

MEDITATION EXERCISES

(Visualization Exercises)

Some cultures believe that *everything* is a meditation. They are fully mindful when they eat, drink, walk, pet an animal, or any other activity. Other cultures are at the opposite end of the spectrum, eating without tasting anything as they speed down the highway, or racing out of the house to start the day without paying any attention to their inner self. For people living in those cultures, a meditation exercise may be helpful in reducing stress levels and to re-center or re-focus oneself in the midst of a tornado of to-do lists, concerns and worries. They may be done alone or in conjunction with a relaxation exercise or a breathing exercise.

This article discusses some basic meditation exercises that anyone can do to lower their stress levels and improve their health. A more structured form of meditation called transcendental meditation has also shown heart health benefits. For example, a 2000 article published in *Stroke* revealed that this form of meditation slightly but significantly reduced plaque build-up, which lowered the risk of both stroke and heart attack. People interested in learning this form of meditation are encouraged to find a local class or to find an instructive book or videotape on the subject.

Which meditation exercise can be done upon waking up?

When people are in love or feeling happy, it can seem like everything goes smoothly through the day. Even minor disappointments or challenges are met with enthusiasm without affecting one's overall good mood. This is an example of how much the attitude you adopt as you start the day has to do with how well your day actually turns out to be. If people wake up thinking how terrible the day is going to be, or how awful it is that they need to get up, then they will more easily be upset by small events that occur over the course of the day. If people wake up with enthusiasm and happiness, then they are less vulnerable to being upset by minor disappointments or setbacks. In other words, they are less likely to feel stressed.

A meditation exercise can be helpful in starting the day in a healthy, strong, enthusiastic frame of mind. It can be done while still lying in bed after the alarm has gone off, or between the time the snooze button was hit and the time the alarm goes off again. The steps for this exercise are as follows:

1. With your eyes closed, take a few deep breaths in through the nose and out through the mouth. With each breath, imagine your body getting stronger and healthier, until it is radiating with powerful energy.
2. Imagine yourself standing in a beautiful place just after sunrise, such as the beach by the ocean or the top of a mountain. Feel the sun shining warmly and the breeze blowing all around you. Listen for the sounds that you would hear in this place as life all around you is waking up to another day.
3. Imagine yourself stretching your arms out to embrace the new day, claiming it as your adventure. Then imagine yourself speaking in an unusually deep, clear and powerful voice as you state your intentions for the day despite any obstacles. For example, "No

matter what happens today, I will maintain my sense of humor.” Or, “No matter what this day may bring, I will not forget what is truly important in my life.”

4. Take a moment to feel the effect of those words, and then begin your adventure.

Which meditation exercise can be done while waiting?

Waiting can be very stressful. Take the following examples:

- Waiting for test results to come back
- Waiting for a child to come home
- Waiting in the waiting room of a medical office or hospital
- Waiting for a loved one to come out of surgery

During these stressful periods of waiting, it can be helpful to do a meditation exercise that relieves stress rather than allowing it to get worse as time ticks by. Getting stressed out will not help any of the above situations, and is often harmful. Therefore, people are encouraged to try a meditation exercise such as the following:

1. Close your eyes and take a few deep breaths, in through the nose and out through the mouth.
2. Imagine yourself at the top of 10 stairs that lead down to a door. Imagine yourself taking one step down toward the door. As you do, your body feels more heavy and relaxed, sinking gently into whatever chair you may be sitting in. With each step that you take toward the door, your body continues to feel heavier and more relaxed.
3. As you reach the door, you open it and step out into the most beautiful, relaxing scene that you can imagine. Perhaps you find yourself by a waterfall, or in a cool forest, or in the best vacation spot that you have ever seen.
4. Spend a few moments soaking in the sights, sounds, textures, smells and even tastes that you associate with this place.
5. Before coming back from this place, take something with you to give you strength and a reminder of this relaxing break from the worries of the day.
6. Come back through the door and climb back up those steps, feeling more refreshed and stronger with every step that you take.
7. Take a deep breath and open your eyes.

Thinking about stressful situations before going to sleep can trigger the stress response, which is the exact opposite of what the body requires in order to wind down and go to sleep. A meditation exercise can help people to get their attention from their racing thoughts to their hard-working body's need for sleep. The following meditation exercise may be done with soft music, nature sounds (e.g., ocean waves) or a relaxation tape playing in the background. It may also be done in conjunction with a relaxation exercise or breathing exercise.

Each step of this exercise can be done while lying in bed. The steps are as follows:

1. Close your eyes and take three deep, cleansing breaths. Focus on inhaling clean air and exhaling stale air.
2. Continuing to breathe deeply, spend a few moments focusing your attention on your toes. You will have fully focused your attention on this part of your body when you can mentally visualize the position of each toe. This in itself can be quite relaxing as attention shifts from the mind to the body. Imagine your toes to be warm, limp and relaxed.
3. Now focus your attention on your ankles. Imagine any knots or tension in your ankles to loosen and unravel, falling away as you continue to breathe in fresh, cleansing air.
4. Continue to spread this blanket of warmth and relaxation up over your knees, thighs, pelvis, stomach and chest.
5. When you reach the shoulders, imagine massaging fingers working out the tension in your shoulders, upper arms, forearms, hands and fingertips. Let those massaging fingers continue to massage up your neck, jaw and cheeks, until you feel completely relaxed from your cheeks all the way down to your toes.
6. Now imagine a cool facecloth over your forehead, soothing away any doubts, worries or concerns that you may have.
7. Feeling relaxed from head to toe, continue to take deep breaths and remember that you can achieve this state of relaxation whenever you want to.

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