



Meditation for Health and Weight Control

Until quite recently, the act of sitting cross-legged on a cushion to enquire within was looked at askance. Between the mystics of the distant Himalayas and the colonies of spiritual aspirants in L.A., meditation got the rap as something too strange. When the Western world opened to Far-Eastern travel and the importation of foreign ideals, a certain spiritual intelligentsia began taking the practice to medical science for approval. Now, meditation for stress reduction is an accepted norm. Kind of. Most people still don't come to it unless pressed. This is much like the route taken on the way to psychotherapy. You fear you're approaching a serious life crisis, or someone near and dear threatens you with an exit sign unless you go for help.

If you are among those who can't quite see what regular meditation might add to the quality of your life, would it make a difference to know that meditation facilitates weight loss? The truth is that meditation has been practiced diligently for centuries, not because of its lofty spiritual ideals, but because of the quantifiable affect it has on physical as well as emotional well-being.

Excessive weight-gain is one of our largest concerns. Poor nutrition coupled with lax physical fitness undoubtedly play a significant part in how we find our image in the mirror. But meditation can help to head poundage off even before it gathers, especially around the tummy, and you need go no further than the cushion in your own living room to access it. When you worry, the brain is conditioned to release toxic chemicals into the blood stream, some of which directly cause a thickening of the waist line. Dr. Melissa Stoppler, MD says "your body has a system of hormonal checks and balances that actually promote weight gain when you're stressed out." If you feel strained as you navigate oceans of traffic on your way to and from work; if your term papers or work documents are not coming together well; if you and your partner are arguing ferociously or you have trauma from surgeries or abuses of whatever kind, then the release of stress chemicals into your blood stream is promoting, among other things, fat.

During times of stress, a hormone called cortisol, aka "the stress hormone," is released into the body. The hormones epinephrine and norepinephrine, synonymous with a flight/fight response, are also activated. When you calm down, the epinephrine and norepinephrine levels return to normal, while cortisol levels can remain persistently elevated over a longer period of time.



This is something that you can check out for yourself. One aspect of Zen Buddhism is that it encourages you not to accept information on blind faith, nor to let yourself fall into habitual skepticism when new ideas are presented. You should check things out for yourself as far as possible. Consider your breathing patterns. When you are anxious, do you sense your breath accelerating and racing high in the chest as opposed to down in the lower abdomen where it usually sits when you're calm? And if you recount a stressful situation to a friend long after the fact, can you feel yourself suddenly breathing high in the chest again and speaking a couple of octaves higher, as if you were right back in the thick of your trauma again? Human beings have a unique capacity for keeping filing systems of old grievances close at hand, available for detailed review. Each time we dredge up anxieties from the past, they may stimulate an arousal response all over again. Over years of this, we develop quite a stock pile of toxic emotions and their accompanying chemistry. Dr. John McQuaid tells us that when our adrenal glands begin to pump out stress hormones, the immediate manifestations are shallow breathing and increased muscle tension. Meditation works to considerably lessen these effects on our physiology.

Furthermore, during meditation the brain produces alpha waves, which promote relaxation of the entire nervous system. The autonomic nervous system is made up of two parts, the sympathetic and the parasympathetic. These systems act in opposite yet complementary ways, the first revving the body and the second calming it down. Chronic burn-out can occur when the sympathetic nervous system dominates for too long. But during an alpha wave state, such as in meditation, the parasympathetic nervous system comes to the fore. If meditation is practiced regularly, this beneficial change becomes relatively permanent. "Go slow. Our ordinary waking lives are beehives of distractions, swarming with over-stimulated thoughts and behaviors. Meditation decelerates them. Many systems in the brain may operate more effectively at a lower speed. Some of its intuitive functions flow best from settings of undistracted awareness." That's according to Dr. James Austin, MD, from his new book *Zen and the Brain*.

One of evolution's objectives in cortisol secretion is the provision of energy for the body. Cortisol stimulates fat and carbohydrate metabolism, and stimulates insulin release and maintenance of blood sugar levels. Arousal under stress always occurs as it is a deeply ingrained, primal response. But meditators have much faster recovery time after arousal and an infinitely more composed manner of managing the stresses that arise. **The end result of all this stress-related hormonal action is an increase in appetite. You will both gain weight and have difficulty getting rid of existing pounds.**



Boulder Natural Medicine Clinic, LLC

Elevated cortisol tends to cause fat deposition in the abdominal area and this deposition has come to be known as “toxic fat.” **Abdominal fat is strongly correlated with cardiovascular diseases including heart attacks and strokes.**

It remains crucial to attend to your dietary and fitness routine. A part of meditation practice in fact includes physical exercise prior to sitting, or *zazen*, especially in the yoga tradition. As I was taught in the temples where I trained, at the very least you need to stretch thoroughly before coming to the cushion. But you should note that excessive dieting and physical training may also carry a factor of stress. Studies prove that most eating disorders have up to a 95% component of underlying stress. Serious eating disorders aside, many agree that when they're stressed, they overeat. Meditation remains a strong contributor in stress reduction, including weight loss.

Why not work on an anti-stress strategy right now?

If you're a beginner, do not worry yet about which technique to use. Simply give yourself 20 minutes per day where you sit quietly and ponder nothing but the comforting presence of your breath. Turn off the TV, the phones and the blackberry. Sit upright, but not stiffly.

Concentrate on your breath going in, and especially on it going out. According to Dr. Austin in his book *Zen and the Brain*, expiration slows down and quiets the firing of nerve cells in the amygdala. The amygdala is the part of the brain involved in responding to signs of anger, avoidance, defensiveness and fear. It is central to the expression of negative emotions in man. It also prompts releases of adrenaline and other hormones into the blood stream, thus disrupting the control of rational thought.

To get you started, chose a means for physical relaxation such as a yoga sequence, simple stretches, or just sit and try to consciously release tensions from your body. **The focus here is on “conscious release.”** Simple resting does not induce the same physiological response as mindful meditation. **Once you've settled into a stable sitting position, place your attention on your breath as it will draw the mind inward and away from external affairs.** If a multitude of thoughts come to trespass upon your ground as thoughts are wont to do, just let them go without arresting them. Left to their own devices, thoughts will enter and drop away of their own volition.

Many instructors invoke the image of a glass of muddy water. When you shake it up, particles swirl around clouding the water. But if you let the glass sit for 20 minutes, the silt will settle and the water will become clear. **The settling and clearing of your mind is at the**



Boulder Natural Medicine Clinic, LLC

core of meditation's success. Repetition is also important so it's best to practice daily. Even five minutes at a time is better than 35 minutes on Sundays. Consider it a daily vitamin. To combat weight gain, meditation alone won't take the place of exercise and diet, but it will definitely enhance the quality of your life and your over-all well being.

Thank you and be well!