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Why do so many of us struggle with meditation?

Meditation has proven health benefits, so why do many of us struggle to start or maintain a regular practice? We look at some of the common challenges people encounter and ask the experts for advice.

If you've tried to start a meditation practice but lapsed, you're not alone. It's a familiar feeling; you want to meditate, but there are so many other things that need urgent attention right now, from the washing up to the laundry. And why get up early to meditate when you could have all-important extra duvet time, particularly when it doesn't seem to be having the 'blissed out' effect you were hoping for?

Starting a meditation practice may be a challenge, but it's worth persevering, as scientific evidence suggests that regular practice has wide-ranging health benefits. Meditation [increases neuroplasticity](#) which enables us to manage conflict and stress more effectively, and [reduces pain](#). Studies have shown that [mindfulness](#) meditation can [reduce the recurrence of depression by 50%](#), and neuroimaging scans have revealed major positive changes in the brain activity of long-term meditators.

Here are some common pitfalls new meditators may encounter and how to address them:

Duration vs frequency

"The key to maintaining a practice is frequency rather than the length of time," says [Dr Peter Malinowski](#), an expert in cognitive neuroscience and director of the Meditation Research Lab at Liverpool John Moores University Research Centre for Brain and Behaviour.

"People often place the bar too high and with a busy schedule, 45 minutes just isn't going to work. We have strong evidence that squeezing in just 10 minutes a day, every day, with good instruction and support can make a real difference to well-being."

Meditation needs to become a habit - like cleaning your teeth - in order for it to stick. It is important to do it at the same time each day, or at least at the same juncture, so it becomes embedded in your daily routine - eg, between a shower and breakfast. And take a few minutes to prepare - do some stretches so your body feels comfortable, turn off any distracting devices, and sit quietly before beginning.

'How do I know if I'm doing it right?'

Meditation is the practice of intentionally and consistently guiding the 'chattering mind' towards an anchor, or single point of focus - such as the breath, or a mantra (chanting a word repeatedly). Just as going to the gym builds physical strength and well-being, meditation and [mindfulness](#) practices can develop mental and emotional strength and agility.

It is important to generate the right kind of focus for meditation to be beneficial, rather than just drifting in a more passive way.

"Although a relaxed, unfocused state might feel good, it is the focused attention that is the important part of the practice," explains Malinowski. "Superficial relaxation doesn't help us in the long run because it avoids the focused practice of observing and letting go of difficulties in our minds."

He recommends finding a certified teacher and taking classes for guidance and support when starting a meditation practice:

"Meditation apps may be useful for more experienced meditators, but I don't think they are a good idea for beginners. The challenge is to understand what works best for each individual and to support what comes up for them during the process. This cannot be done easily via an app; you need a teacher, at least to begin with."

'I can't stop thinking'

It is a common misconception that meditation is about having a blank mind and being free of thoughts, but this is not the case. The benefits come from learning to gently observe and step back from thoughts and emotions, without judgement.

"It's natural for the mind to create experiences all the time; it's how we relate to them that is important and transformative," says Malinowski.

During meditation, the process of observing thoughts as they arise and letting them go - by consistently returning to our point of focus - is key in training the brain to be more adaptable and agile in its daily functioning.

"Day to day, being able to step back when I feel overwhelmed by thoughts gives me more freedom," he continues. "It doesn't mean I push emotions away or avoid them, just that I have the psychological flexibility to decide which thoughts to engage with and which to let pass by."

'I'm trying really hard, but nothing's happening'

It's common when beginning a meditation practice to have expectations about feeling an immediate sense of well-being, or wanting to have a particular kind of experience. This can be counter-productive and may put us off persevering.

"Often trying too hard to feel a certain way during meditation can be a barrier," says Malinowski. "It may seem like a contradiction, but we will feel better if we don't aim to feel better."

Psychologist, [Sabine Tyrvaenen](#), agrees: "Meditation is a process, not a destination; training the mind is a balance between optimal focus and optimal effort. I've seen neurofeedback scans of clients during meditation - they think they're meditating, but their brainwaves show they're actually just trying really hard to achieve something, which is counter-productive."

'Why do I find myself avoiding a practice that's proven to be beneficial?'

During meditation, all sorts of emotions and thoughts may arise that we might have been pushing down in order to function during our busy lives. It is natural to resist letting these (often uncomfortable) feelings surface and to just live our lives on 'autopilot', even if that means being caught up in behaviours that are detrimental to our well-being.

"Your mind has been locked into particular patterns of thought and behaviour for years," continues Tyrvainen. "And it will resist being asked to focus in a different way because the ego - your identity, your thinking self - is invested in maintaining the status quo. Your ego has decided that you *are* your thoughts, judgement and beliefs, so it's not going to take too kindly at first to a practice that doesn't give your thoughts full autonomy."

Is meditation for everyone?

There are a few important things to consider before using meditation and mindfulness techniques. Never attempt to start a meditation practice during a period of depression, and always talk with your GP first if you have any concerns.

"Becoming more aware of thoughts and feelings can initially make some people feel worse, especially if you're very unwell when you begin," cautions Stephen Buckley, head of information at mental health charity [Mind](#). "And some exercises may not be suitable for people with mobility or breathing problems. The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) also recommends not using mindfulness - including MBCT and MBSR - to treat social anxiety."

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