

Meditation for Seniors

Meditation can help reverse the rate of aging, especially when it comes to maintaining your gray matter, which is the part of your brain that helps control movement, emotion and memory. From reducing stress, anxiety, and depression to improving our attention spans, discover how meditation can benefit you as you get older and how to get started.

Multiple studies over the years have shown the benefits that meditating has on your brain and overall mental wellness. Not only can it help control stress, but it can also positively impact attention span, memory, verbal fluency, processing speed, overall cognitive flexibility, conflict monitoring, and even creativity. It can especially be worthwhile as you get older to help offset the mental aging process.

Meditation Benefits for Seniors

Not only can meditation often provide immediate results but participating in a regular practice can bolster healthy aging. A study conducted by UCLA found that consistent meditation can result in less loss of gray matter, which allows you to control movements, retain memories, and regulate your emotions as you age.

Here are some of the reasons you should consider incorporating meditation into your retirement lifestyle. .

Promote Mindfulness

The practice of meditation is about more than just sitting still. It's about focusing your thoughts and your breathing — both of which help promote overall mindfulness. The American Psychological Association defines mindfulness as a "moment-to-moment awareness of one's experience without judgment."

The benefit of such practice helps reduce rumination — or becoming stuck in negative thinking — which has been linked to a range of adverse effects, including stress, depression, memory loss, and the inability to focus.

Reduce Stress, Anxiety and Depression

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 20% of adults ages 55 and older experience some form of anxiety, severe cognitive impairment, or mood disorders, including depression; all of which can negatively impact physical, mental, and social functioning.

While meditation has long been viewed as a way to reduce stress, it can also reduce the side effects of stress by allowing you to control your response to it. A study conducted by Johns Hopkins University found that meditation can be as effective as antidepressants in reducing the symptoms of depression and anxiety.

Boost Immune System

As you age, your immune system no longer responds to fighting off illness and disease as robustly as it did when you were younger. Recent studies on the effect of meditation on your immune system response is promising, suggesting that it can reduce inflammation, boost cell immunity, and reverse biological aging. One study from the Annals of Family Medicine even found meditation helped significantly reduce the severity and longevity of cold and flu symptoms.

Control Pain

According to a report from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 30% of adults in the United States over the age of 65 experienced some form of chronic pain and 26% of all adults are projected to be diagnosed with some form of arthritis by 2040.

Mindfulness meditation helps us learn to control pain by focusing on our breathing and rewiring the brain to not ruminate. In fact, in patients with rheumatoid arthritis, meditation has proven to have greater results than cognitive-behavioral therapy.

Improve Concentration and Attention

Our ability to learn, remember, and problem solve slows down as we age. Focused meditation can help improve all three, not only for people who have long been practicing, but even for those who have just started.

A study published in Psychology Today found via MRI studies that meditators had more stability in the region of the brain linked to spontaneous thoughts and mind wandering, meaning they were better able to control their thoughts and keep their mind sharp.

Lower Blood Pressure

Your body naturally release nitric oxide in response to feeling relaxed. Nitric oxide is a compound that causes your blood vessels to expand, in turn, lowering your blood pressure.

Though the results require a sustained daily practice, studies have proven that meditation is effective in reducing blood pressure in patients — even enough to reduce the blood pressure medication doses for some patients.

Meditation Techniques for Seniors

The goal of meditation is to learn how to focus and control both your breathing and your mind's tendency to wander. If you're new to meditation, here are a few ways to get started:

Start small

As you get started, you should only aim for a couple of minutes per day and increase the amount of time you spend meditating gradually.

Focus on a task

Many people find it hard at first not to go through a list of things you need to do, a conversation you recently had, or what you're going to do next.

Find one task to do while meditating, such as:

- Inhaling and exhaling and becoming aware of your breathing.
- Scanning your body from the tips of your toes to the top of your head and focus on what you notice in each place.
- Reciting a phrase, sentence, or even a single word repeatedly.

Find a comfortable position

You may have an image of someone sitting upright on the floor associated with how to practice meditation. But the truth is, whatever position provides the least discomfort is the best option. This could include being seated in an upright chair, reclined chair or even lying down.

Add exercise

If none of these are working or you find yourself falling asleep, try yoga, tai chi, walking or any exercise that allows for physical movement and mental focus.

How to Start Meditating

The great benefit of meditation is you can do it from anywhere. Whether you prefer to meditate at home or in a rec center, there are a ton of great resources from audio and video recordings to classes that will help hone your focus and begin a regular meditating practice.

There are several different types of meditation that involve different techniques and provide different benefits. You can start by considering what you want to accomplish through meditation and what types of meditation are best suited to you.

5 Types of Meditation

Breathing meditation

Breathing meditation uses different breathing techniques to quickly reduce stress and clear the mind. It can also help with your physical health. You can research breathing techniques on your own or find information on them through yoga studios or wellness centers.

Guided meditation

A teacher or instructor guides you through your meditation through a class, recording or another form of instruction.

Mindfulness meditation

Mindfulness can be practiced throughout the day by taking short moments to pause and become aware of what's happening around you. It is helpful for dealing with stressful moments in your day.

Silent meditation

Also called unguided meditation, silent meditation involves meditating alone. It may be as simple as sitting quietly, alone and becoming aware of your thoughts and body for a set period of time.

Spiritual meditation

Almost all religions and spiritual practices use some sort of spiritual meditation. You can practice it almost anywhere including at home or your place of worship to seek a deeper connection and understanding of your religious or spiritual beliefs.

Once you find a type of meditation that works for you, you may want to take classes or use some other form of instruction to get started.

If you feel more comfortable alone, you'll need to research the techniques more thoroughly, perhaps using recorded instruction.

For a beginner, meditation requires you to get comfortable, prepare to sit still for a few minutes, focus on your breath and thoughts, then follow your breathing for a couple of minutes.

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