



Meditation easy as ABC
Introducing the benefits of meditation in the workplace
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Positive Psychology and Meditation

More and more research is highlighting the benefits of “meditation practices” in overcoming psychological distress caused by trauma, anxiety, depression and general life/work stresses. These approaches are psychological adaptations of Buddhist philosophy but are not reliant on any religious or spiritual paradigms.

Physiological changes occur when you meditate and these can be scientifically measured. Changes include decreased breathing and heart rate along with hormone secretion from the pituitary gland releasing endorphins into the blood stream. Scientific studies have also discovered a link between regular meditation and increased activity of the left prefrontal cortex of the brain, “people who exhibit a higher ratio of persistent activity in the left prefrontal cortex - an area associated with feelings of joy, happiness and enthusiasm - have happier temperaments and tend to bounce back quickly from negative events” (Zetter, K. (2003, August 30) Keep taking the meditation. *Good Weekend*, pp.22)

Simonette Vaja provides corporate workplace health and well-being initiatives such as resilience training, work-place well-being seminars, advanced communication skills and team development programs. The practice of Meditation is an integral component for enhancing and maintaining positive well-being and creative productive work-groups.

Why meditation

Meditation helps clear the busyness of your mind, relax your body and restore harmony within your being. Through the regular practice of meditation all aspects of yourself become balanced. Each time you meditate your experience can be different. Sometimes you may experience a deep state of relaxation and at other times a heightened state of alertness, and yet at other times you may feel like nothing is happening at all. Keep with the regular practice, as meditation facilitates the body, mind and emotions to discard accumulated stress and return you to a natural state of balance, equilibrium and focus. These positive effects are reinforced by measurable physiological changes that occur when you meditate. All these factors contribute to a feeling of increased well-being and enhanced functioning (Remember it takes practice).

Meditation and Stress

There are many stressful life experiences, that you experience on a regular basis: in the workplace these might include meeting key performance indicators, dealing with customers and colleagues, overtime issues as well as the many changes in the workplace due to cutbacks, and job-sharing. At home, on the roads, dealing with the complexity and speed of the information technology age can be overwhelming. There is overwhelming research to support the benefits of regular meditation to reduce the harmful effects of stress and increase your resilience to stressful life experiences.

Meditation and Self

Meditation is not bound to any particular religious practice or spiritual belief. It is a practice that can stand outside of any cultural tradition yet at the same time meditation practices are found in the majority of religions and spiritual paths throughout the world.

To share with you some of my personal experiences with teaching meditation in the workplace, community setting, or private practice, I have found many people look for an explanatory framework to guide their practice and experiences. You may already have a respected framework that you believe in, or you may still be searching. Your intellect may be more interested in having a “paradigm” to follow, and the intellect can often take us away from a deep connection to spirituality and love. I differentiate this into “bodies of knowledge, and bodies of experience”, theory versus practice. The focus then is on your meditation practice, and guiding you to have positive and supportive experiences with your meditation. There are a myriad of personal experiences that can connect you to your natural state of being; to a deep inner peace.

To put it simply, meditation is a tool to bring into focus your natural, healthy self, undistracted from the pressures you may face in your everyday life.

In this way, meditation is a practice of self-discovery and through profound observation; you can gain beneficial insights into yourself, others and the world around you. Developing this knowledge assists in navigating the stresses, changes and relationships we regularly encounter. Meditation is an excellent tool for assisting with everyday stresses as well as being an effective part of addressing more complicated health and well-being issues.

Learning to meditate is an interesting experience - even after 20 years of meditation I still feel like a learner. I accept that I am a life long learner, always adapting and adjusting to situations. Life is a wonderful teacher and brings all the experiences that we need. Meditation can help each of us to cope with these inevitable ups and downs and to accept them, leading to a richer and more productive existence.

Meditation is beneficial for all aspects of your well-being

- Physiological benefits
- Emotional benefits
- Psychological benefits
- Relationship benefits
- Spiritual benefits
- Develops spiritual experiences
- Improves creativity, insight and intuition
- Meditation is a practice that works to enhance your mind, body, spirit and soul

Meditation and Visualisation

The main difference between meditation and visualisation is that meditation is about clearing the mind, emptying the mind of thoughts, ruminations and fears. Visualisation on the other hand involves your imagination and stimulating your creativity.

With a guided meditation, or a visualisation you are adding content and qualities of thought, therefore choosing particular cognitive impressions you want to reinforce. The power of your mind to direct your thoughts toward more positive and supportive cognitions can be easily achieved using specific guided visualisations. A guided meditation will usually have a theme with embedded positive suggestions to improve your self-esteem and confidence; to manage stress and hardships; to sleep better, improve your relationships; or to manage chronic pain.

The beginning point - meditation as easy as A B C

Attention

Breath

Contemplation

The ABC format has been developed to simply explain and instruct on the fundamentals of meditation practice. Meditation practices are an extremely useful tool and can be safely adopted by anyone. The following techniques will allow you to enjoy the benefits of basic meditation, releasing stress from your body, strengthening your mind, and developing the ability to be calm and focused, bringing happiness and balance into your entire being. It's important to understand the meaning of the terms "attention" and "quality of thought" in order to use these techniques, they are explained below.

Attention

Attention is the act of giving your focus to one area of interest. You can place 100% of your time/focus/awareness towards one activity or stimulus. However, there are only so many stimuli you can take in at any given moment and you will also be "taking in" the periphery of the scene. Your consciousness will automatically screen out what it assumes is unnecessary or unimportant to your survival. Focusing attention is a key aspect of certain meditation techniques.

Quality of your thoughts

Wherever you place your attention, automatically there is a power surge and this will affect the results accordingly. If you give your attention to a beautiful image that is meaningful to you, your response will be one of increased feelings of love and wellbeing. If you focus all of your attention on a violent and bloody incident, idea or image, your physiology will become irritated and uncomfortable. Over time the body becomes imprinted with what "qualities of experience" you give your attention to as well as what qualities of experience you want to avoid.

A - ATTENTION

1. One pointed attention

When you practice the following you will improve your ability to direct your attention and therefore the quality and content of your thoughts. Choose a quiet space and sit or lie in a comfortable, relaxed position.

Focus within (choosing one sense modality to focus on)

- Visual attention to an image within - a color, a star, a shape
- Physical attention on the breath, noticing the rise and fall of your body, or following the breath pathway
- Auditory attention to an inner sound/cue word (Mantra)
- Kinesthetic attention to a body sensation/feeling

Alternatively,

Focus on an external sense modality

- Visual, looking at a candle flame
- Scene in nature, a painting or deity
- Auditory singing and chanting out loud
- Movement dancing or holding a position for a period of time, surfing, golf, skiing, intense focus on movement
- Relational sitting and looking eye to eye with the other
- Attention on the rise and fall of your breath on your body
- Singing a sound or repeating a phrase.

B - BREATH

Breathing is critical for sustaining life and for enhancing our wellbeing. We can live a certain period of time without water, food or shelter but without breath, we die. Breath is life!

Vitality begins with the breath; our ability to breathe begins at birth and stays with us until we die. Our breathing pattern is undeniably linked to our emotions. When we are anxious our breathing rate increases, when we are relaxed our breathing rate decreases, when we are excited and happy our breathing pattern is different to when we get a surprise or terrible shock. We breathe without thinking, it is automatic, and we can also consciously breathe and affect our breathing patterns. There are various meditations that focus on the breath and encourage conscious breathing patterns. Here are two different ones for you to try.

TAKE FIVE!

Breathing pattern - repeat 5 cycles each.

1. Counting as you breathe in for 5
2. Hold your breath for the count of 5
3. Exhale for the count of 5
4. Pause for the count of 5

For longer practice time

Allow up to 20 minutes of uninterrupted time.

Simply focus on the breath without consciously changing it. Just letting the breath be, notice the gaps and pauses, notice the flow of breath. You need to sit comfortably, with your back upright and relaxed. Breathe at your own natural rhythm and place your attention to the breath. You might focus on the area of your nostrils and keep the breath as your focal point. When you notice that your attention has drifted, bring your focus back to the nostril area. Keep doing this. You will be strengthening your ability to focus. Your mind will continue to wander off - this is the nature of the mind, please don't be concerned by it, or think that your practice is wrong, or difficult, or that there must be something wrong with you. It is normal for the mind to become distracted - you can't do anything to change this, all you need to do, is to notice it and when you do, place your attention back to your breath.

The optimal time is 20 minutes, but start with what is manageable and practical. When your meditation time has passed, lie down for approximately 5 minutes and just relax, don't concentrate on anything in particular, just relax and allow your meditation experience to integrate at a deep level within your psyche and physiology. This rest time allows your nervous system to adjust and prepare for everyday activities. Have a stretch and gently raise yourself up to your feet and you are ready for action, clearer, calmer and more confident.

C – COGNITION & CONSCIOUSNESS

Cognition & consciousness

The content of your inner thoughts, sense impressions, imaginings are contained within your consciousness in the form of cognitions. These cognitions can be known by you; you can listen and observe your inner chatter, sometimes more negative than positive in content. When you stop and bring your attention within, you will notice that you are constantly evaluating, judging, deciding, worrying and celebrating.

What you have located can be referred to your as your "inner voice" and it gives you an idea of the "quality" the emotional regard that you hold for yourself – a subjective measure of your self-esteem and relationship to others. You know that it is you who is focusing on something and bringing it into your awareness; you know that you are having the experience. In psychological terms this is called the "Observer, or the Knower". These complex, seemingly random thought processes are the contents moving along your stream of consciousness and it isn't really linear or rule-based.

The intellect and rational mind likes to make it so, but there is more to you than your intellect. There are your emotional reactions to events, your physiological attributes and your unique conditioning. The regular practice of observing your inner cognitions and emotional responses provides the training for emotional intelligence.

Contemplation meditation 5 - 10 minute practice

When you learn to meditate you will be given a cue word (Mantra) to focus on. When you sit and focus on your cue word you will notice that your attention shifts from place to place. You have allocated 5 - 10 minutes to keep your attention focused on your cue word, you will "observe" many thoughts and experiences seemingly chaotic and arising from often unrelated ideas and sharing a different time and space. The past, present and future are all merging into the one stream of consciousness.

As you continue to observe you become aware of this thinking experience and you may notice an emotional state that can vary with tone and intensity. Each time your attention is diverted, bring it back to your cue word. This in itself teaches you that you can manage and direct the content of your thoughts. This practice has also been referred to as "mindfulness meditation". By simply witnessing your inner content you become more self-aware, and self-knowledge is a powerful tool for self-change and empowerment.

These mindfulness observations are the beginning point.

Profound moments

Meditation allows you an opportunity to slip into the spaces, the silences between thoughts, the pauses between the intake of breath and the exhalation of the same breath. These are moments when you have transcended your cue word or imagery. Meditation allows you to arrive at insights that are meaningful and profound for you.

Meditation is about allowing and surrendering, you can't control or stop your thoughts all you can do is direct your attention toward more positive and supportive thinking/cognitions. Within this gap, pause and silence, a deep inner peace and vitality can be experienced. You also discover that you can't control or "hold on" to this feeling of deep peace and acceptance, it happens through surrendering to the practice.

For most of us in our working lives we do not surrender, we like to be in control, to organise the world and people we interact with. We actively protect a persona that we show our colleagues, families and friends.

What to do if you feel more anxious or distressed in your practice?

Sometimes when you meditate you may feel intense emotions coming to the surface, and this can feel uncomfortable especially if you are not used to expressing your emotions. You might find that meditation rather than relaxing you is making you feel more tense and anxious. This can happen at any time and be unexpected, so if you feel overwhelmed, then seek advice and guidance from a registered psychologist, your EAP service, a GP, or meditation teacher. They will be able to assist you to understand the cause of those feelings and help you to enjoy your meditation practice.

Remember it take practice! Meditation is not something you just “get right” one day and never have to do again. It is a practice you include in your daily routine, like cleaning your teeth, eating breakfast, going to work.

Create a meditation space at home or at the office

Some places are more relaxing and encourage you to settle into your meditation practice. Have fun creating a beautiful safe environment for yourself. Treat yourself to some quiet time in a beautiful sanctuary within your own home. You don't need to have a room dedicated to meditation just a corner of a room can suffice. Choose a particular area in your home where you can have your meditation area set up. It is best if you can relax into your meditation practice without interruption. Create a private quiet meditation space, with no phones and gentle sounds surrounding you. Not always possible, but worth a try.

Here are some ideas to help create a beautiful meditation space:

- Ambient music, play some soft and gentle music
- Aromatic oils, fragrance, place your favorite aromatic oil in a burner
- Comfortable seating with cushions or a favorite chair to sit in
- Subtle lighting, candle light or lamps rather than bright fluorescent lights
- Have some water available
- Good flow of air, comfortable temperature
- Fresh flowers, ornaments, sacred pictures or statues of your preference
- Quotation books, Angel cards and a personal journal for writing down your insights
- Tissues (just in case)

Meditation in the workplace

Meditation is being widely adopted by psychologists as an effective and convenient tool for use in workplace well-being initiatives. Because each workplace invariably comes with its own unique dynamics, stresses and demands, it is important that the meditation practice is delivered by a professional with an understanding of these needs. Meditation is an incredibly effective tool for addressing a broad range of needs, and once learned is a well-being resource that lasts a lifetime.

Training in Meditation

Simonette has been teaching meditation as part of her work as a psychologist and clinical hypnotherapist since 1998. She has developed a range of popular guided meditation CD's and DVD's, meditation courses, information packs and workshops to suit different personal and workplace settings. For the individual meditation can enhance your physical and emotional wellbeing, improve your concentration and ability to remain calm in the face of adversity; from a corporate perspective meditation is a healthy alternative to the not so healthy "smoko break".

Take five! is a 1 hour work place training that incorporates teaching meditation as part of a series of quick five minute pick ups!

Try taking 5 deep breaths at different times during the day, and you will start a positive chain of events: improving your oxygen intake, enhancing your mental capacity and performance. The regular practice of meditation ensures emotional balance and even increased happiness and optimism. When you are happy and optimistic your relationships improve, work communication improves and this results in higher rates of productivity – a simple practice, a valuable and effective tool for upper management.

Work-place programs presented by Simonette

1. Meditation easy as ABC

1 hour interactive presentation
2 hour interactive presentation

2. Take Five! enhancing resilience to workplace stress

1 hour powerpoint presentation
for work teams

3. Advanced communication for positive relationships

3 hour presentation and interactive training