dalai Lama-endorsed study of intensive meditators, researchers measured telomerase activity in people after a three-month meditation retreat. "We found they had 30% more telomerase activity than the control group," says Dr Clifford Saron, associate research scientist at the UC Davis Center for Mind and Brain in the US, and scientific director of the Shamatha Project. "Improvements in a sense of purpose, perceived control over life and a decreased tendency to blow things out of proportion were all associated with more telomerase." It's not proof meditation will make you live longer, but certainly suggests it impacts positively on cellular ageing.

SHARPEN YOUR MIND, FAST

Forget crosswords and sudoku, meditation is all you need to buffer your brain against ageing. "Our research has found that in long-term meditators, there was one brain region, the prefrontal cortex [important for working memory], where 50-year-olds had similar grey matter as 20-year-olds, suggesting meditation might actually prevent deterioration in that region," says Dr Sara Lazar, neuroscientist and meditation researcher at Harvard Medical School. Equally encouraging is research from Emory University, US, revealing that not only does daily Zen meditation keep grey matter intact, it's particularly protective for the putamen, a brain structure linked to attention. So, no more foggy moments, then!



"MEDITATION HELPED ME BEAT CANCER"

For executive coach Josie Thomson, 46, learning to meditate proved not only life-changing, but life-saving.

"My first encounter with cancer was at the age of 24, when I was diagnosed with thyroid cancer. Shockingly, I was given six months to live, but survived. Then, three years ago I was diagnosed with cancer again, this time a brain tumour and bone cancer. My cranial surgery was successful, but the months that followed were challenging, to say the least. I couldn't walk or talk properly, and while I could sense the instructions my brain was sending my body, it wasn't responding. While I was recovering, I started a daily routine of sitting outside on the grass with my two dogs. It should have been relaxing, but instead I felt angry and frustrated, trapped inside a vessel that wasn't responding.

But about a month later, everything changed. I was sitting outside on a beautiful, sunny day when I stopped the battle with my mind and became present to the moment. All of a sudden, I was looking at the blades of grass, the sky and my dogs in a whole new way, seeing everything as a gift. There was no fight or suffering, just a blissful space of silence, peace and stillness.

I was fascinated and wanted to know more, so I started investigating mindfulness and meditation. Every day, I'd create some time to be still, tune in to the moment and appreciate the treasures it had to offer, and as time went by, I could feel myself getting well. During my meditations, I'd focus on my breath, imagining that I was inhaling the sun's healing energy and exhaling any toxicity. Six weeks after the surgery, my neurosurgeon rang to say it was time to consider treatment for my bone cancer, so I went in for a full-body scan. The result? There was no trace of cancer. Part of me wasn't surprised: I had absolute belief in the healing power of mindfulness and meditation. My experience inspired me to create a CD, 'Simple Meditation for Busy People' (see aexcel.com.au), so I could share meditation with others. It costs nothing but really does give you everything."

Just eight weeks of mindfulness meditation could sharpen memory, improve your ability to absorb new information and help you better handle emotions

CALMER, IN 10 SECONDS!

Keen to tap in to your inner Zen? Try one of these simple expert-approved meditation techniques.

1 DOORWAY MEDITATION (10 SECONDS)

If there's a doorway you walk through several times a day, turn it into a gateway to instant peace. "Every time you walk through, stop in the doorway, feel your feet on the ground, take a deep breath, let your shoulders drop, then walk on," advises Louise Gilmore of Sydney's Awareness Institute. Serenity in seconds? We like the sound of that.

2 BREATH AWARENESS MEDITATION (5 MINUTES)

Focus on the feeling of air entering and leaving your nostrils as you breathe in and out, advises Dr Jeffrey Schwartz, neuroplasticity expert and author of *You Are Not Your Brain* (Penguin). Use the following count—on the in breath, count 1, 2, 3, then on the out breath, 1, 2, 3. On the next in breath, count 1, 2, 3, 4, then 1, 2, 3, 4 on the out breath. Then start again, so you only ever count up to four. Do this for at least five minutes. "This meditation is not just about being aware of your breath, it's also about being aware when your mind wanders, and going back to start at 1 when it does."

3 BODY SCAN MEDITATION (5 MINUTES)

Sitting in a chair, be conscious of your body. Feel your feet on the floor, noticing if they're tense and allowing them to relax. Gently move up through each part of the body—the legs, stomach, hands, arms, shoulders, neck and face, noticing any tension without judgement. Turn your attention to your breath, letting it settle into its own natural rhythm. If thoughts arise, gently let them come and go. After a time, let your attention move to your listening, just noticing whatever sounds are around you. When you're ready, become aware of your body again and slowly allow your eyes to open. "You can practise this for anywhere from five to 40 minutes, and I recommend doing it twice a day, before breakfast, and again at night, ideally just before dinner," suggests Dr Hassed.

ASHRAM-FREE WELLBEING

Beyond taming tension, researchers around the globe are teasing out the ways specific meditation techniques (which range from mindfulness to transcendental, or compassion meditation and mental silence) impact our wellbeing. One such group is the University of Sydney's Meditation Research Program, which has worked with a technique called Sahaja Yoga that uses a form of mental silence meditation. In a recent study they discovered long-term meditators rated significantly better in wellness measures such as bodily pain, general health, mental health and vitality than non-meditators. But that wasn't all. "The biggest margin of difference was in mental health—regular meditators were about 10% better off than the general population, which is massive," explains lead study author, Dr Ramesh Manocha.

At the University of Wisconsin-Madison in the US, mindfulness meditation (which focuses on paying attention each moment to your body and emotions) has emerged as a potent immune-booster, reducing people's likelihood of catching respiratory illness and curbing symptom severity if they do. Then there's transcendental (mantra-based) meditation, linked to reduced thickening of coronary arteries in those with hypertension, in turn slashing the risk of heart attack and stroke. These studies are part of a burgeoning body of evidence that links meditation to everything from a reduction in menopausal hot flashes (yes, really) to improved shut-eye for insomniacs, decreased pain severity for people with chronic pain and a reduced relapse rate in depression sufferers. In short, it seems that no matter what ails you, meditation is the tonic.

Still, many questions remain. Are all types of meditation equal? Do the benefits of one automatically apply to another? "When we talk about meditation, it's almost like using the word 'sports,'" says Dr Saron. Meaning, just like swimming and running strengthen certain body areas and cultivate specific skills, the same can be said of different meditation techniques. Bottom line? No matter what technique you use, think of your mind as a muscle that can be stretched and strengthened.

BOOST YOUR BRAIN POWER

Becoming familiar with the mind is high on the agenda of scientists too—or more specifically, the ways meditation can influence it. Not long ago, it was believed the brain was static and unchangeable beyond a certain age, but the emerging field of contemplative neuroscience has turned that old theory on its head, revealing meditation can also alter the structure and function of the brain. Even more thrilling, changes can transpire within weeks, says Dr Lazar. Her research has shown that just eight weeks of mindfulness meditation affects certain brain regions, in ways that could sharpen memory, improve



ILLUSTRATION MARTA ANTELO/ILLUSTRATIONROOM.COM.AU

your ability to absorb new information and help you better handle emotions. "We detected increases in grey matter in the posterior cingulate cortex, an area related to autobiographical memory [our recollections of life experiences]; the temporo-parietal junction, important for seeing other people's point of view, empathy and emotion regulation; and the hippocampus, a region linked to learning and memory," says Dr Lazar.

Scheduling in a little serenity won't just make you calmer. It could also help you break free of negative and self-sabotaging thought patterns, says Dr Schwartz. "Meditation strengthens executive brain function, which relates to making plans and decisions and inhibiting wired-in patterns you no longer want," he explains. "It strengthens your connection to what I call your 'wise advocate' or the helper and encourager within, so that over time, the wise advocate starts functioning in your brain's habit centre, and you start thinking and acting in line with your true values." As a result, those old quirks you used to kick yourself for (like irrational fears, cravings and compulsions) lose their vice-like grip on your mind.

Clearly, the benefits of meditation are compelling. Still, there's no need to see it as yet another thing you should be doing, stresses Dr Saron. "You can actually flip it around entirely if you say, given the preciousness of life, the ultimately short span of time we have on this planet, does it not bare urgent attention to get to know yourself?" And in the process, you might just encounter a healthier, happier you. **P**

SIMPLE TIPS FROM A MEDITATION TEACHER

Having taught meditation for 24 years, Louise Gilmore of Sydney's Awareness Institute knows a thing or two about cultivating calm. Here are her top tips for becoming a meditator and blitzing common stumbling blocks.

SEEK OUT A GOOD TEACHER

Meditation CDs or books can be helpful, but there's nothing as powerful as joining a group led by an instructor who knows the obstacles you might face and the joys you encounter. Community and natural therapies colleges often have introductory courses. Often, they'll give you a taste of different practices.

START SMALL

Ideally, you want to meditate on a daily basis or at least several times a week, for 20 to 30 minutes. But rather than aiming for half an hour and never having that much spare time, start smaller than you think you can do—even just five minutes—and let it grow from there.

CREATE A ROUTINE

If you can, meditate in the same place, around the same time of day. This trains your mind and body to expect meditation, and as your system gradually gets used to it, it gets easier and easier to drop into that deeper place.

BE COMFORTABLE

It's a misconception you have to sit on the floor with legs crossed when you meditate. Sitting in a chair is fine, but make it a kitchen or dining chair rather than a comfy armchair, where the tendency may be to relax too much and go to sleep. A lot of people ask me my thoughts on guided visualisation CDs. I think they're fine for a beginner, but I'd advise moving on fairly quickly, because if you're listening to the same visualisation or even music-based meditation, you'll get used to it.

QUIETEN YOUR MIND

Probably the most common thing people notice when they start to meditate is how busy their mind is. The aim is not to stop the mind from thinking, but to not get caught up in the thinking. Do this by labelling thoughts as they arise—for instance, 'work', 'partner' or 'angry'. This slows down the process and stops you getting swept up by habitual thought patterns.



FAST-TRACK YOUR SERENITY

Find instant calm with our 11 simple, stress-busting tips. Log on to preventionmag.com.au/health and boost your physical and mental wellbeing—today. You'll be blissed out and less stressed in no time!