

WORKING LIFE

Mind over matter

Mindfulness meditation: contemplating your way to reduced stress and better performance

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[CBC News](#)

That roller-coaster economy got you worried about your professional future? Maybe problems at home are eating away at you and affecting your performance on the job.

Think about it: meditation could be your ticket to cutting stress and improving the way you perform.



Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, meditates at his headquarters in New Delhi, India in this Dec. 1967 file photo. The guru to the Beatles introduced the West to transcendental meditation. (File photo/Associated Press) Recent studies have found that meditation can [slow progression of HIV](#), [reduce death rates and extend lifespan](#) and reduce overall stress.

Meditation's been a part of human life for thousands of years — and it's not just restricted to mystical eastern monasteries or hippie communes of the 1970s.

The Beatles helped spark a surge in eastern-style meditation at the height of their fame in the late 1960s, when they extolled the virtues of transcendental meditation, which was developed by Maharishi Mahesh Yogi in 1958. It's a form of meditation that you can only learn through a certified teacher, according to the TM website. That'll set you back a couple thousand hard-to-find dollars in a tight economy.

But there are forms of meditation that don't require a huge financial outlay and some that you can learn in an afternoon workshop.

The Canadian Oxford Dictionary defines meditation as "exercising the mind in contemplation," usually by focusing on a subject. So, yes, you can meditate by contemplating your navel.

Jon Kabat-Zinn is one of the world's leading authorities on the power of meditation. He founded the Stress Reduction Clinic at the University of Massachusetts Medical School and is a proponent of a form of meditation called Mindfulness Meditation, a practice Buddhists call vipassana.

It is seen as a way of transforming yourself through close observation and introspection — taking the time not only to smell the roses but to completely experience them as well.

In Buddhist practice, this type of meditation is seen as a way to not only calm the mind, but to reveal how the mind was disturbed to begin with and to prevent it from being disturbed again.

One of Kabat-Zinn's methods involves handing his students a raisin. They're told to look at it like they've never looked at a raisin before — to take in its colour and texture. They're invited to hold it to their ear, to squish it to see if it makes a sound. When they finally swallow it, they're invited to appreciate the fullness of its flavour, to be conscious of it as it progresses from the tongue to the stomach and to imagine themselves exactly one raisin heavier.

Not exactly your mantra-chanting meditation, but it seems to get results.

Tiger Woods is a practitioner. He says it helped slice several strokes from his golf game.

Maria Gonzalez used to work in high finance in Toronto. Now she teaches people how to reduce the stress in their working lives by being mindful in their meditation. She teaches them how to do it while walking, talking or lying down.

"People view meditation as being soft or weak, that it might take away their edge if they do it, but it's completely the opposite," she says. "In fact, when you meditate, you have a presence of mind that enables you to be more effective, more efficient."

When you're busy and thinking clearly, Gonzalez says, you're less likely to forget that you've already done something and then do it again. Also, if you're interrupted while doing a task, you're more likely to get back to it and finish it.

"The latest research tells us that the average worker is interrupted every 11 minutes, but it takes them 23 minutes to get back to the original task. But if you meditate, it takes you seconds ... so you can see how you'd be very efficient when you meditated."

Getting the most out of meditation

Gonzalez offers these tips on how to meditate in way that makes you mindful and present in the moment:

- When you wake up in the morning become present. Becoming aware of your body and your surroundings helps sets the tone for the day.
- When you are in a meeting, really listen to what the other person is saying. Become aware of the sounds, of their voice and by doing that, you're going to pick up cues that you would normally miss. Rather than your mind drifting, this allows you to be completely present, completely effective.
- While you're driving, when you come to a stop light, remember to connect with your body, to be in the present moment and aware of drivers around you. If your phone suddenly rings, it's an important time to be present. Take a breath and listen to what's on the other end rather than looking at your e-mail. Chances are that if you're looking at your e-mail you'll have to do things twice or ask the person to repeat what they're saying.
- If you're on a treadmill or running down the street, be aware of the body. Make sure you make contact and be aware of when your feet touch the ground. Be aware of how this is bringing health/healing to you — allowing you to release stress.
- If you're on an airplane and it's delayed, rather than being upset and frustrated that you're so late, just connect with your body while you're sitting there. Start to work on every part of the body. Start with the feet and work all the way up. What that enables you to do is when you're off the plan, you're relaxed as opposed to frazzled.

Gonzalez says meditation can be life changing. Researchers say it may also lead to [structural changes in](#)

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[your brain.](#)

Neurologists at Massachusetts General Hospital compared the brain scans of people who meditate with a control group. Among the meditators, they found thickened cortical walls surrounding the regions of the brain responsible for attention and sensory processing.

As an added benefit, the study also showed that meditation could help slow down the age-related atrophy of certain parts of the brain.

Something to think about.