

Meditation Resources for Beginners

Kimberly Hatch Harrison

Meditation is no fad. It's a very old practice, with roots in ancient Hindu and Buddhist observances. But you don't have to belong to a particular spiritual group—anyone can meditate as a way to increase focus and reduce stress. Meditation has been gaining popularity in Silicon Valley and amongst "biohackers" due to scientific evidence of its many health benefits (reduced stress hormones, lowered blood pressure, improved brain health, etc.). But beware people trying to sell you something. Meditation is simple and free.



Getting Started with Different Styles of Meditation

Meditation is all about focusing your attention on the here and now—also known as "mindfulness." There are many ways to go about this. What works for you may not be the same thing that works for me. And you may find your needs change from day to day. So if one of these styles of meditation isn't clicking with you, don't beat yourself up. Let it go, and try something different. It's the trying that counts! Every time you try to meditate, you ARE meditating.

Zazen Meditation

Zazen is probably what you picture when you think about meditation. It involves sitting in the lotus position and focusing on your breath. This is the most common form of meditation found in apps and videos, and is a quick way to give people a taste of what meditation is about. I actually avoid recommending this to absolute beginners, because 1) the posture is difficult to maintain for many people, and 2) ironically, focusing on your breath can be anxiety-inducing. Still, this is one of the very simplest and most accessible forms of meditation, so give it a try and see what you think!

Video to try: [Zazen meditation at home \(Taizo-in Zen Buddhist Temple\)](#)

Guided Meditation

Guided Meditation is the other very common form of meditation you'll find in apps and videos for beginners. I find it the most accessible, but also the most variable in terms of quality and effectiveness. It involves listening to a recording of a guide who gives you instructions. By following the instructions, you become very relaxed—quite a bit like hypnosis. Guided meditation sometimes involves paying close attention to your breath, but it doesn't have to. It may instead take you on a bit of a journey, where you picture soothing images. Or

it sometimes involves doing what is known as a "body scan," where you concentrate on relaxing all of your muscles. You'll be amazed at how much tension you have been holding, without realizing it. If you have tried one guided meditation and it didn't do much for you, I can tell you that there is great variability in the guides and their routines. There is almost infinite variety to be found, so don't give up—try a different guided meditation every day of the week, and see for yourself if you don't start to have favourites.

Video to try: Meditate With Me - Yoga Nidra body scan (Socratica)

App with lots of guided meditations: Headspace

Transcendental Meditation

TM is what the Beatles famously studied with the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, introducing much of the Western world to meditation in the 1960s. Although this discipline has its roots in the ancient practice of Vedic Meditation, Transcendental Meditation is a brand name, with specially trained teachers. Students pay a fee to attend TM classes, during which they learn to meditate by silently repeating a personalized mantra (usually a meaningless word). I have not personally attended TM classes, but I have found mentally repeating a self-chosen mantra to be fairly effective. I would love to give the official TM class a try one day (if I win the lottery).

Video to try: David Lynch on Consciousness, Creativity and the Brain (Transcendental Meditation)

To learn more about their classes: tm.org

Common Misconceptions about Meditation

- There is one correct way to meditate.
- You have to be taught to meditate.
- If you get distracted, you've failed.
- Meditation is only for the enlightened.

To be clear, all of these statements are false. Meditation is simple to explain, and does not require any complicated classes or extensive teaching. But it *is* a discipline. This means you don't learn how to do it and then quit once you have reached your goal. Rather, you keep trying every day, for the rest of your life. Every time you "fail" to maintain focus, you have another opportunity for learning and growth. Your life is enriched by the *process* of learning how to meditate and continuing your efforts to focus and refocus your attention. You don't have to join any particular religion or pay dues to a club. Meditation is a club of one. You.

Additional Resources

Socratica Yoga Nidra mp3 (Audio recording of guided meditation
- free download)

UCLA Mindful Awareness Research Center

Muse (a brain-sensing headband that trains you how to meditate)

The Miracle of Mindfulness: an Introduction to the Practice of
Meditation by Thich Nhat Hanh

Links to scientific papers about the benefits of meditation