

How meditation can

New evidence reveals meditation really can make you healthier and happier, and help you live longer

Celebrities have been extolling the virtues of meditation for decades. Recently, devotees such as Halle Berry, 41, Kate Hudson, 28, and Jennifer Aniston, 39, have all spoken of its benefits.

And now a new book called *The Blissful Brain* has revealed the research that shows the beneficial effects meditation has on certain parts of the brain. It claims the practice not only helps reduce stress, but could be crucial for good health and brain power.

"Meditation is seen as something quite mystical, but there's a clear need for it," says the book's author, Dr Shanida Nataraja.

"Meditation really enables us to manage our health more effectively and not be so reliant on pharmaceuticals and visits to the doctor." Here, Dr Nataraja explains how...

What is meditation?



"Meditation is a period of stillness in which the practitioner focuses their attention on a single thing," says Dr Nataraja. The ancient practice hails from the East and goes back thousands of years. Methods generally fall into two categories: "top-down" and "bottom-up".

Top-down involves relaxation of the mind and body, such as meditation and prayer, and bottom-up is prolonged activity of the mind and body, including dancing, chanting and sleep deprivation. When you meditate, activity shifts to the front part of the brain and different hormones are released, depending on the individual and type of meditation you're doing. These could make you feel mentally alert, clear-headed and positive, or maybe relaxed and peaceful.

Where can you meditate?

Most people in the West meditate at home or in classes. You can also go on retreats, although Dr Nataraja warns to choose carefully. As there are many different kinds of meditation, she advises trying different types until you find

How can it help you?

According to the findings in *The Blissful Brain*, meditation can...

- Reduce your risk of having heart disease and decrease blood pressure.
- **Increase your blood flow.**
- Reduce anxiety and depression. Meditation increases your levels of the brain chemical serotonin, which influences mood and behaviour. Low amounts are linked to depression.
- **Reduce PMS.**
- Improve your work efficiency.
- **Improve your relationships by making you more compassionate and understanding.**
- Help benefit patients with hormone-dependent cancers, such as breast and prostate cancer.
- **Boost the immune system by increasing the activity of the body's natural killer cells, which destroy bacteria and cancer cells.**
- Improve the coping mechanism of people dealing with chronic pain.
- **Increase your energy and vitality, and eliminate fatigue.**
- Improve your clarity of mind and increase creativity.
- **Boost your self-confidence.**
- Reverse some of the effects of ageing.
- **Improve your concentration.**
- Help you sleep.

However, meditation is not goal-orientated. "If you go into it thinking, 'I want to lower my blood pressure,' you are almost hindering the progress that you're having," explains Dr Nataraja. "You have to go into it without any expectations. An ultimate goal is for someone to become much more in tune with their body and much more aware of the effect that stress places on the body."

one that suits you. Or you can follow her guide to giving it a go in your own home. It's advisable to consult your GP before taking up meditation.



improve your health



Halle, Kate and Jen are all big fans of meditation

How to meditate

- **Find a quiet space in your home where you are unlikely to be disrupted.**
- **Set the scene.** It helps if the room is dimly lit.
- **Sit cross-legged on the floor or in a chair in a relaxed but upright position and close your eyes.**
- **Breathing naturally, either through your nose or mouth, scan your body, working from the top of your head down your body to your toes, feeling the tension and releasing it.** Aim to spend around five to ten minutes doing this.
- **Remembering not to force your breath, find something as an anchor to focus your attention on.** "I often find that breathing is the best for me," says Dr Nataraja. "I focus on how my breath is going in and out or perhaps focus on the movement – a visual image of what my diaphragm is doing. Do it for how long you feel is right. The more times you meditate, the easier it will be for you to hold your attention for longer periods of time."
- "After a while, you'll notice that thoughts will pop into your head," Dr Nataraja adds. "They can be as simple as thoughts like, 'I need to do the washing-up!' Acknowledge the thought but then let it go and continue to concentrate on your breathing and your focus point. As you meditate more, though, the time between those thoughts or interruptions will become longer and longer."
- **You can continue meditating for as long as you want, and whenever you want.** "I know people who like to get up and meditate first thing in the morning for half an hour before they go to work," says Dr Nataraja. "Or others find it's good to do it when they come back from work to relax."
- **When you feel like you are ready to finish, start by moving a little and slowly opening your eyes.** "It's a bit like when you wake up in the morning – give yourself a moment to get back into it."
- **How you feel afterwards varies from person to person.** "I know people who feel very energised, more compassionate towards others and positive," says Dr Nataraja. "But at the same time, we actually repress a lot of our emotions, stress and experiences, and the one thing meditation sometimes does is bring those up to the surface. It's not unusual for someone when they start to come out of the meditation to be crying! This is an emotion they repress and it's important for it to come out – it's not a negative thing."
- **The more you meditate, the more progress you're likely to make.** "If people were able to start off and do 15 to 30 minutes, three or four times a week, that would make a huge difference. You'd have to do it for at least eight weeks before you started to see what it's really all about and began to reap the benefits. That's about the time it takes to learn to relax and get into the technique."

The Blissful Brain (Gaia, £7.99) by Dr Shanida Nataraja is out on Saturday March 15

