

## Meditation: An Introduction

Meditation is a mind-body practice in *complementary and alternative medicine* (CAM). There are many types of meditation, most of which originated in ancient religious and spiritual traditions. Generally, a person who is meditating uses certain techniques, such as a specific posture, focused attention, and an open attitude toward distractions. Meditation may be practiced for many reasons, such as to increase calmness and physical relaxation, to improve psychological balance, to cope with illness, or to enhance overall wellness. This article provides a general introduction to meditation and suggests some resources for more information.

- People practice meditation for a number of health-related purposes.
- It is not fully known what changes occur in the body during meditation; whether or not they influence health; and, if so, how. Research is under way to find out more about meditation's effects, how it works, and diseases and conditions for which it may be most helpful.
- Tell your health care providers about any complementary and alternative practices you use. Give them a full picture of what you do to manage your health. This will help ensure coordinated and safe care.

### Overview

The term *meditation* refers to a group of techniques, such as *mantra meditation*, *relaxation response*, *mindfulness meditation*, and *Zen Buddhist meditation*. Most meditative techniques started in Eastern religious or spiritual traditions. These techniques have been used by many different cultures throughout the world for thousands of years. Today, many people use meditation outside of its traditional religious or cultural settings, for health and wellness purposes.

In meditation, a person learns to focus attention. Some forms of meditation instruct the practitioner to become mindful of thoughts, feelings, and sensations and to observe them in a nonjudgmental way. This practice is believed to result in a state of greater calmness, physical relaxation, and psychological balance. Practicing meditation can change how a person relates to the flow of emotions and thoughts in the mind.

Most types of meditation have four elements in common:

- **A Quiet Location:** Meditation is usually practiced in a quiet place with as few distractions as possible. This can be particularly helpful for beginners.
- **A Specific, Comfortable Posture:** Depending on the type being practiced, meditation can be done while sitting, lying down, standing, walking, or in other positions.
- **A Focus of Attention:** Focusing one's attention is usually a part of meditation. For example, the *meditator* may focus on a *mantra* (a specially chosen word or set of words), an object, or the

sensations of the breath. Some forms of meditation involve paying attention to whatever is the dominant content of consciousness.

- **An Open Attitude:** Having an open attitude during meditation means letting distractions come and go naturally without judging them. When the attention goes to distracting or wandering thoughts, they are not suppressed; instead, the meditator gently brings attention back to the focus. In some types of meditation, the meditator learns to observe thoughts and emotions while meditating.

Meditation used as CAM is a type of mind-body medicine. Generally, mind-body medicine focuses on

- The interactions among the brain (mind), the rest of the body, and behavior
- The ways in which emotional, mental, social, spiritual, and behavioral factors can directly affect health

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