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9 Tips for Starting and Maintaining Your Meditation Practice

1. Schedule your meditation

In our always-on, accomplishment-oriented culture, it is easy to fill our schedules to the point that there can be little time left for the activities and pursuits that really matter to you. If your meditation practice is not on your schedule, it can be easy to forget or get caught up in doing other activities, and then it doesn't happen. You can start off your meditation time on your schedule for one week. This way you have a small and manageable first milestone to reach.

2. Same time, same space

Meditating at the same time each day will support you in practice consistently. You might experiment with practicing in the morning, after school or work, and before bed to see what time works best for you. Also, it is helpful if you can meditate in the same place, ideally a space that is quiet and where you won't be disturbed. If possible, create a space that is dedicated to meditation. You might carve out a little corner of a room where you can place your meditation cushion or chair and any objects that inspire you, such as special photos, candles, or books. With time, your body and mind will begin to relax automatically when you enter that space.

3. Start small

Starting small makes it easy for you to succeed and creates confidence and momentum. Begin with a small and manageable amount of meditation time that can easily fit into your schedule—like five or 10 minutes, or even less, say, two to five minutes, if 10 minutes feels like too much. And setting goals with minimums will make it easy for you to follow through 100 percent of the time. For example, your daily goal might be to meditate for 10 minutes, and your minimum might be three minutes. That way, if you are not practicing, you know it is not because you don't have the time. It is likely because you have forgotten, gotten distracted, or not prioritized it. Once your initial time commitment becomes habitual, then you can begin to lengthen your meditation practice, maybe adding on a couple of minutes every week, working your way up to a 30-minute practice per day. Consistency is key. Research shows that it is far more beneficial to meditate daily for five or 10 minutes than it is to meditate once a week for an hour.

4. Everyone can meditate!

There is a common misconception that you are not supposed to have thoughts or that thoughts are bad during meditation. This contributes to people thinking they can't meditate or are not good at it and can contribute to people feeling frustrated or giving up. Thoughts are not only okay during meditation, but they are also part of the practice. Each time you have a thought, it gives you the opportunity to begin again in your meditation practice by going back to your breath or your present-moment object of focus. This builds the muscle of attention in your brain. Each time you notice that you are thinking and come back to your object of focus, the stronger your attention and focus becomes. Especially at the beginning of your practice, it is normal to experience an almost constant stream of thoughts, feelings, and sensations. These are always going on within you, but you are now becoming more aware of it all. This is a trustworthy sign that you are becoming more mindful!

5. Be really kind to yourself

It's been said that the longest relationship you will ever have is with yourself, so it is worth the effort to make the relationship a healthy one. Many of us can have a tendency to be hard on ourselves. Let your meditation be a practice of relating to yourself with patience, acceptance, and kindness.

6. Be clear on your intention and note your excuses

Being clear on your intention for why you want to meditate is one of the most important ingredients for beginning a meditation practice. The clearer you are on your motivation for wanting to practice meditation, the more inspired you will be to show up consistently, even when you don't feel like it or think that you don't have time. Meditation is a practice of self-awareness. Observe how your mind rationalizes breaking your commitment ("I'm too tired." "I don't have time." "I'll do it later."). Notice these excuses without judgment and then use them as trustworthy reminders to take a moment to recall your intention for why you want to practice meditation and do your best to follow through anyway, even if it is just for a few minutes.

7. Reflect on the benefits

At the end of your practice, it can be helpful to take a few moments to reflect on or journal about the benefits you are experiencing from your practice. This can help inspire you to maintain consistent practice. Learn what you love about your meditation practice. Is it the clear mind you have after practice? Is it the feeling of calmness or relaxation? Is it that you feel happier and more centered throughout your day? Or do you simply find it satisfying to know you are bettering your physical and mental health? Whatever it is that is valuable to you about your meditation practice, have that be your reason to keep meditating day in and day out.

8. Make yourself accountable

You can make yourself accountable by stating your intention to meditate out loud to someone, creating a reminder on your phone or computer, writing a note to yourself, or scheduling the practice on your calendar. Another way to support consistent follow-through is finding a meditation buddy with whom you can meditate or check in on daily, for example, with a quick text: "Just meditated! You?"

9. Use guided practices + meditate with a group

If you are new to meditation, it is common to feel unsure about what to do during your meditation practice. Guided meditations are an excellent way to take all the guesswork out of your meditation practice and can help you get the most out of your experience. In addition to the meditations provided in this Health Coach Training Program, there are a variety of smartphone apps that offer guided meditations, such as Insight Timer; Stop, Breathe & Think; Headspace; Mindful; and Simple Habit. What is most important is that you find guided meditations that you like and use them regularly.

Finally, find a local meditation group! Meditating with others is a powerful way to help you follow through on your commitment to the practice, and groups also create a tangible energy that can inspire even the most reluctant meditator.