

Is there a quick route to calm?

Meditation has become an invaluable tool for many in tackling frenetic, stress-filled lives. So, asks busy sceptic Emma Hill, just how easy is it to master?

Struck down by flu, I'm lying in my bed feeling dreadful. My ears are blocked, my head is thudding and I'm worried about how I'm going to deal with my workload. So I decide this could be a good moment to road-test my beginner level meditation. I close my eyes and take five breaths, in and out, through my mouth. Then I do a 'body scan', the first of two techniques meditation teacher Julie Smith talked me through when we met last week. It involves focusing on one part of the body for a few moments, and working systematically all the way around. 'Think about how that area feels,' I recall Julie's words as I move from my forehead to my right cheek. 'If your mind is drawn to another point by an itch then let it,' she says. You can gently pull it back to the area you're focusing on.

The technique embraces two central concepts of meditation, that of *allowing* – letting things or thoughts unfold instead of controlling them – and

completed my body scan and feel better already. The flu symptoms are still there, but my mind is clear. I'm no longer stressed about work. My mind feels more quiet, as if I've given myself some space.

The second technique Julie taught me used visualisation with the breath. So, on the inhalation you breathe in positive thoughts, by silently verbalising abstract words like love, peace, joy (I think of sweets), and on the exhalation you exhale negative thoughts (hate, anger...) on an imaginary puff of grey smoke. It can sound kooky, but I went with the flow and it felt soothing and centring.

Julie has trained with teachers in far-flung places and has been inspired by Dr Ravi Ratan, >>>

detachment – looking at the itch and standing back. The idea is that if you can observe an itch without pushing it away, it tends to disappear on its own. It's all part of the process of training the mind to be more disciplined.

After five minutes, I've





>>> a chakra meditation practitioner, and Alan Wallace, a student of the Dalai Lama and Tibetan Buddhism. Her teaching is based on five important concepts: awareness; being present; allowing or accepting; detachment and patience. I discover that meditation, although deeply relaxing, isn't about being half asleep, but being fully 'aware' as you do it. It's about being in the present. So, for example, by scanning my body, and thinking about how it is feeling, I can train myself to avoid wasting energy on worries. Worries are about the past and future; meditation helps me stay in the present. Patience is about not being hard on yourself if your mind wanders during meditation.

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Information overload

So, flu aside, why did I go to see Julie? Why meditation? As a journalist, I'm constantly switched on. Thanks to digital and social media, news is delivered and received 24/7 through multiple channels, so my job is now about near-constant engagement. For me, this digital force can feel overwhelming.

I have a growing fear of information overload and that my brain will pack up. Scientific studies now confirm that meditation can help us train and sort our info-addled minds – perhaps even stave off senility. In 2012, *Science Daily* reported on a study that found that taking part in an eight-week meditation training programme can have measurable effects on how the brain functions, even when not actually meditating. Brain scans were taken in the three weeks preceding the start of the meditation programme and then again within three weeks of finishing. They were conducted as participants viewed images with positive, negative or neutral content. They revealed that after the training there was a decrease in activation of the right amygdala in the brain – proving that not only could meditation beneficially alter brain function, it could also create lasting changes in the way we process emotions, notably, how we cope with stress.

Learning this propelled my interest – I need some evidence, particularly with something like meditation (its new-age connotations, however

outmoded, have stuck with me). And I'm not the only sceptic. 'In Britain, we haven't been brought up with a culture of spirituality unlike other parts of the world, so there can be some scepticism,' agrees Jillian Lavender, who runs the London Meditation Centre. So for the dubious, consider this. When hooked up to an EEG (a device used to measure the brain's electrical activity) during meditation, we can see a change in brain function. 'We see a high degree of coherence between the right and left hemisphere of the brain. We see a lot of action in the prefrontal cortex, a part of the brain engaged in decision-making, reasoning and making sense judgements. This is why it's often described as the CEO of the brain, governing the ability to process, make judgements and reason,' she says. 'When we're stressed, this goes offline, but when we're meditating we see this cortex very engaged. So when we look at studies on those meditating, we can see how it improves memory, concentration, focus, learning ability.'

Lavender teaches Vedic meditation, which uses a mantra to direct a meditation session. The mantra is a sound with a vibration that matches your own – it is different for everyone and is arrived at when you discuss your needs with your teacher. You don't say it out loud, you imagine it as you meditate. 'As soon as we introduce the mantra into the mind, it starts to become more refined, soft and faint, so you don't have to try to concentrate on pushing away those worrying thoughts,' she says. Vedic meditation is typically practised twice a day, for 20 minutes. Careers advisor Karen McMillan, who runs her own company A Work In Progress and has been practising Vedic meditation for five years, follows this path. 'In the first few months I noticed I'd be groggy if I didn't do it, not as sharp and rested, so, in a way, my determination to stick with it and find that time, really drove itself,' she says.

Ten minutes twice a day works for Eve Pettitt, production manager at jewellery designer Babette Wasserman, who has been meditating for years. She practises Zazen meditation, a Buddhist





technique where you sit in front of a blank white wall with your eyes open. 'You let all your thoughts flow as if you are watching a film of them on the blank canvas in front of you. Instead of grabbing onto them, thinking about them and pushing them away, you're just accepting them, watching them go by as if they're a silent movie,' she says. 'The more you do that, the more you realise they're slowing down and there aren't quite so many frenetic ones. I use it whenever I have too much on and feel suffocated. It helps clarify things. When thoughts are calmer, you can see things more clearly.'

Mixed results

My own practice over the past two weeks has been mixed. While reluctant to do it at first, when I do stop what I'm doing and meditate for 10 minutes, it's easy and quite blissful. Am I seeing with greater clarity? Maybe – but not in a life-changing way. During meditation I've found it difficult to manage each flickering thought. I've learned that the busy, persistent, unplanned thoughts will

always be there, and I have to find a way to let them be. When I manage it, I feel them pass by and I can come back to focusing on the breath or body part. Smith tells me this gets easier: 'Over time, those gaps where there are fewer distractions get longer, so you'll have more of those peaceful moments when the mind is quiet.'

I've also had my 'moments'. I joined Tri Yoga founder Jonathan Sattin's Monday night beginners' session as my first step. For 10 minutes in a warm room with incense burning, I listened to Jonathan and attempted visualisation – moving through an open doorway. The challenge was to move not your body, but your self without your body, through it. I found it impossible to isolate the intangible self, but perhaps that's the thing. Meditation is a practice, a way of life, which requires a certain commitment, just like going to the gym. I haven't yet got my soul through that door into a state of deep, calm, clear equanimity, but I've come close. It will take time, but it feels good to know that I'm on the right track. ■

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