

# Meditation and dealing with stress and anxiety

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## About myself

I'm a Compliance auditor, and I did Medicare compliance audits for WellPoint for 21 years, till our division was closed in August last year. I started meditating regularly since 1991 as a way to deal with the anxiety and the stress of impending layoffs at WellPoint. I survived the wave of layoffs that took place in 1991, but I got so much out of the practice of meditation that I never gave it up after that point. Steady practice over the years has greatly improved my power of concentration - on what has to be done right now, the calm with which I face difficult times, and the tenacity with which I pursue something until I get it.

## Purpose of today's presentation

The purpose of today's presentation is to share with the group what I have learnt about the practice of meditation from my own experience as well as from books that I have read on this subject, so that we may all be able to deal effectively with the stress and anxiety of being in transition, and maybe go further and explore the possibilities of meditation as a spiritual discipline.

## Scientific Evidence about Meditation

Dr. Herbert Benson of Harvard Medical School and Dr. Robert Wallace of UC Irvine were the first to do a landmark study on meditation in the 1960's. Their findings were that experienced meditators can lower their stress levels by meditation. The reduction in stress levels, in turn, brings out physiological changes such as a reduction in hypertension. Since then, additional studies have further confirmed this finding. However, what can be more convincing than our own experience? If meditation can lessen your stress, help you cope with changes and enjoy life more fully, it will have proved its value for you.

## What is Meditation?

Meditation is the practice of turning your attention inwards. It is an unbroken focus on an inner object in the field of your awareness. This inner object can be the breath, a mantra that you repeat, a visualized object, or it can just be the ebb and flow of mental activity.

## And why does it help us to relax and deal with stress?

- Anxiety, stress and depression are emotional states of mind that are rooted in the past or the future. Meditation disconnects us from our obsession with the past or the future and brings us back to the present over and over again.

- Stress and anxiety is multiplied by the sense of an unending list of unfinished business and the unavailability of time to do it in. Meditation simplifies our life by reducing the number of items in the frame of our attention. It strengthens our ability to stay within the frame of focus.
- At our deepest level, we are peaceful. The surface agitations of the mind prevent us from accessing this level. Meditation stills the surface agitations and allows us to draw on our own inner resources of peace that are deep within us.
- Our minds have power. We absorb the qualities of anything that we focus intensely on. By visualizing images of divinity that resonate with us, we absorb divine guidance and “set our sails to catch the breeze of divine grace”.

### **Dealing with anger, depression, despair during a time of transition**

- Meditation breaks the compulsive power of negative thoughts (the monkey story).
- The example of a train which travels a predetermined route; getting off at an earlier station
- A “digital” approach to thinking, as opposed to a “continuous” way
- Why a mantra can be useful (the elephant story)

### **How I meditate**

I spend about 90 minutes every morning on prayer and meditation. I start with reading inspiring spiritual books for about 20 minutes, then do about ten minutes of devotional singing, and finish with an hour’s meditation on a mantra that I have used for close to twenty years.

### **Notes on the “hands-on session”**

- 3 minutes of deep breathing. Every inhalation is the “absorption” of strength and courage, every exhalation is the “giving up” of negative thoughts
- Visualization of any image of divinity that is truly close to your heart
- Drawing the image into your heart
- Generating inspiration for yourself from the image in your heart
- Giving blessings to everyone, interconnectedness, conclusion of meditation

### **Additional resources**

*Books: Healing and the Mind by Bill Moyers; Reversing Heart Disease by Dean Ornish; Meditation for Dummies by Stephen Bodian, Full Catastrophe by Jon Kabat-Zinn*

*Videotapes and Audiotapes: The Art of Meditation by Jack Kornfield; Guided Meditations, by Jack Kornfield, Healing and the Mind by Bill Moyers*