

# WHOLE HEALTH: INFORMATION FOR VETERANS

## Seated Meditation



Whole Health is an approach to health care that empowers and enables YOU to take charge of your health and well-being and live your life to the fullest. It starts with YOU. It is fueled by the power of knowing yourself and what will really work for you in your life. Once you have some ideas about this, your team can help you with the skills, support, and follow up you need to reach your goals.

All resources provided in these handouts are reviewed by VHA clinicians and Veterans. No endorsement of any specific products is intended. Best wishes!

<https://www.va.gov/wholehealth/>

## Seated Meditation

### What is meditation?

Meditation began as a religious practice thousands of years ago. Many people practice meditation today, whether they are religious or not. There are many types of meditation such as mindfulness, Vipassana, Transcendental Meditation, Zen, and prayer. Some types of meditation can involve moving, but here the focus is on meditation you do while you are seated. If you have trouble sitting, it is also fine to do these meditations with your body in other positions.

Meditation can be done for different reasons. It can help people handle stress better, improve concentration, and gain more awareness. One of the most popular forms of meditation in health care settings is mindfulness meditation. With this form of meditation, you focus your attention on the present moment. You can bring your mind into the present moment using many different exercises, such as focusing on your breath, tuning into your senses, repeating a word or phrase (*mantram*), or bringing your awareness to different parts of your body.

The key is to not judge yourself when distractions come up in your body or mind, and to just notice these thoughts as they come up. Our minds will naturally wander. This is a practice of simply noticing this without judgment and then trying to come back to the present moment again. A simple seated meditation is offered below.

### How can meditation help me?

You do not need a medical diagnosis for meditation to improve your overall health and well-being. Meditation can relax your mind and body and help you deal with stress and pain.<sup>1</sup> The more you practice meditation, the more it can help your mind and body.<sup>2</sup>

Many studies show that meditation can help people cope with issues like stress, cancer, trouble sleeping, anxiety, and depression.<sup>3-7</sup> A small study showed that a particular type of mindfulness-based intervention, Mindfulness Based Cognitive Therapy, may help posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in combat Veterans.<sup>8</sup> Meditation can also help with long-term pain, multiple sclerosis, and peripheral neuropathy.<sup>9-11</sup> (Peripheral neuropathy is when the nerves of your different body parts send signals to your brain that may be interpreted as numbness, burning or pain.)

### Who shouldn't meditate?

Meditation is generally very safe. If you have a serious psychiatric disorder, like schizophrenia or PTSD, you should talk with your health care team before practicing meditation.

### How can I practice meditation?

There are many ways to practice meditation. There is no right way for everyone, so find what works for you. Begin meditating for just a few minutes at a time. After you find a practice you feel comfortable with, increase the number of days and length of time you

meditate. It is important to be consistent with your meditation practice. That is, try to meditate daily and at the same time each day.

Before starting your meditation, consider the following:

- Set aside 5-10 minutes the first time. You can dedicate more or less time going forward. It is often easier and more helpful to meditate at the start of the day, but any time works. Many people start with just a minute or two.
- If possible, find a quiet space where you won't be disturbed or easily distracted.
- Make sure you can sit comfortably. Feel free to use a mat, cushion, bench, or chair. You can also use a rolled up blanket or pillow for support. You can also do this lying down. Use of a cushion, shawl, mat, or blanket for comfort may be helpful.

To begin a mindfulness seated meditation:

- Find a comfortable sitting position.
- Let your eyes close or look at the floor or wall in front of you without straining.
- Allow your body to relax onto the ground, bench, or chair as much as you can.
- Bring your attention to your breath. If possible, breathe through your nose.
- Try one of the following techniques:
  - Breath. Count 10 deep, slow breaths. When your mind wanders, bring your attention back to the present and start again. Don't judge yourself, just observe, and focus on your breath.<sup>12</sup>
  - Repeated saying (mantram). When you breathe in, say to yourself "I am." When you breathe out, say "at peace." You can choose any phrase that might be helpful for you.
  - Object. Focus your attention on a candle or another object in front of you. When you get distracted, look back at the candle.
- Continue the practice for 5-10 minutes. Slowly increase the amount of time as you practice more.

It is common for the mind to wander when you are meditating. That's what minds do. You may start to think about the past, the future, why you're meditating, or any number of things. When this happens, don't become angry or frustrated with yourself. Instead, observe your thoughts without judgment and guide your mind back to your practice.

### **Am I doing meditation right?**

Meditation can be challenging. It is important to be kind to yourself when practicing. Many issues can come up when you are meditating. This doesn't mean you're doing it wrong.

The following are some examples:

- **Bodily distractions.** After a while, you may feel uncomfortable or sleepy. You might have pain, muscles twitches, or the urge to move. Observe how your body is responding and avoid judgment. If you feel like you need to move, do so in a focused and quiet manner.
- **Mind distractions.** A wandering mind is common. It is easy to get caught up in the past or future, wanting things to be different, focusing on something annoying in the room, questioning why you're meditating, etc. Become aware of distracting thoughts. Observe them without judgment, and guide your mind back to your practice.

By moving through distractions, you can learn your biggest lessons and get the most benefit from meditation. You may feel distracted often. That is okay! Just continue to return your attention to your practice. It gets easier over time, with practice.

### **Are there other ways to practice meditation?**

There are many ways to practice meditation that aren't listed here. When you are first starting, it can be helpful to attend classes to learn techniques and receive support and encouragement. Mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) is an eight-week mindfulness training that is often taught in health care settings. Participants learn different ways to practice mindful awareness, including seated meditation. Many VA centers offer MBSR classes. See what classes are available at your nearest VA center. Be sure to see what is on offer at your local library, as well.

There are also many resources online that provide guided meditations. Reference the "For more information" section at the end of this handout for some examples.

### **For you to consider:**

- How might you benefit from meditation?
- Can you find a time in your day to practice meditation? How much time are you willing to dedicate to your practice?
- What type of meditation are you interested in?
- Do you think you'd learn better by being in a class, doing an online guided meditation, or by yourself?

The information in this handout is general. **Please work with your health care team to use the information in the best way possible to promote your health and happiness.**

### **For more information:**

ORGANIZATION	RESOURCES	WEBSITE
Veterans Health Administration	A variety of Whole Health handouts the power of your mind.	<a href="https://www.va.gov/WHOLEHEALTH/veteran-handouts/index.asp">https://www.va.gov/WHOLEHEALTH/veteran-handouts/index.asp</a>
Insight Timer	Free meditation app for various types of smart phones	<a href="https://insighttimer.com">https://insighttimer.com</a>
Breathe2Relax	Free app for iOS and Android devices	<a href="https://breathe2relax.soft112.com">https://breathe2relax.soft112.com</a>
Integrative Health Program University of Wisconsin School of Medicine and Public Health	Patient handout "Meditation for Health and Happiness" (includes a list of many types of meditation)	<a href="http://www.fammed.wisc.edu/files/webfm-uploads/documents/outreach/im/module_meditation_patient.pdf">http://www.fammed.wisc.edu/files/webfm-uploads/documents/outreach/im/module_meditation_patient.pdf</a>

Check with a VA center near you for mindfulness-based stress reduction classes (MBSR), where you can learn mindfulness meditation.

*This handout was written for the Veteran's Health Administration (VHA) by Mara Motley, MD, Academic Integrative Health Fellow, Integrative Health Program, University of Wisconsin Department of Family Medicine and Community Health. It is based in part on the VA Whole Health documents "Clinical Tool: Progressive Muscle Relaxation" and "Clinical Tool: Meditation" by Shilagh Mirgain, PhD and Janice Singles, PsyD. The handout was reviewed and edited by Veterans and VHA subject matter experts.*

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