

Meditate & Medicate: Ease Stress Without Drugs!

by Hara Marano

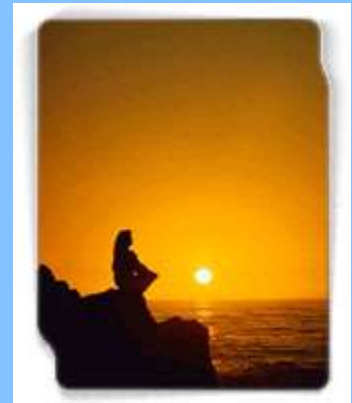
Psssst... Want a stress-reducer that does not involve fighting yourself in order to gain control? Looking for a lasting way to get past your emotional reactions? Try meditation.

The more psychologists look at meditation, the more they see what it really is: a way of "decentering." It's a state of mind that lets your thoughts happen without catching you up in their content or emotional charge.

And who doesn't need that?!

What makes meditation so effective is that it does more than curb the hormones that send stress signals rampaging through your brain and body. Even more importantly, it keeps negative thoughts from undermining your best intentions.

In other words, it's a way to overcome the destructive inner chatter we all experience... the force that drives us most often in terms of what we react to and how we feel. Meditation allows you to experience the chatter of the mind without getting hijacked by it.



There's no magic or mysticism to meditation. Anyone can do it. It's just a matter of paying attention in a particular way. It can be as simple as eating a raisin.

Normally, you'd just pop one into your mouth automatically, but try this little exercise instead: Sit in a relaxed position. Take a raisin in the palm of your hand and look at it carefully -- as if you've never seen anything like it before, because you've just dropped in from Mars. Turn it over. Explore its texture between your fingers. Examine the pattern of light striking its hollows and folds.

If thoughts come to mind, even ones such as, "what a ridiculous thing to be doing," just note them. Allow them to flow. And gently guide your awareness back to the raisin. Lift the raisin to your nose and notice its smell with each "in breath."

- Slowly take it to your mouth, perhaps noticing how your hand and arm know exactly where to deliver it. Notice how your mouth begins to water as the raisin approaches.
- Gently place the raisin in your mouth. Just explore the sensations of having it in your mouth. Very consciously, take a bite into it and notice the tastes it releases.

- Slowly chew it, noticing the saliva in your mouth and the changing consistency of the raisin. Try to follow the sensations of swallowing it, of the raisin moving down into your stomach -- and realizing that your body is now exactly one raisin heavier.
- The raisin exercise is a concrete way of recognizing how much of life we go through automatically. Eating is usually such an automatic act, we are hardly ever aware of what is going on.

Slowing down, focusing on the raisin and tasting it creates "mindfulness." Your mind stays in the present moment, and you're just watching what's going on in it -- neither rejecting things nor pursuing them, but just letting thoughts come and go.

Many people think they can't afford the time and energy to meditate. But you can achieve dramatic effects in a 20-minute session of mindfulness practice. The key is to incorporate it into your daily life.

The most basic meditation exercise of all is breathing.

1. Sit with an alert and relaxed body posture, so that you feel comfortable without moving (sit in a straight-backed chair with your feet flat on the floor).

2. Keep your back, neck, and head vertically aligned. Relax your shoulders. Place your hands comfortably on your knees.

3. Bring your attention to your breathing. Observe the breath as it flows in and out. Give full attention to the feeling of the breath as it comes in and goes out. Whenever you find that your attention has moved elsewhere, just note it, let it go and gently escort your attention back to the breath -- back to the rising and falling of your belly.

4. When you can maintain some continuity of attention on the breath, try expanding your field of awareness "around" your breathing and around your belly to include a sense of your body as a whole.

5. Maintain this awareness of the body sitting and breathing and, when the mind wanders, bring it back to sitting and breathing.

With practice, you can transfer mindfulness to everyday activities. You wind up always knowing where your mind is.