



# A GUIDE TO MEDITATION

What you need to know about popular forms of meditation and their benefits, drawbacks, and appeal.

BY AKANKSHA SINGH

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**WHEN RIANNA KATE** tried meditation for the first time, one word summed up her experience: uncomfortable. “I tried to sit the way you were ‘meant’ to and focus on nothing, but my mind kept wandering and getting distracted,” explains Kate. “And then I would get frustrated that it wasn’t working.”

Kate, now a movement and mindset coach, isn’t alone in feeling this way. The word *meditation* conjures many images. Some people see yoga pants, incense, and people chanting “om,” while others might think of an app that guides them through their messy stream of thoughts or even see themselves reading, painting, or running. “I didn’t realize at the time that this is all part of the experience of meditation, just like going to the gym for the first time can be uncomfortable,” Kate says. “It takes time to train your mind, just like it takes time to train your body.” She adds, “I didn’t have the patience or knowledge to understand this then.”

More Americans are meditating now than ever before. According



to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, nearly 14 percent of U.S. adults ages 18 to 44 reported meditating in 2017, with women meditating more than their male counterparts. If you haven't found a meditation practice that suits you yet, here are a few forms that might work for you.

### Transcendental Meditation

Transcendental Meditation, or TM, is a spiritual form of meditation in which practitioners remain seated and breathe slowly. It's likely what comes to mind for most people when they think of meditation. Developed by a yogi in India, TM took root in the West after the Beatles visited India to practice it. The goal of TM is to "transcend" or rise above your state of being by mentally chanting a mantra specific to you.

Because this form of meditation has been around since the 1950s, with a centralized educational charity founded in the 1970s, there is a vast scientific body of work examining its benefits, which include lowered blood pressure and decreased stress. In fact, a 2018 study found that people who practiced TM had significantly higher blood flow patterns in executive and attention areas of the brain and significantly lower blood flow patterns in arousal areas. Simply put, this means that TM offers a sort of restful alertness; people who practice TM are alert but not overstimulated—something we could all use more of in our busy, plugged-in lives.

Aaron Hartman, MD, an integrative medicine and functional medicine practitioner in Richmond, Virginia, says forms of meditation such as TM and resting awareness (a guided meditation practice through mindfulness) help improve coherence. "[Coherence] is a way of increasing the 'rest and digest' parasympathetic part of your nervous system," says Dr. Hartman. "Long story short, [it] helps balance the parts of your nervous system and brain that tend to become unbalanced and in turn can help decrease uncontrollable emotional outbursts [or emotional incontinence]."

"The memory part of your brain [the hippocampus] becomes activated and over time enlarges, while the emotional memory part of your brain [the amygdala] gets smaller over time," he explains. The result is increased memory recollection without limbic kindling, the fight-or-flight response: "Meditative practices help balance the limbic system [and] help curb emotional incontinence." Research also finds that TM practitioners show better musical and textual

memory, presumably due to the activation of the amygdala and hippocampus, resulting in better memory consolidation and learning.

But what about the drawbacks of TM? Physiologically, they are certainly overshadowed by the benefits that have been backed by peer-reviewed research. The most glaring drawback, however, is its cost. In the U.S., the registered TM technique is taught by a nonprofit educational organization called the Maharishi Foundation. Each mantra is assigned to a practitioner by a certified TM teacher. This makes it significantly less accessible than other forms of meditation.

Beyond the cost, a handful of studies have questioned the reliability of the research put forth. One study even went so far as to suggest that if TM is used like a one-size-fits-all pill, it could "precipitate serious psychiatric problems, such as depression, agitation, and even schizophrenic decompensation." That study dates back to 1976, though, and there has been very little research (beyond the odd Reddit forum) discussing any detrimental impacts of TM.

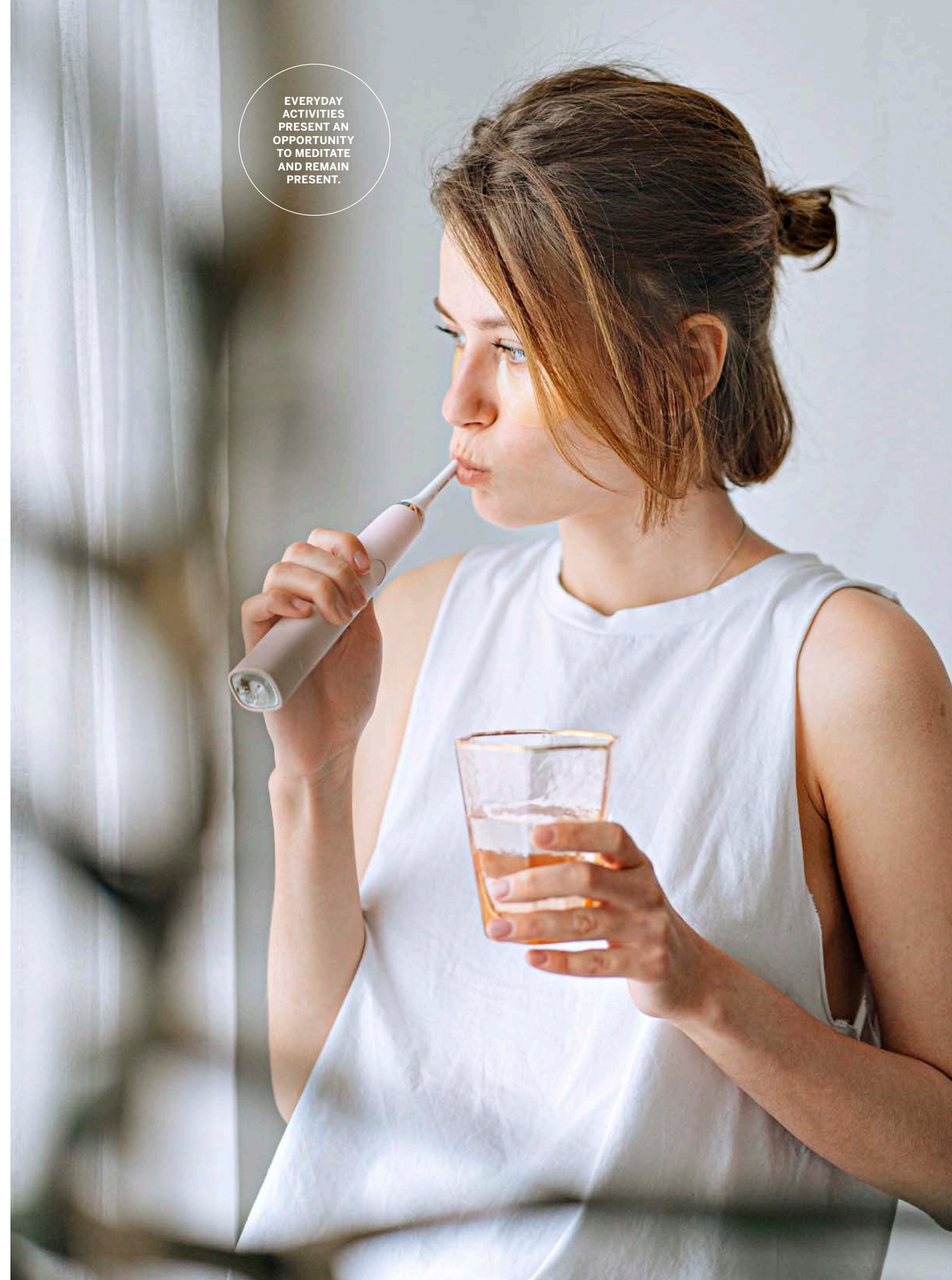
### Mindfulness and Grounding Meditation

Although mindfulness meditation is a prominent practice in the wellness sector right now, its roots are much, much older. With origins in the East, mindfulness is extracted from Buddhism, and Buddhist monks have used it for more than 2,600 years in their search for enlightenment.

Simply put, mindfulness meditation involves noticing our feelings, thoughts, and sensations without judgment—in other words, being mindful of each of these things. What makes mindfulness meditation unique is that it doesn't deny that our minds are thought-producing machines in overdrive; rather, it tells us to sit with these same thoughts and find comfort—and subsequently alleviate stress—within their presence.

Part of the more recent appeal of mindfulness is its secularity, which has been garnered by the overwhelming body of research, which has bolstered its popularity. The mindfulness-based stress reduction program that was created in 1979 by Jon Kabat-Zinn to help counter stress, chronic pain, and other ailments today extends into research that has further proved its efficacy. Among the benefits of mindfulness listed by the American Psychological Association are stress reduction, memory improvement, focus,

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It's no wonder that mindfulness courses today can be found everywhere from digital apps to coloring books and military training. The U.S. Army, among other organizations, adopted it in 2019 to "improve military resilience."

Still, despite all the positive research on the benefits of mindfulness, there are downsides to the practice, especially in the manner in which it has been Westernized. Researchers and commentators of existing studies suggest that ill effects may stem from the one-size-fits-all approach mindfulness has taken on, which clashes with the idea that we are all unique with unique problems. For instance, for those who have a tendency toward negative thoughts, observing those thoughts can cause their minds to flail, causing more anxiety—the opposite of what we hope to achieve through meditative practices. A 2019 study found that 25 percent of regular meditators experienced adverse events through the practice,

from panic attacks and depression to an unsettling sense of "dissociation."

As a physician who fuses both Eastern and Western medicine in her treatment of chronic pain, anxiety, and related issues, Puja Shah, MD, believes meditation practices are all about achieving a healing mindset, with a mind-body connection that begins in "micro moments" of opportunity throughout the day. "Wellness and mindfulness do not have to be a large-scale activity," says Dr. Shah, who is also a certified yoga instructor. Our lifestyles of multitasking and being "on" all the time drain us, she says. "When we wake up in the morning and brush our teeth, we do have that extra moment to take a deep breath," she points out. "How many times have you jumped into the shower, jumped out, and thought to yourself, 'Did I even take 15 minutes in there?'"

Grounding is a practice that often accompanies mindfulness. Where mindfulness, as defined by Kabat-Zinn, is about "paying attention, on purpose, and without judgment to what is happening right

here, right now," grounding is about anchoring ourselves in our environment or headspace.

For trauma survivors especially, the idea of letting thoughts pass by without judgment can be difficult. Grounding is often used to pull our attention toward the present and into a safe space, whether we're zoning out, dissociating, or experiencing anxiety in the form of shortness of breath. Rather than continue on autopilot, suggests Dr. Shah, practice micro moments that connect the mind and body. "These can be while we are driving, while we are cooking, while we are eating. It's still time when we can truly tune in to who we are." When you jump in the shower, for instance, define your experience using words ("icy," "refreshing," "steamy," "hot") to ground yourself.

Extending micro moments into your day is an easy way to start a mindfulness practice if sitting on a cushion and watching your thoughts pass by without judgment just isn't for you.

### Flow State and Moving Meditation

In 1990, psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi published *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*. He defined flow as the state in which "people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter; the experience is so enjoyable that people will continue to do it even at great cost, for the sheer sake of doing it."

Flow state meditation is moving meditation—one that does not necessarily involve sitting and focusing on your breath—that results in being in "the zone." Because they're often the opposite of what most people associate with meditation, flow state and moving meditation are distinct. Flow state meditation asks that, rather than sitting still and emptying your mind, you move and immerse yourself in something in which you're so engrossed, your mind focuses only on what you're doing. This ensures that your mind is at ease from day-to-day stresses and improves your focus on the task at hand.

Since what engrosses us varies individually, so does whatever falls under these forms of meditation. For some people, it might be yoga, which in the Westernized sense always involves movement of some sort; for others it might be taking a walk,

swimming, or painting. Depending on the moving meditation you choose, the risks of this practice vary. Most prominently, the risk for us mentally is having the meditation we've chosen become a chore. Still, there's a balance between having an off day or two (or five) and having your meditation practice evolve into a chore. "When a task is both stimulating and challenging, it requires a certain level of mental capacity," says Kate, who is an avid practitioner of flow state meditation. "You have no room for the niggles in the back of your mind to distract you. You are 100 percent focused on the task at hand—this not a particularly relaxing meditative state."

Tai chi, an ancient Chinese form of moving meditation, has been found to increase physical well-being and decrease stress. There are physical benefits too. Tai chi has been found to be more effective than brisk walking in reducing cardiovascular disease risk factors among adults with hypertension. In a 2019 review of the extensive English and Chinese research on tai chi, reviewers found that the practice improved negative emotions, decreased depression, and reduced anxiety in apparently healthy individuals. The researchers noted that tai chi "contains multiple components including mindfulness, deep breathing, and aerobic exercise" that "contribute... to its overall [positive] effect of negative emotions toward all age populations."

Additionally, the practice changes depending on how mindful you're able to be with your thoughts. Imagine yourself as a potter creating a vase. When you're shaping clay on a wheel, it's not that you have no thoughts; it's that the thoughts you have come and go, and the clay stays and moves as you want it to, and that is what you're focused on.

### Guided Imagery or Visualization Meditation

Guided imagery is a form of meditation that involves focused relaxation. It is based on visualizing or thinking of a specific place, experience, or even a sound or smell to calm your mind. This form of meditation can (but doesn't always) tie into a mindfulness and grounding practice. For instance, if you were told to

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Just a few minutes of meditation every day can dispel negative thoughts and help you relax.

close your eyes and imagine you were standing in a lavender field, and all you could smell was lavender, it would be hard to not think of lavender fields and the smell of lavender. You'd likely even feel a sensation of calm, peace, or mindfulness in the moment.

Our brains and bodies react to what they're told. And if we're being told what to tell them through an audio app, it's as close to a sure thing as we can get. A 2017 study found that a 30-minute guided-imagery session worked as well as a 15-minute massage and improved sleep quality. Additionally, a 2019 study of guided imagery and progressive muscle relaxation—a practice of tensing and relaxing muscle groups one by one—found that the two worked effectively in tandem for pain management for cancer patients.

The benefits of guided relaxation are far greater than removing ourselves from stressful moments or situations; the practice has even been shown to improve athletic performance. "During [a guided-imagery practice], the same parts of your brain are activated as if doing the actual activity, with the exception of the motor track in your brain," says Dr. Hartman. "As a result, guided imagery meditation

gives the benefit of repetitive practice without actually going through the physical motions."

Perhaps the earliest and best-known example of an athlete who used visualization is Muhammad Ali, who once said, "If my mind can conceive it, and my heart can believe it, then I can achieve it."

This all sounds great, doesn't it? But as with all forms of meditation, it isn't for everyone. For one, in individuals with aphantasia, which is the inability to visualize anything with clarity or at all in your mind's eye, a visualization practice isn't ideal. But beyond that, if you're not focused enough or able to visualize properly, there's reason to believe that the frustration that results from trying could trigger anxiety.

At the end of the day, meditation is about what works for you at any given moment. Perhaps you're able to try TM first thing in the morning when your concentration is best, followed by midday moving meditation when your energy levels are low. Perhaps the only thing that works is having someone's voice flowing into your ears through your headphones telling you what to do. And if you feel something isn't working, consider letting it go and trying something new. ●

## The Best Meditation Apps to Help Beat Anxiety and Stress

These free and paid apps offer a wide range of mindfulness services.

BY HANNAH HARPER

The more you meditate and achieve mindfulness, the better you'll feel. And thanks to some smart and easy apps, you don't need to leave your living room to reap the benefits. There are many free meditation apps that offer guided sessions, calming playlists, and daily reminders to be mindful.

With so many choices, how do you know which meditation app is right for you? Consider this guide your cheat sheet.

### Headspace

This app is simple and approachable for meditation beginners. Most of the free sessions focus on teaching the user how to meditate and easing them into the practice, while also acknowledging that meditation can be difficult. Full disclosure: I was already using Headspace before reviewing these apps, and I appreciate its introduction to meditation. Yet to get into the really good stuff, you need to pay for the full membership.

To unlock the rest of the library, you'll pay \$12.99/month or \$69.99/year. From there, Headspace offers meditation for everything from stress and anxiety to sleep to personal growth and physical health.

### Insight Timer

Insight Timer offers a multitude of meditation bells and calming musical

notes to listen to during self-guided meditations. I genuinely enjoyed sitting back and listening, especially when I didn't feel like focusing on a guided session. Featuring a variety of professional instructors and courses, Insight Timer also offers significantly more content for free users than other apps (25,000 guided meditations!). This is by far my favorite app, one I will keep in my rotation.

Although the free option is extensive, the premium version can be accessed for \$9.99/month or \$59.99/year. Premium offers 10-day and 30-day courses, as well as downloadable meditations, night mode, and daily insights.

### Meditation Studio

Meditation Studio conveniently groups all its free meditations together, so it's easy to use the app without paying. These meditations run from 5 to 30 minutes and are available for download, a feature that other apps typically reserve for premium members. The amount of free content, however, is limited and included mostly basics. The design of the app is also relatively plain, although some people may find this calming and not distracting.

Use for free or unlock 500-plus meditations and 50-plus experts with a premium subscription of \$7.99/month or \$49.99/year.

### Breeth: Meditation and Sleep

A nice feature about Breeth is the calming background music that plays while the app is open, even without opening a meditation or music. I felt like I was instantly put into a calming mental state. Breeth offers a lot of sleep content, including visualizations and bedtime stories, and also features hypnotherapy sessions (only via premium, though). The app does offer a few 7-day courses for free, but the majority of the content (1,000-plus meditations) is locked behind the paywall.

Use the free version, or access all the app's content with a premium membership of \$12.99/month or \$89.99/year.

