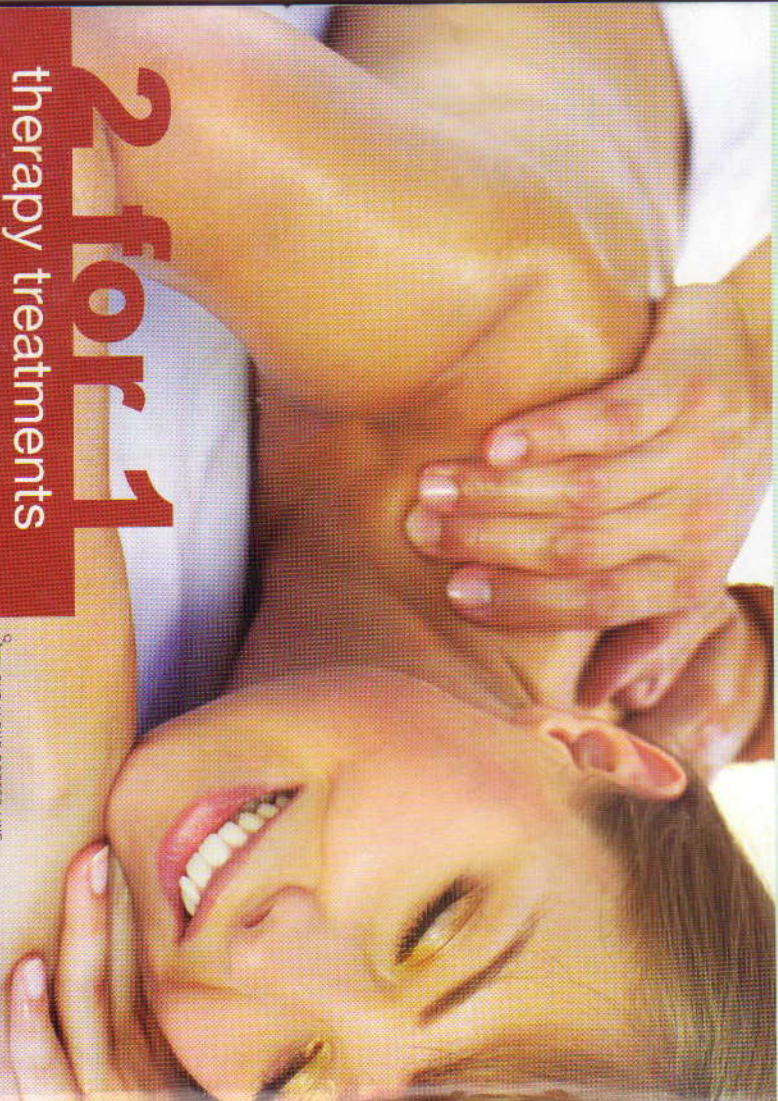




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TERMS AND CONDITIONS

1. This offer is open to UK residents aged 18 years or over.
2. This offer entitles you to receive two therapy treatments for the price of one.
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4. A full list of participating therapists can be found online at www.fht.org.uk by searching "Find a Therapist".
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CUT ALONG DOTTED LINE



Federation of Holistic Therapists
FHT The UK's largest professional therapist association

2 FOR 1 THERAPY TREATMENTS

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Contact telephone no

Promotion Code: **FHT0808 Guardian and Observer**

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TREATMENT

The Guardian & Observer guides to Massage & Relaxation part two



is Neasden

Meditation

Learn how to clear your head of the babble of everyday thoughts and you might find you are able to concentrate better and feel less stressed. So here's a beginner's guide to how to meditate (as the maharishi said, anyone can do it...)

What is it?

Put simply, meditation is a mental process by which you learn to clear your head of the incessant babble of everyday thought. Neuroscientist Shantida Nataraja believes that: "by drawing your attention to the constant chattering of the mind, you become aware of the gap between your thoughts – the silence amid the noise. The sense of peace and tranquillity arises from this silence."

You don't have to be perched atop a far-flung mountain with your legs painfully contorted into the lotus position to achieve a meditative state. Simple "mindfulness" – focusing on the present moment – can help you achieve a deeply pleasurable state of relaxation.

Is there any evidence?

The benefits of meditation are often talked about in esoteric abstraction, but scientific studies have helped demystify the effect of meditation on the brain. In a study of meditators and non-meditators the brains of the experienced meditators were found to be thicker in the area associated with emotion and attention. Also, a survey conducted by the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (Nice) indicated that if someone has had

three or more periods of depression, meditation could reduce their chances of having another depressive episode by more than half.

Meditative techniques are also gaining popularity as a way of improving the quality of life for people suffering from chronic illness or pain.

Where does it come from?

Indian scriptures dating back over 5,000 years describe meditative techniques, though it's believed to predate recorded history. Vedic Hinduism is the oldest religion to claim meditation as a spiritual practice.

Meditation was popularised in the west in the late 60s when the Beatles, and an incongruous-looking Jane Asher, followed Maharishi Mahesh Yogi to India. The maharishi, who died in February this year, introduced the west to the practice of Transcendental Meditation.

Who can do it?

You don't need to be aligned to any religion in order to experience the benefits of meditation. As the maharishi said, "anyone who can think can meditate."

Reaching a meditative state is not necessarily easy though, intrusive thoughts can scupper

attempts at focused mindfulness. The answer, explains Nataraja, is to keep trying: "Meditation is part and parcel of what it means to be human," she says. "Our brains are hardwired to access higher levels of awareness through meditation – it just takes practice."

What results can I expect?

According to Nataraja, every time you consciously clear your thoughts, you're strengthening the right-hand side of your brain. "This is the side of your brain associated with intuitive and holistic thinking, rather than logical, analytical thought. In a society reliant on left-brained activity, meditation means we can use both sides of the brain."

This balance brings true insight, creativity and imagination to whatever task is at hand, easing life's everyday stresses and strains. "Meditation isn't goal orientated," Nataraja reminds us. "It's benefits are intangible, but they will bring a sense of groundedness, connectedness and compassion for both yourself and others."

Contra-indications

If you suffer from very serious mental health issues such as schizophrenia or bipolar disorder you should consult your doctor before meditating.

How was it for you? Iain Whiteley (temperamental)

I arrive for my class and am (embarrassingly) surprised to find my teacher Kim's flat devoid of new-age crystals; and it smells of cooking, not incense.

We start with relaxation exercises: massaging the face, relaxing the jaw, straightening the spine. Then we focus on breathing and I note the cold air in, the warm air out as I just... Let. Go. I'm to count to 10 and back, starting back at one whenever my mind wanders. I don't make it past three. I label distractions: cars on the road become "noise", my urge to giggle, "laughter", I feel relaxed



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by the end, but don't know what I've achieved. Kim explains: "It's about achieving nothing."

I decide to do 10 minutes each morning. The first day I'm so relaxed, I fall back to sleep and am late for work. I meditate on the tube: the constant apologies for delays are off-putting, but after a few failed attempts, it works. No related states, but I feel better than normal.

After just a few days' practice my mood is brighter, my thoughts clearer and I've done more. Surely things can't change so quickly? But at my second session Kim tells me

the effects are noticeable straight away. In this session we introduce a word or phrase, used as a surfboard to ride the breath. Each time my thoughts wander, I get back on the word and ride again. Kim tells me to note the gap at the end of each breath. I do. It is blissful – for a few brief moments there is nothing.

When Kim asks me how the session was, I'm so loved up I want to hug her. But remembering she's twice my age and her husband's in the kitchen, I don't. Achieving nothing is harder than it sounds. But it's worth it.



Please mind the gap! Iain Whiteley searching for silence on the London Underground



How to find silence amid the noise

Neuroscientist **Shamida Nataraja** offers three simple, step-by-step instructions for quietening the body and clearing the mind

The practice of meditation involves three main steps. To begin with, the practitioner relaxes their body. Then they turn their attention to their breath, focusing on the natural rhythm of their breathing. And finally, the practitioner attempts to clear or still the active mind by repeating their mantra. Here's how:

1 Stilling the body

Many of us seem to spend our entire waking life in continuous motion. Even at rest, we are poised to take action if necessary, and this leads to a feeling of restlessness during periods of stillness. The first important step is therefore for the practitioner to consciously relax their body, releasing this latent energy, and allowing them to rest in the stillness.

● Find a quiet place, and sit in a relaxed, but upright position. Draw your attention to your head; feel the tension stored in your scalp, your forehead, your brow and jaw. Contract the muscles in these areas, and then relax them, feeling the tension melt away with your outgoing breath. Draw your attention to your neck, your shoulders, your back, pin-pointing areas of tension and releasing that tension. In this manner, work through your entire body, relaxing your muscles further with every breath, until your body is completely relaxed.

2 Focus on breathing

Focusing on the breath is an excellent way of anchoring attention in the body. When we are excited or agitated, our breathing tends to become quicker and more shallow than normal. Sometimes we even hold our breath in moments of tension. The next step is to therefore draw the



Return to your mantra, return to the silence'

Start to focus on the gap between the thoughts – the silence

attention to the feeling of your chest rising and falling with every breath, and finally move it to the feeling of your diaphragm falling and rising as your lungs fill up and empty of air. Breathe naturally, and continue to watch your breath, relaxing both body and mind.

3 Stilling the mind

When our bodies are relaxed, we become more aware of the restless nature of our mind. Thoughts constantly pop into our heads, and we follow these thoughts, remembering past experiences and worrying about the future. The next crucial step is to focus on the feeling of the air at the back of your throat; watch the sensation of the cool air coming in when you breathe in, and the warm air being expelled when you breathe out. Then, move your

word or phrase of spiritual significance. This mantra can be used to refocus the mind and release distracting thoughts when they arise.

● When you are completely relaxed, focusing on the natural rhythm of your breathing, draw your attention to your thoughts. Watch how thoughts can spontaneously pop into your mind, and how you are distracted by them: plans for the evening, forgotten tasks, memories of a past event. Acknowledge these thoughts, but don't become absorbed by them. Start to focus on the gap between the thoughts; the silence amid the constant chattering of the mind. Watch how you can use your mantra to let go and thus quieten your thoughts, entering into that silence. Whenever thoughts arise, return to your mantra, and return to the silence.

The Blissful Brain by Dr Shamida Nataraja is published by Gaia. To order a copy for £7.99 with free UK p&p go to guardian.co.uk/bookshop or call 0870-836 0875

A new way to focus

Here's a method for meditating and washing the dishes at the same time!

“Mindfulness meditation” also involves the focusing of your attention. This time, however, you focus it consciously on the present-moment experience – precisely what you are actually doing. The aim is to cultivate a state of detached, non-judgmental awareness of your “internal landscape” (thoughts and memories) and/or your “external environment” (sensations and experiences).

Mindfulness is found in Buddhism, but it also forms the basis of the non-denominational “mindfulness-based stress reduction” (MBSR), a type of meditation increasingly being used in the clinical setting.

As with mantra meditation, breathing plays a key role in mindfulness. It acts to anchor the mind in the present-moment. Take the example of mindfulness while washing up. Draw your attention to the task at hand: the sight of the dishes in the soapy water, the smell of the washing-up liquid, the sound of your hands splashing in the water. Now take each dish, one by one,



and carefully wash it as if it were a sacred object or something of great sentimental value.

Approach the task at hand as if it were the most important job of the day, the most important thing in life. When your attention begins to wander, use breathing to refocus it back to the present-moment. Breathe in, breathe out, and again give your undivided attention to those soapy dishes.

There are a number of defining principles of mindfulness meditation, and three of them – non-judgmental attitude, beginner's mind and letting go – are discussed in the panel below. Mindfulness can be practised either as seated meditation or while going about your everyday business. During seated meditation, the practitioner applies the principles to their interaction with their internal landscape. During everyday life, the practitioner applies the principles to their external environment and their reactions to that environment. **Shamida Nataraja**

The defining principles of mindfulness meditation

1. Non-judgmental attitude

Making value judgments is part of being human. We rate our experiences and behaviour as “good” or “bad”, and strive to maximise the good and minimise the bad. We move from the joy and optimism created by good experiences to the disappointment created by bad experiences. Mindfulness teaches us not to judge experiences, but to observe them with a detached attitude.

2. Beginner's mind

This refers to having a state of openness to different ways of

looking at our experiences. Many of us have a fairly rigid view of our world; we often filter our experiences to reinforce this view, rather than seeing things as they really are. Mindfulness encourages the practitioner to experience every experience without any preconceptions, as if for the first time. In doing so, the practitioner becomes more open to new experiences and new perspectives.

3. Letting go

We have a tendency to attach emotional significance to certain places, people, thoughts and

behaviour. A memory of a night out with a loved one becomes so precious, so pleasurable, that it is replayed again and again in our heads, allowing us to relive the pleasure we felt at the time.

In the same way, an unpleasant experience can haunt us for many years, interrupting our daily lives and reminding us of the anxiety we experienced. Mindfulness teaches a greater awareness of the experiences, thoughts and behaviour that we have become attached to, and allows us to let go of these experiences and the emotions attached to them. **SN**