

Week 5: Meditation
Developed by The Center For Mind Body Medicine

I. Meditation

Meditation creates a relaxed state of moment to moment awareness which is critical to stress reduction and self-awareness. Meditation is the heart of healing and it's about being in the moment. Every spiritual and religious tradition in the world has meditative practices. If we belong to a particular religion, practice a spiritual tradition, or have no religious/spiritual affiliations, we may still use other practices. I invite you to use what is comfortable for you.

3 Kinds of Meditation

There are three major types of meditation: (1) concentrative, (2) mindfulness and (3) expressive. All three have powerful and beneficial effects. The more often you do them, the more you will experience their effects.

We have already been doing Soft Belly breathing which is a **concentrative meditation**. Concentrative meditation consists of focused awareness on a particular object, such as an image or sound. Prayers and visual meditations are also concentrative meditations.

The second type is called **mindfulness (or awareness) meditation**, which involves being relaxed and aware of thoughts, feelings and sensations as they arise, without focusing on a particular object. Studies of mindfulness meditation have emphasized its value as a stress management technique. For example, walking can be a meditation. As you walk, focus on staying aware of your thoughts, feelings and sensations as they arise. As sights, smells and emotions come to you, name them to yourself. Observe what is around you. Notice how your body feels and whatever comes to you.

The third type is **expressive meditation**. This is probably the oldest kind of meditation. It's the one that indigenous healers around the world have used for thousands of years. This includes such active techniques as chanting, dancing, shaking, rapid breath work, and whirling.

Studies show that concentrative and mindfulness meditation can change brain wave activity and neurotransmitter levels, increase parasympathetic activity and increase heart rate variability. Studies have also demonstrated the effectiveness of concentrative meditation in lowering blood pressure, decreasing pain, decreasing frequency and intensity of asthma attacks, improving mood and decreasing anxiety.

As we practice meditative techniques the physiology of our body may change. Sometimes medications need to be reassessed and dosages changed after a regular meditation practice is established.

Meditation wakes us to the experience of the here and now and to our connection with that which is larger than ourselves. Meditation practice brings benefits to ALL aspects of our life.

II. Experiential Exercise: Expressive Meditation of “Shaking and Dancing”

This meditation can be useful for releasing any state of “stuckness” that we feel. We get stuck in our bodies and our joints don’t move well. We get stuck in emotional states and feel sad and depressed.

Shaking helps us to physically begin to break up the stuck patterns in the body and open the joints, to relax the muscles and to break up those fixed postural patterns. Shaking also works to break up fixed ideas that we carry in our minds such as “Nothing is ever going to work out for me,” and helps us to move stuck feelings such as sadness, anger and despair. The movement of shaking helps to create open space where new ways of seeing, feeling, and experiencing can come in.

III. Movement and Exercise

Breathing is crucial to every aspect of our life. Living in a highly industrialized society where movement is constrained and constricted we have to recover this experience of movement to make it consciously a regular part of our life. Running, jogging, dancing, weight-lifting, playing ball and swimming are generally described as aerobic exercises, which means they’re oxygen consuming. Technically, a definition of an aerobic workout is raising the heartbeat to 70 to 80 percent of its maximum for 20 minutes at a time. Many studies have been done on aerobic exercise showing its effectiveness in helping to prevent and treat many illnesses.

There are other forms of exercise that may not reach the level of heart rate that’s characteristic of an aerobic exercise but are still helpful. These include the exercises that come out of the Eastern healing traditions—Chinese Tai Chi, a moving meditation, and Qi Gong, a short form of meditation as well as the movements of Indian Hatha Yoga. These exercises promote flexibility and may increase aerobic capacity.

It is important to find the exercise that suits you. If you hate doing a particular exercise, it’s not likely that you will do it. So find something you enjoy doing which fits with your lifestyle. Breathing, exercise and movement can also be a part of our spiritual life. They’ve been used in virtually every spiritual and religious tradition. **With exercise it’s important that you do a form you like and that you do it regularly.**

Research says that exercise has a direct effect on physiology and is a powerful agent both in preventing and treating a number of major illnesses. It has been shown to improve mood, perhaps by increasing the levels of neurotransmitters in the brain.... chemicals called peptides like serotonin and norepinephrine. These are the same chemicals that antidepressants are designed to increase. Physical exercise seems to increase the levels of these substances without any of the negative side effects of the antidepressants and, of course, without the expense. Exercise may also improve mood by increasing levels of endorphin—the morphine-like substances that our own bodies produce.

In addition, exercise has been shown to reduce anxiety, improve mental functioning, prevent and treat coronary heart disease, diabetes, and osteoporosis, as well as improve the sense of wellbeing, appetite, and emotional and mental functioning in people who are being treated with cancer. However, if you have a physical limitation or illness you need to exercise in a way that takes care of your physical body. If you have concerns be sure to check with your doctor.

IV. Homework: It is useful to have more than one meditative practice to choose from. Different types of meditation are appropriate in different situations.

-Experiment with both the quiet and the active meditations and write about it. Where were you? What time of day was it? What was the exercise like?

-Practice shaking and dancing once a day for a week. Do it in a private place where you won't be interrupted. If you worry about what other would think if they saw you, notice the worry and keep shaking. If you want to stop, shake even more.

-Find a form of exercise that you like and that you will do regularly, at least 4 or 5 times a week for 30 or 40 minutes each day.

➤ **NOTE:** Whichever meditation practice you choose, attempt to practice it for several weeks. Remember, meditation does not always come easy so be patient with yourself.

