

MEDITATION 1 - THE QUIET MINUTE



Welcome all sceptics - you are my tribe!

For decades of my life I dismissed meditation as both boring and pointless. As a professional educator and academic researcher I was concerned with results. As a human being, I had seen too many desperate people trying (and failing) to sort out their problems with meditation, to believe it could have any meaningful impact.

I wasn't a data addict like some of my colleagues. I appreciated the importance of the human aspect of any data I was gathering about students and teachers. But I rejected the notion that doing nothing for 10 minutes could help in any way and was, in fact, a complete waste of time in classrooms which were time poor, already.

What changed? Well, there wasn't any kind of mountain top experience. It was the science. Technology has brought us to a point where we can take images of brain activity and understand so much more.. And it turns out that genuine, focused, consistent meditation is not nothing ... it's actually something very useful and, I now believe, essential for brain health.

When nothing is something

Although 'thinking about breathing' feels like doing nothing, there is something very important going on in your brain. In meditation, you are using different, more positive networks in your brain and strengthening pathways that build skills in creating calm and clarity. Calm, meaning you are able to cope better when small anxieties and big stresses come into your life (as they inevitably do). And clarity, meaning you can remember things you've learned or tasks you need to do and you can prioritise and strategise more effectively. This is not some wishful thinking, hippy fluff! This is real, measurable scientific fact.

(See a couple of easy non-academic references below - there are also hundreds of substantiated academic articles available - just ask Google Scholar!)

Mediation is not emptying your mind

It is essentially impossible for a living person to have no thoughts. The brain thinks on many levels all the time, and an empty mind is neither the goal nor the technique for meditation.

Meditation is both a rest and an exercise for your brain

Consider the emotional and physical benefits of going for a brisk walk or a positive training session, balanced with the emotional and physical benefits of going on a weekend's holiday to somewhere delightful. Meditation is like a balance of those two activities for your brain. It gives your brain a lovely restful break, and it strengthens new pathways that are going to be useful to draw on later, when you're in a moment that requires calm, clear thinking.

Mind & brain benefits

In both wellbeing & psychological (mind) terms and scientific & neurological (physical brain) terms, meditation potentially brings a variety of benefits. Here are just a few:

1. Increased control in mind wandering, and obsessive thinking (posterior cingulate).
2. Increase in learning, memory and emotional regulation (left hippocampus).
3. Increase in perspective, empathy and compassion (temporo parietal junction, or TPJ).
4. Increased production of regulatory neurotransmitters to aid with sleep (the Pons).
5. Reduction in the part of the brain responsible for anxiety, fear and stress reactions (amygdala).

REFERENCES

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Schulte, B. May 26, 2015. *The Washington Post*. Harvard neuroscientist: Meditation not only reduces stress, here's how it changes your brain.
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Borson, M. 2009. *One-Moment Meditation: Stillness for People on the Go*. Winter Road Publishing. New York.

THE QUIET MINUTE - INSTRUCTIONS



Go into this one minute, knowing that this is not a passive time. On the contrary, this is an important investment in your mental calm and clarity.

PREPARATION

- Sit comfortably anywhere, on the floor or a chair. Make sure your legs are planted firmly.
- Don't flop down, but don't sit too straight either. Try to imagine a comfortably straight line down your spine.
- Lift your chin a little, as if you're a sunflower or solar panel, turned towards the sun and soaking it in.
- Put your hands in any position that is easy and balanced. You'll want to be able to sit comfortably without moving them. (Eg on knees, face up, face down or clasped, holding elbows)
- Don't worry about what to do with your mind. Focus on your breathing. It is only going to be for a minute. One breath at a time.
- You can expect to get distracted. That is normal.
- As soon as you get distracted, just think, "Hmm, I notice I'm getting distracted." And think about your breathing again.
- Get a timer organised so that you'll know when to stop. To be aware of your time limit, you could play the last minute of a gentle music track that you like, or you can just use a timer set to one minute. (I find the minute much longer when there's silence, especially for children.)
- Throughout the minute, you're going to take deep breaths, preferably in through your nose and out through your mouth. While you're breathing, think about how the air feels coming in and out of your body. Where can you feel it most? Your throat, your chest? Your lips? Is it cool or warm? What sound does it make? How do your muscles feel? In your mouth? In your chest?, etc.
- So ... sit comfortably, close your eyes and focus on breathing easily. If you get distracted, just notice that and come back to the breathing. Ready? Go.

AFTERWARDS

- Think about how you feel right now. Maybe at first a little sleepy, but then you should feel just a little bit refreshed and positive.
- Your brain thanks you for this quiet moment by sending 'happy' hormones through your system and boosts your energy, emotions and your ability for your brain to work well.
- Don't be disappointed if one minute doesn't make massive differences in your well being, but don't be surprised when one minute daily starts to make obvious improvements in your mental energy, attitude and ability to think clearly.
- Before you get up from your relaxed position, pause and plan when you're going to do your one quiet minute tomorrow. Same place & time, or mix it up. It doesn't really matter. What matters is the intention of setting aside time to do it and then doing it!