

Why Meditating Can Change Your Life Forever

Now that 2016 is in full swing, many people are adding meditation to their New Year's resolutions.

BY ANGELA AMBROSE

The reasons for meditating are as varied as the people who do it – CEOs looking to boost productivity and get an edge on the competition, athletes trying to improve their game, patients coping with a cancer diagnosis or depression, or those who are in a rut and looking to find their purpose in life.

Meditation requires no cost or equipment – just the self-discipline to sit in stillness while focusing on a thought or feeling. Hundreds of studies have shown that regular meditation can improve a wide range of health conditions including chronic pain, anxiety, insomnia, high blood pressure, high cholesterol levels, digestive disorders and immune system functioning. But most surprising is the effect it has on your mental and spiritual well-being and your relationships with others.

"Meditation is designed to settle down the nervous system and alleviate the stress that can shroud your ability to see yourself and the world clearly," says Sarah McLean, founder and director of the McLean Meditation Institute in Sedona, Ariz., and best-selling author of *Soul Centered: Transform Your Life in 8 Weeks with Meditation*. "It helps to condition the mind, which can really help to wake people up to who they are and why they're here."



McLean recommends meditating daily, or at least three to four times a week. It can help you instantly relax your nervous system, lower your blood pressure and improve your focus; however, most health benefits, including the positive restructuring of your brain, take place over an extended period.

"It's a slow shift," says McLean. "It's not like shopping, where you see something, and you can try it on, and you can immediately wear it. Instead, the benefits of meditation show up over time."

Some people try meditating a couple times but give up because they get bored or frustrated when they aren't seeing immediate results or they feel they are having a difficult time clearing their minds.

"Thoughts are a real part of meditation, and when you close your eyes, they seem to get louder," says McLean. "But it doesn't mean you're not having an effective meditation just because you're thinking."

One of the keys to meditating is having the resolve to stick with it and letting go of unrealistic expectations. Don't wait for a mystical, out of body experience or a fireworks display. Meditating can feel static and a lot like watching paint dry, but commit to staying with it. The real transformation happens outside of meditation.

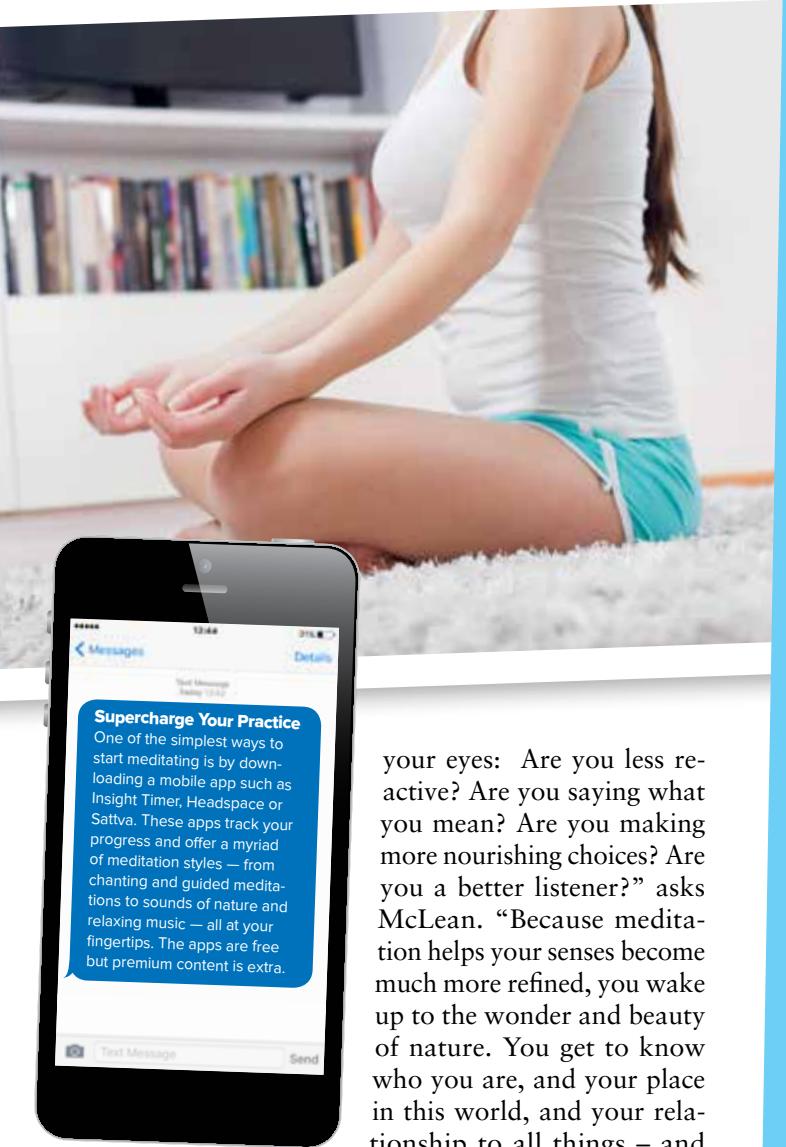
"Never judge the experiences you have in meditation. Instead, trust that it's working and look for the benefits when you open



6 Easy Ways to Find Your Focus

Meditation comes in many different styles. Experiment and find one that feels most natural to you. Here are a few examples of focal points you can use to get started. You can meditate on your own or with an audio-guided meditation:

- Follow your breath as you breathe in and out through your nose. You might find it easier if you silently count your breaths (Inhale-1, exhale-2, inhale-3, exhale-4, inhale-5 and so on). If your mind starts to wander, simply refocus again and again.
- Gaze at a candle flame, the night sky or the horizon. You can also focus on an inner point of light at your heart center.
- Listen to the sound of the ocean waves, sounds of nature or a soothing song.
- Use a mantra – a word or phrase that you repeat silently or out loud – focusing on the sound and vibration of the words. Try using the word "one," "peace," "shalom" or "amen."
- Focus on a feeling such as gratitude, appreciation, forgiveness or loving kindness.
- Do a full body scan. Starting at the crown of your head, bring your non-judgmental attention to the physical sensations of your body, working your way down slowly until you reach your toes. Then slowly move your focus to each part of the body as you work your way back up to your head. If you notice you are telling yourself a story about a certain part of your body, go back to the sensation. Devote your full attention to *feeling* the sensations.



more.” And that’s a gift that doesn’t end with the holidays, but continues to grow with time.

To learn more about meditation or to sign up for a class, retreat or teacher certification program with McLean, visit mcleanmeditation.com.

Angela Ambrose is a Phoenix-based writer with 28 years in magazine, corporate and video scriptwriting. As an ACE-certified group fitness instructor and certified yoga teacher, she combines her writing expertise with her passion for healthy living. After years of feeling restless in meditation, Angela now wakes up eager to meditate using meditation mobile apps that add more variety and passion to her practice.

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How to start **Meditating** Right Now

Mute your cell phone and tell those around you that you will be meditating so you won’t be disturbed.

How do I position my body? Sit upright in a comfortable position – seated in a chair or on the floor cross-legged on a cushion – and close your eyes.

Where should I sit? Find a quiet place in your home free of distractions. As you become more experienced, you will be able to meditate anywhere – at work, on the subway, at the doctor’s office – but when you first start, choose a comfortable place that you can return to at the same time each day.

What do I do? Find a focal point such as a sound, sensation or emotion and gently bring your full attention to it. When your mind wanders, bring your attention back to your focus without judgment. (See “6 Easy Ways to Find Your Focus” for examples of focal points to try.)

How long should I meditate for? Decide ahead of time how long you will meditate. Start with five or 10 minutes and slowly increase your meditation time. Any amount will be beneficial, but to build self-discipline, stick to the amount of time you commit to once you start your session. Use a watch, meditation mobile app or the vibrate mode on your cell phone to let you know when your time is up.

What time of day should I meditate? Anytime, but the two best times are when you first wake up in the morning and between work and dinner – what McLean calls her “happy” hour. To avoid dozing off, meditate on an empty stomach. Because meditation can increase your alertness, finish meditating at least three hours before bedtime, so it doesn’t interfere with your sleep.

How do I end my meditation session? Take a few deep breaths and become aware of the sensations in your body and the sounds around you. Begin to gently stretch your body and slowly open your eyes, just as you would coming out of a restful Savasana pose at the end of a yoga class. Take at least two minutes to come out of meditation.

