

Meditation

When you hear the word ‘meditation,’ what comes to mind? For some of us, our minds might conjure up an image of someone sitting cross-legged humming “Ohm” over and over to him or herself. Or, you might be picturing someone laying in a field of wildflowers pondering the meaning of life. But how about picturing someone just simply breathing and observing?

Meditation can take many forms, from a person completely entranced in their meditation practices to someone simply sitting at their desk chair breathing deeply while being mindful of their body and what their body is feeling. Deep breathing meditation and mindfulness are not strenuous tasks by any means, but most of us don’t seem to take the time to simply breathe and listen to our bodies most days. Meditation is not to be confused with just simply relaxing, although this is healthy for us to do as well.

You might be thinking that meditation at first glance is waste of time or that it really can’t be that beneficial, but science tells us otherwise. The [Yoga Journal](#) reported earlier this year that a study was conducted on meditation, mindfulness and the health benefits they may bring and was printed in *Biological Psychiatry*. When the study’s participants actively practiced being mindful (or being aware of their bodies and the spaces around them without analyzing or criticizing, just accepting things as they were) during their meditation session they received positive physical benefits. This research centers around a relatively new field in neuroscience named *interoception*, which is one’s sense of his or her body and how the body feels or changes. This sounds fairly simple on the surface; after all, you can pretty easily recognize when your body is hungry or tired without having to meditate, right?

The art of interoception is not exactly as simple as it first appears to be. First, you need to tune out the many distractions that constantly compete for your attention in today’s world in order to really listen and feel changes in your body. Once you’ve meditated and begun to notice those small fluctuations within yourself, the next key piece of interoception is a bit more challenging: you must simply observe yourself without judging. That means not criticizing yourself or analyzing why you feel the way you feel-- just simply recognize that you have a feeling and accept it.

Once you’ve been enlightened to the challenge of interoception (sometimes also called embodiment), there are a few ways to help yourself achieve it. An excellent way to get started practicing this exercise is to use the method shared by Bo Forbes on the [Yoga Journal’s website](#):

“Make a fist with your left hand and touch it to your right palm. Take your fist and palm into your upper abdomen, just below your ribs. Apply as much or as little pressure with your palm as feels good to your belly. Direct your awareness to the point of contact between your hands and your body. Using nasal breathing, draw your breath into that point of contact, creating an anchor of awareness, for a minute or two. As you inhale, say in your mind the words “This is my center.” As you exhale, say in your mind “My body releases anything that doesn’t belong to me.” Continue for several rounds. Finish with both palms flat on your belly.”

Forbes recommends taking one or two minutes to practice this or one of several other short exercises (which you can listen to [here](#)) and get a better idea of how interoception works. Take notice of how you

feel after this exercise. Do you feel more relaxed? Were you surprised at how difficult it was to simply accept your thoughts without judging or trying to change them? Keep going with this exercise; it will feel more natural with each try.

At this point, you might be wondering why you want to practice embodiment. Sure, you may have felt more calm and more at peace afterward, which are both beneficial on their own. There are also ways you may benefit physically and mentally other than just getting that fantastic feeling of calm for a few moments. The study featured on the Yoga Journal site indicated that our immune systems and the tiny bacteria in our digestive tracts positively benefit when you practice interoception. Our connective tissue system also benefits with this practice of simply being mindful of our bodies. And our minds and thoughts may be positively impacted as well; anxiety and depression along with long-term pain could be reduced by practicing embodiment.

The key to taking advantage of the healthy side effects coming from embodiment is relative to how many times per day you take to stop and be mindful of yourself and your surroundings. The exercise described above only needs to be practiced for one or two minutes, which is simple enough to fit into even the busiest of schedules. But don't stop at just one of these two-minute sessions per day. Make sure to take pauses throughout your day to run through this exercise and simply observe without judging, analyzing or trying to correct your thoughts. When you first start incorporating this into your regular routine, pay attention to your stress levels. As you notice yourself becoming more stressed or increasingly anxious and reacting to stressors in your life, realize that is your cue to practice your newfound skill of interoception! Pretty soon, this will become a healthy habit you can easily practice whether you're at home, at the office, or while traveling.

Interoception, once you understand how it works, can be very beneficial. Combining it with other mindful exercises such as yoga is a really great way to improve your mental health as well as your physical well-being. If you have questions about meditating or the most effective ways to combine meditation and embodiment with yoga, please feel free to contact me. Namaste!