

Meditation & Relaxation Response

Dr. Doug Nielsen ~ Licensed Psychologist



We live in a fast paced world. Our minds are filled with thoughts of work, family responsibilities, financial pressures, activities, traffic, endless sources of information and stimulation through technology (music, video, search engines, etc.). Many of us are over stimulated and stressed. Humans are wired with a survival mechanism, which triggers a stress reaction or what is sometimes called “Fight-or-Flight Response.” A threat message is triggered in the amygdala, which relays a distress signal to the hypothalamus, the brain’s command center. Through the autonomic nervous system the physical body is regulated. This stress response affects breathing, heartbeat, blood pressure, and other body functions as well as our emotional state. Repeated and prolonged activation of the stress response will take a toll on the mind and body over time.

The antidote to the stress response is a relaxation response, which promotes a healthy state in the physical body and a positive emotional state. Specific methods for triggering a relaxation response are talking (deeper, emotional talk), moderate physical activity, focused deep breathing, progressive muscle relaxation (PMR), and positive visual imagery. But one of the best ways to move from a pattern of *Stress Responses* to more *Relaxation Responses* is with meditation.

RELAX

WHAT IS MEDITATION? Simply put, meditation is actively relaxing and emptying the mind.

BENEFITS OF MEDITATION: Numerous studies have shown the benefits of meditation to the mind and the body. For example, meditation is helpful for reducing anxiety and other mental health issues. Meditation has also been shown to improve the functioning of the immune system, contributing to less illness.

WHO HAS TIME TO MEDITATE? Hopefully you! Any amount of meditation can be helpful, even five or ten minutes. Optimal would be twenty minutes per day. Morning is the best time but any time is okay. Three days a week is good, five or more days a week is great.

HOW TO MEDITATE: There is no one best or perfect way to meditate. Find what works for you.

Step One: Work a meditation period into your daily routine. Find a quiet place where you’re less likely to be disturbed or distracted. A bedroom, a garden, even a car.

Step Two: Sit comfortably. You could use a yoga position but this is not necessary. Sitting erect but relaxed is good but any comfortable position may work. In most places you’ll want to close your eyes.

Step Three: Begin with slow deep breathing. In through the nose and out through the mouth is good but whatever feels comfortable for you is okay. Inhale slowly, hold the breath for a second or two, then exhale slowly. Be tuned in to your breathing.

Step Four: Keep your mind calm. If thoughts enter your mind, simply excuse them and clear your mind again. Continue with slow breathing and a clear mind for the amount of time you have.

Variations: As you become better with practice you can expand your meditation techniques. If possible, do some meditation outside. Some studies have shown a decrease in the stress hormone cortisol after thirty minutes outside. Sitting in a quiet place in nature creates peacefulness for almost everyone. But mindful walking, mindful light outdoor gardening, or walking in nature may produce some of this same benefit for you. You might sometimes want to add a word or mantra that would be helpful to you. For example you can whisper words like peace, calm, relax, strong, love, etc., on the out breath.