

Mental Health and Meditation

By

Dakota Baker MA, LPCC, LADC

As I was challenged with my own transformational work I sought out proven strategies to accomplish my goals. I explored many different types of healing and transcendent literature and looked for common threads. One such common thread was meditation.

Meditation is a discipline, and while many of us can sit around doing little or nothing at all, it is conversely very difficult to be still and meditate. I have meditated on this seeming paradox myself and I have concluded that there is value in coming to your own understanding. This is part of the journey toward becoming more conscious, mindful, and yes, perhaps even enlightened. I say without hesitation that you will achieve these things, not because I say so, but because those who have come before us, who have been the profits, teachers, and now the researchers, say so.

Let's look closer at what we are talking about; Meditation comes from the Indo-European root *med-*, meaning "to measure". To measure what? I'd like to offer the supposition that it is a measure, when we are in that time and space, between our spirit and our ego. In meditation, where we are still and yet mindful, which is a place like no other, we have a clearer understanding of who we are and who we can be. Can we then measure that distance, and work to close that gap? I think so.

With enough practice we even find what we need to do in order to realize our potential. But this is not going to happen right away. It is as incremental as the growth we had from child to adult. We didn't notice it while it was happening, but we know, as an adult, that we used to be a smaller person. Part of the challenge of meditation is the incremental nature of the transformational process, combined with the fact that we have been conditioned to want and expect immediate gratification. There is a payoff for you in committing to meditation for the long haul and there is indisputable scientific *evidence* that people who meditate are healthier, happier, have less stress, and depression. They also are more likely to recover from addiction and live longer. The list goes on and on. If you find that there is a barrier for you to actually start, I encourage you to seek out this evidence as a means to chip away, or break through that barrier.

Sometimes when people start to meditate they will feel fake or fraudulent, so they quit. If you are confronted by those feelings, keep working through them. Consider it like a physical exercise. There are good, better, and best ways to exercise. Even if you don't get the optimum benefit each time, it is still better to get to the gym and do *something*, instead of sitting on the couch doing nothing. Maybe someday I'll concern myself with correct form, or some other criteria, but for today, it's good that you show up. Relative to that, I would recommend you designate a specific time and place for your meditation. You might even honor that space with some special decoration that signifies that very important and special work is being done there. Not for anybody else to see, but for you.

There are so many ways to meditate, you might wonder how to get started. As I studied ways of meditation I looked for commonalities

throughout the different techniques. For reasons that I had a hard time understanding, which I understand now, learning to sit with your spine aligned between earth and sky is a very valuable position. The problem is that for many of us, we have slouched for so long that the muscles which help us to sit erect are underused and weak, making it difficult to sit up straight. Since I have had a serious slouching problem most of my life, I disciplined myself to sit and stand erect as much as possible during those early years of meditation. This in itself made me a more mindful person. This included driving with my car seat straight up and down, sitting erect during every meal, standing tall while in any lines where I might also be practicing my patience, and of course, working it every day during my twice daily meditations. Now it has become habit to sit and stand with my spine erect. Doing this has a whole host of other benefits, based on research. Did you know that research has shown that people who walk or sit with good posture are seen by other people, observers, to be more intelligent, better looking, healthier, etc., than when those exact same people slouch? This is true, and the research is available to you if you look for it, but I leave that for another time.

It is not *necessary* to sit erect, and there are ways to meditate while lying down as well. I share only what I have learned. The other common thread is to focus on breathing. There are even different ways to mindfully breathe. One strategy is to get familiar with the muscles of the diaphragm. That muscle is located at the lower area of the ribs and anyone who has ever played a wind instrument or had a voice coach can tell you about it. Instead of going on about diaphragmatic breathing, if you are interested, take a yoga class or do some research on line to learn more.

From those two physical starting points of sitting erect and breathing properly, you should practice just showing up. Woody Allen is attributed as saying “80% of success is showing up” and I believe that it applies to meditation, only more so. Find a place and a time to meditate and commit to showing up. I have limited space in my home, so I’ve created a meditation space with a couple of throw pillows and a partition. I have a couple of spiritual wall hangings there, and I’m good to go. As I stated earlier you might also consider setting aside a regular time to meditate. It has been said that sunrise and sunset are exceptional times to meditate. But we have schedules that we need to adhere to, and those times change with the seasons, so that isn’t very easy to do. Perhaps you could budget 10 minutes after you wake up and 10 minutes before you go to sleep. It seems like such a small amount of time when we consider the benefits. So if you want to become a happier, healthier person, please take the time to meditate, because, you’re worth it.

Dakota Baker, MA, LPCC, LADC is a licensed alcohol and drug counselor, and licensed professional clinical counselor who attained his Master of Arts degree from Saint Mary’s University of Minneapolis in Counseling Psychology. He is currently in private practice at River City Clinic in Saint Paul.

