



ZEN IN 60 SECONDS

WANT TO BE A LITTLE CALMER, BUT LACK THE TIME (OR INCLINATION) TO SIT AND CHANT? ANNA MAGEE DISCOVERS THE NEW WAYS TO SLOW DOWN FAST

PHOTOGRAPH POLLY WREFORD

Is meditation on your To Do list? Probably not. With bosses, friends, family, partners and children all wanting a piece of you, sitting and awaiting enlightenment is not likely to be high on your list of priorities. Yet it doesn't have to take up too much of your day. Today's meditation techniques are modern-life-friendly, with a focus on fast practices we can fit into our frenetic lives.

'New meditative practices have been extracted from the spiritual core of the older methods and concentrated,' explains neuroscientist Dr Shanida Nataraja, author of *The Blissful Brain* (Gaia Books, £7.99). 'Underpinning every type of meditation is one principle: increased attention on one single thing. Whether that's on the breath, on a task, on your senses or on a movement, the benefits will be the same, as long as you do it and do it regularly.'

The benefits are undeniably attractive. 'Though it's not yet conclusive, the theory is that meditation can help slow the effects of age,' says Peg Baim, of the Benson-Henry Institute of Mind Body Medicine at Harvard Medical School. An overall analysis of 823 meditation studies by the US National Institute of Complementary and Alternative Medicine, suggests meditation may help keep Alzheimer's, Parkinson's and heart disease at bay. Another study, from Dalian University in China, found that meditating for 20 minutes for five days could reduce the stress hormone, cortisol, as well as improving your ability to deal with conflict, depressive thoughts, anger and tiredness (ie a typical commute).

'Meditation helps train the mind to deal with stress in much the same way as we train our muscles,' says Dr Nataraja. Most of the time, we use our logical left brain to deal with life. 'But, to solve a problem, you need both sides of the brain. And, when you meditate, you're learning how to use your abstract right brain.'

To get your brain training started, here are the latest meditation options for women on the go (crystals optional).

MINDFULNESS

A type of non-religious meditation that focuses on being in the moment, whether that's in a formal 'sitting' meditation, while doing the washing up, or eating a meal. Trisha Hills, 45, a therapist and yoga teacher, from Manchester, tried a course of Mindfulness a year ago. Suffering from depression, negative thought patterns

and daily crying jags, after a series of destructive relationships, she wanted the de-stressing benefits of meditation, but didn't have time to devote to it. After learning the 'three-minute breathing space' meditation, where you focus on your breath, observing the thoughts that enter your mind, without becoming involved with them, Trisha was impressed. 'Even a working mother of four, like me, could find three minutes,' she says.

Trisha began doing the exercise at the beginning and end of every day. 'The effects have been unbelievable,' she says. 'I still get feelings of negativity, but I just bring my mind back to the present and now realise these thoughts can't hurt me.' In fact, the National Institute of Clinical Evidence (NICE) has seen enough evidence of the benefits, that Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy, or MBCT, is even prescribed on the NHS (in some areas), for people with a history of mild depression.

MOMENTARY

The newest of the new speedy meditation techniques, this was pioneered by teacher and corporate consultant Martin Boroson, after he was asked to teach meditation to a group of fast-paced corporate lawyers. 'The session took place at lunchtime in the boardroom of their City offices; they had to eat and learn to meditate in less than 60 minutes,' he says. His solution? Super-fast meditations. 'We meditated for

'Even a working mother, like me, can find three minutes to meditate'

a minute, ate some lunch, then meditated for another minute,' explains Boroson. 'After a minute's mindful breathing and focus, the atmosphere shifted and some of the guys were noticeably more peaceful.'

Boroson outlines various 'momentary meditation' practices in his book, *The One-Moment Master: Stillness For People On The Go* (Rider & Co, £6.99). 'With practise, they can take even less time,' he promises. 'You can do them in just a moment.' The idea is to fit meditation into the 'gap moments' between the seemingly back-to-back demands of life.

FLOW

Flow meditation is great for those who don't like the idea of traditional meditation. It's simply doing something you love. Ever since she was seven and her grandmother taught her to knit, Juliet Bernard, 45, from Welwyn, who runs a PR company, has loved getting her needles out. Five years ago, she began suffering panic attacks on the train. 'An overwhelming feeling would come on suddenly,' she explains. 'It was like the fright you get in the middle of the night, only I was awake.' At her worst point, Juliet couldn't get on a train without a couple of Valium.

At Harley Street's Optimum Health Clinic, where Juliet went for therapy, psychologist Alex Howard wired up her brain, measuring the alpha waves that are produced when the body is relaxed state. The challenge was to discover which activities calmed her the most. 'It turned out I wasn't most relaxed doing yoga or doing conventional meditation, but when I was knitting,' says Juliet. That's the beauty of flow; knitting or maybe gardening, pottery, cooking – even cleaning – will allow your mind to get so lost that your brain literally forgets to think negative thoughts or to panic.

MOVEMENT

'I write a weekly blog and, if ever I'm stuck for ideas, I hit the gym,' says Joanne Mallon, 39, a life and career coach, from Brighton. 'I focus hard on the muscle

I'm working. It becomes quite hypnotic. Nine times out of 10, the answer for my blog will come to me out of the blue.' Whether it's through yoga asanas, or sports, such as running, swimming or cycling, focusing on exercise – it could be as simple as walking – has long been a part of meditative traditions. The guru Sri Chinmoy taught sports meditations, and he always said it was the same as any other meditation – breathe evenly, focus your attention on your bodily sensations, open your senses to your surroundings, and practise regularly. ■

CALM TO GO

Five do-anywhere mini meditations

1 Basic breath count

WHEN? Any time you have a minute, or after a crisis. Sit down somewhere quiet – this could be the loo cubicle, an empty office or your car (not while driving!). Breathe gently into your diaphragm. Count very slowly to yourself from 10 down to zero – one number for each breath. If you're not feeling better, start again from 10.

2 Mindful vacuuming

WHEN? During any menial task (or while exercising), to increase your calm and anchor you into the present. Sounds mad, but it works! Draw your attention to the task: the noise of the vacuum cleaner, the movement of your arm, the dust being sucked up. If your attention wanders, breathe in, breathe out, and then bring your attention back to the Hoovering.

3 Just a minute

WHEN? First thing in the morning – or any time you have a minute and access to a timer. Sit down and place your legs in a relaxed, but fixed, position, feet on the floor. Set your alarm for exactly one minute. Place your hands in your lap and close your eyes, then allow your mind to settle into your breathing. When the alarm sounds, stop.

4 Mindful eating

WHEN? Any time during meals. This technique has been associated with weight loss. At the start of a meal, take three long, slow breaths. Concentrate on how hungry you really are, on a scale of one to 10 (one being full). Now, slowly eat each mouthful, concentrating on the experience of eating, the taste, the sensations in your tummy and how full you're getting. Put your fork down between bites. When you have had enough, stop eating.

5 Ten-minute wonder

WHEN? Any time you have access to a CD player or iPod. For anyone who has to have a voice telling them how to relax, the best CD we've found is *Just Ten Minutes* by meditation teacher Heather Bestel. No bells, no chants, just relaxation – fast. £10, from alittlebitofmetime.com ✉