



THE KNOWLEDGE

HOW TO MEDITATE *Mind racing? Unable to relax? Sit back, breathe deeply and focus on these calming words from the science writer and meditation expert* **SHANIDA NATARAJA**

START AT THE BEGINNING Meditation is often seen as something mystical and disconnected from normality. But in fact it's an incredibly powerful tool for reducing stress and is something that can be incorporated into anyone's everyday life. The benefits come from focusing your attention entirely on the present moment and being fully 'mindful' of whatever it is you are doing, rather than letting your mind race back and forth. Once you have perfected this technique, it can be done anywhere and at any time

TAKE A SEAT Find a style that suits you. Techniques that incorporate movement, such as yoga and t'ai chi, are popular, but seated meditation is an easy way for a beginner to start. Sit in a comfortable, upright position, which opens up the chest and makes you aware of the tension in the body. Start to relax the body consciously. You may find it helpful to work your way down from head to toe, tensing and relaxing your muscles in rolling succession

HEAD AND SHOULDERS ABOVE THE REST Pay attention to your head and shoulders. Think about the point between the eyebrows, and the tension stored in your jaw, just under the ears. Scrunch up your muscles as if you were frowning, then widen your face and feel it relax. Breathe in gently and let go of all the tension. Follow with your shoulders, moving them up and down to become aware of how you hold them. Breathe gently in, and then allow them to relax down as you exhale

BREATHE EASY Pay attention to your breathing. Don't consciously alter your breath – just watch it. Feel the air passing into your nostrils, to the back of your throat and then out again. Take the awareness a little deeper, feeling the breath moving down into your chest and expanding your lungs

STILL THE MIND The quieter the body, the more aware we are of the thoughts racing through our mind. Usually, when a thought arises it triggers a chain of thinking, which we follow wherever it leads. During meditation, acknowledge the thought – but instead of examining it properly, let it go. You can return to it later. As successive thoughts are acknowledged and then let go, you will find that the mind gradually quiets

FIND YOUR FOCUS Another way to still the mind is to use an 'anchor' – something else to focus on. This could be an image, a repeated word or 'mantra', or even your own breath. As soon as you start to daydream, draw your attention back to your anchor and in doing so release the thought

ACCEPT AND MOVE ON Don't get disheartened. We're restless creatures by nature. Our minds are so active that at first it's hard to focus for more than 30 seconds before your thoughts start to wander. The key is to recognise this tendency and accept it. With practice you will find that it becomes easier to sustain that focused attention

GO GRADUALLY Be realistic. There's no point in sitting there for hours on end. Just 15 minutes at the beginning or end of the day is a good start ●

'The Blissful Brain: Neuroscience and Proof of the Power of Meditation', by Shanida Nataraja, is published by Gaia at £7.99 (blissfulbrain.com)