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YOUR EMPLOYEE ASSISTANCE PROGRAM (EAP) NEWSLETTER

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The Power of Meditation

Worry, anxiety and stress can be more than distractions. Continually replaying in your mind daily problems and fears can affect your mental and physical health.

“Meditation provides a way of quieting that chatter,” says James N. Dillard, M.D., D.C., C.Ac., assistant clinical professor at Columbia University College of Physicians and Surgeons in New York City, and author of “The Chronic Pain Solution.” “By bringing your focus to your breath, a mantra or a sound, you give your mind something simple to hold on to as you gradually let go of the world.”



By controlling your attention as you meditate, you begin to feel more relaxed and at peace. And this peacefulness usually lasts far beyond the meditation itself, so that when stress appears hours later, you have the psychic resources to deflect it.

Meditation allows you to become more awake and more deliberate about your actions, says the Arthritis Foundation. It teaches you how to respond rather than react to situations in your life.

Although meditation sounds simple, it takes discipline to remain still in body and mind, blocking out the world around you and quieting your thoughts, the AF says. You also need to practice at least 20 minutes a day to get the most out of your meditation.

There are a number of theories about how meditation may improve physical and mental health. One hypothesis is that it reduces activity of the sympathetic nervous system, leading to a slower heart rate, lower blood pressure, slower breathing and muscle relaxation.

Various types of meditation use different techniques. Popular forms of meditation include:

- Mindfulness, which involves focusing on a physical sensation such as the breath. When thoughts intrude, you return your focus to your breathing.
- Relaxation response, which involves progressively relaxing your body and then focusing on a word or sound.
- Visualization, which involves focusing on specific places or situations.

“It’s important to remember there’s no ‘right’ way to meditate,” says Randy Flora, a mind-body fitness instructor



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at Canyon Ranch in Tucson, Ariz. “If you get frustrated with one method, or it’s just not working for you, try another technique until you find one that’s helpful.”

Two of the most popular meditation techniques are described below. For best results, try to meditate every day for 20 to 30 minutes.

Mindfulness meditation

In mindfulness meditation, you focus on an awareness of the present moment, the AF says. You start with a single focal point, such as your breath, and then expand to include thoughts, emotions and sensations. Here are some tips to keep in mind when you meditate.

- Find a quiet place. Sit in a chair or on the floor.
- Become aware of your breathing, focusing on the sensation of air moving in and out of your body as you breathe. Feel your belly rise and fall and the air enter your nostrils and leave your mouth.
- Watch every thought come and go. When thoughts come up, don’t suppress them, but simply note them and return to your breathing.
- As the time comes to a close, sit for a minute or two, becoming aware of where you are. Get up gradually.

Relaxation response

- Sit quietly in a comfortable position or lie down on the floor and close your eyes.
- Deeply relax all your muscles, beginning at your feet and progressing up to your face. To do so, start with your toes and consciously relax them. Then relax your feet, ankles, calves, knees and so on until you reach your face. Keep everything relaxed as you go.
- Then choose a word or phrase that makes you feel peaceful.
- As you breathe in, slowly say the sound or word to yourself. Breathe slowly and naturally. Inhale through your nose and pause for a few seconds. Exhale through your mouth, again pausing for a few seconds.
- As the time comes to a close, become aware of where you are, open your eyes and get up slowly.

Moving meditation

Fitting an additional 20 to 30 minutes of meditation into your already busy day may be difficult. An alternative is to try a form of exercise that combines fitness with meditation. Yoga, for instance, focuses on breathing, movement and posture to help you relax and control stress. Tai chi is a form of meditation that combines slow, gentle movements and deep breathing. Some people do a walking meditation; with this method, you slow down your walk so that you can focus on your steps and the movement of your legs and feet.

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Curb Emotional Eating

Like many people, you may seek occasional solace in a bowl of ice cream or slice of pizza after a bad day. When you find yourself seeking out food to comfort you, you are eating in response to your emotions, rather than to hunger.

Occasional emotional eating isn't a problem for most people. After all, that's what makes comfort food so appealing. But turning to food every time you have unpleasant feelings - or even positive ones - can lead to weight gain, says the American Dietetic Association (ADA). Being overweight can increase your risk for obesity-related health problems, such as diabetes and heart disease. And it can take a toll on your self-esteem and emotional health.

Understand your cravings

The first step in dealing with emotional eating is to learn to recognize the difference between emotional and physical hunger, the ADA says. Here are some clues that can help you identify emotional eating:

- Sudden hunger
- Craving one specific type of food, such as pizza, because no other food will satisfy your hunger
- Difficulty stopping eating once you are full
- Feeling guilty after eating
- Eating to reward or nurture yourself

What you can do?

Once you learn to identify emotional eating, it helps to keep track of those things that trigger you to eat when you are not hungry, the ADA says. Many people often eat in response to feeling sad, anxious, depressed or lonely. Come up with substitutions for emotional eating. For example, take a walk, call a friend, engage in a hobby, or do anything else that can distract you from wanting to eat. It also helps to replace unhealthy comfort foods with healthy ones and practice portion control. You don't need to completely give up foods that comfort you, just eat less of them.

If you need extra help

If you've been an emotional eater for a long time, you may find it difficult to stop on your own. In particular, if you are depressed or have low self-esteem, it may be helpful to talk with a therapist or a dietitian who works with eating disorders, the ADA says. Finding a support group for people dealing with similar issues can provide needed guidance for dealing with emotional eating. Talking with your health care provider about your concerns is a good place to start.

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What to Do When the Family Feels Claustrophobic

There comes a time when even the closest families find themselves too close together. Suddenly, the house seems smaller; the kids are whiny, fighting with each other or acting up in other ways. Worse, you are ready to burst and it becomes clear that your usually peaceful, friendly household is full of people who wish they were anywhere but there -- including yourself.

It's time to get up and get out, advises Martin Goldberg, M.D., a psychiatrist and director of the Penn Council for Relationships. "People pay too little attention to the need to be outside, to be active," he says.

- Go for a walk. "It's a good way to be out and active and meeting other people," Dr. Goldberg says. (If the weather is inclement, do your walking at the local mall.)
- Plan mini-vacations, like a weekend or day trip. To break up a routine that's become monotonous, Dr. Goldberg says, you need new things to look forward to.
- Invite company over. "It shakes up the cast of characters, and children are always better behaved around company," he says.
- Create separate space: Mom's night out. Dad's afternoon out. An outing with friends for the kids.

When the walls start closing in and the whining starts, "discipline" can be simply showing your children something new to do, says Maurie D. Pressman, M.D., founder of the Pressman Center for Mind/Body Wellness in Philadelphia.

"There was a time when we told stories, when we used to make things, instead of just sitting in front of the television," says Dr. Pressman. Rein in your children with engaging, imaginative pursuits like arts and crafts, puzzle solving, thought-provoking games or helping you to cook, he says.

"Kids are a great joy," Dr. Pressman says, "but they are very demanding. They need a loving environment, but they also need discipline."

If your children are younger, a "time out" often works to restore calm, says Robert R. Prentice, M.D., a fellow of the American Academy of Pediatrics.

Time outs should be in a boring place with no distractions, and the child should be told ahead of time how long the time out will be. These are especially effective if you have more than one child and they won't stop fighting, Dr. Prentice says. You can separate them and put them each in time out.

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