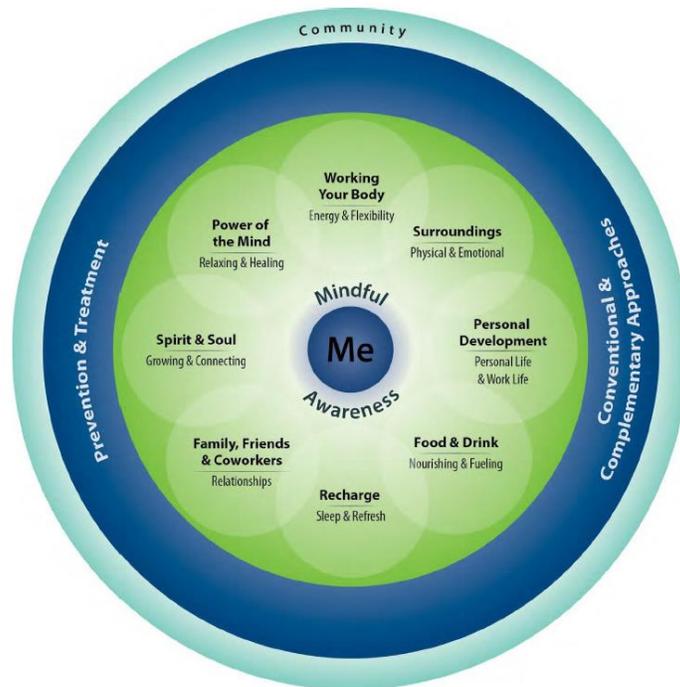


# WHOLE HEALTH: CHANGE THE CONVERSATION

Advancing Skills in the Delivery of  
Personalized, Proactive, Patient-Driven Care

## Meditation Clinical Tool



This document has been written for clinicians. The content was developed by the Integrative Medicine Program, Department of Family Medicine and Community Health, University of Wisconsin-Madison School of Medicine and Public Health in cooperation with Pacific Institute for Research and Evaluation, under contract to the Office of Patient Centered Care and Cultural Transformation, Veterans Health Administration.

Information is organized according to the diagram above, the *Components of Proactive Health and Well-Being*. While conventional treatments may be covered to some degree, the focus is on other areas of Whole Health that are less likely to be covered elsewhere and may be less familiar to most readers. There is no intention to dismiss what conventional care has to offer. Rather, you are encouraged to learn more about other approaches and how they may be used to complement conventional care. The ultimate decision to use a given approach should be based on many factors, including patient preferences, clinician comfort level, efficacy data, safety, and accessibility. No one approach is right for everyone; personalizing care is of fundamental importance.

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## **Meditation Clinical Tool**

### **What Is Meditation?**

Meditation is a practice that is ancient in its origins, with a history going back well over 3,500 years. Although initially associated with religious practice, modern forms of meditation, such as mindfulness meditation, can be utilized without any specific religious connection. Meditation is really an umbrella term used to refer to a diverse historical and current day group of practices including mindfulness, transcendental meditation (TM), relaxation response, Vipassana, Zen, meditative prayer and many others. Meditation approaches typically have in common that they use a focused attention, with an open attitude toward the distractions that arise. Today, many classify meditation as a mind-body practice.

Some meditations can be considered more of a concentration practice, such as TM, where a central focus of the meditation is on a word, a mantra, the breath, etc. Another branch of meditation is labeled mindfulness meditation. It may include elements of focused attention, but central to most practices is an attitude of openness and curiosity toward what arises in the meditation experience. Mindfulness meditation has become increasingly popular as a focus for research studies. In clinical settings, mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) and mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (MBCT) programs are common methods of teaching mindfulness practice and are the focus of numerous studies.

### **What Are Its Uses?**

Meditation can be practiced for many reasons including to increase a sense of calm, improve concentration, induce physical relaxation, cope with stressors, manage health problems, or enhance overall well-being.

### **What Does the Research Say?**

There are hundreds of research studies on meditation, as well as systematic reviews and meta-analyses (see reference list at the end of this handout for meta-analyses) covering the topic. Studies have been supportive of meditation's role in improving psychological health and overall well-being, as well as health conditions that are impacted by stress or psychological conditions.<sup>1</sup> Meditation can assist in coping with a health condition such as pain, and it appears to be a beneficial adjunctive treatment for many problems including cancer.<sup>2</sup> It has been shown to be helpful in chronic disease symptoms in epilepsy, tinnitus, peripheral neuropathy and multiple sclerosis.<sup>3</sup> Increasing evidence suggests that mindfulness meditation might help with chronic sleep disturbances, as well as in binge eating and overeating.<sup>4,5</sup> There are specific studies that have also explored the biological correlates to meditation, which suggest that meditation can "change the brain," such as

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activating different parts of the brain or increased telomerase activity<sup>6</sup>. MBCT programs have shown to be helpful in relapse prevention for major depression. For a more detailed summary of this research, see the educational overviews [Power of the Mind](#) and [Mindful Awareness](#). A bibliographic listing of additional key studies is provided below.

### **How to Prepare?**

When possible, it is best to attempt to practice at the same time every day; however, that is not a requirement and benefits can arise with practice at other times and whenever it is possible. A popular time for meditation is prior to the day's activities, generally in the morning. Staying consistent with time of the day and the location can help tremendously in developing this positive habit. When feasible, create a quiet environment that is free from interruptions.

### **How Much Time Is Needed for Meditation?**

Many people start with a meditation class, which often includes longer meditations immediately. However, it is also acceptable to start with shorter periods of time and to build up. Whether your meditation is shorter or longer, there will be opportunities to practice with the obstacles that naturally arise for most of us (see the section on obstacles below).

### **Is Meditation Safe?**

Meditation is considered safe for most healthy people. Caution is suggested with significant psychiatric difficulties, although reported problems are rare.

### **Can Movement Be Meditation?**

Many forms of mindfulness meditation utilize a walking practice. This can bring awareness to the fact that mindfulness can be brought into many everyday activities. In walking meditation, the practice starts with finding an area where you can comfortably walk back and forth. Walking slowly, begin by paying attention to the sensations associated with walking. For example, you can notice how each leg feels as you move forward, transferring the weight from one leg to another. Another focus would be becoming aware of the sensations in the feet as they touch the floor. Walking meditation is flexible and can be used in longer or shorter intervals. Some meditation practices alternate a sitting practice with a walking practice.

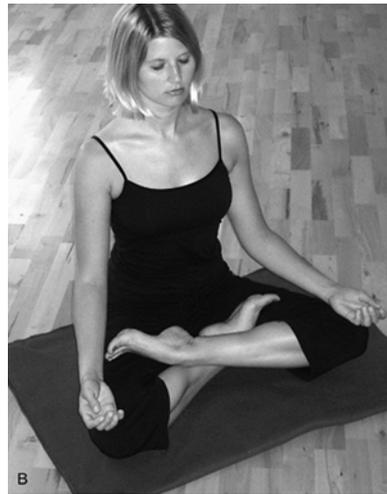
Yoga, tai chi and qi gong are often included under the rubric of meditation practices. These are excellent choices for some individuals who prefer these movement meditation methods also known as body-mind practices. Classes for movement meditation practices are increasingly available in many towns and cities. It is worth checking into what is available at your VA site.

## What Is the Best Way to Sit for Meditation?

Traditionally, meditation has been a sitting practice. Most people imagine meditators sitting cross-legged on the floor but that is not the case in more modern meditation settings. Chairs are often used, as well as mats, benches, cushions and bolsters—see examples below. One instruction often given for sitting meditation is to sit in an erect and dignified way, eliminating any slouching or slumping. The following illustrations are from Fortney L. Recommending meditation. In: Rakel D, ed. *Integrative Medicine*. 3rd ed. Philadelphia, PA: Saunders; 2012:873-881.



**A.** Seated position with chair. Maintain a straight back.



**B.** Full lotus position. Maintain a straight back. Use of a cushion, shawl, mat, or blanket for comfort may be helpful.



**C.** Half-lotus position. Maintain a straight back. Use of a cushion, shawl, mat, or blanket for comfort may be helpful.



**D.** Kneeling position with bench. Maintain a straight back. Use of a shawl, mat, or blanket for comfort may be helpful.

## What Are the Obstacles to Meditation?

1. ***Wanting for something*** that is not in our immediate experience. Examples of this might include wanting the meditation practice to be over, wanting to be more comfortable, wanting to be a “better meditator,” etc.
2. ***Finding that we are resisting and trying to escape some aspect of our present experience*** of meditation. This might include an uncomfortable or unwanted physical, mental, or emotional experience. We may find ourselves actively repressing certain thoughts, feelings, or sensations that have naturally arisen during the meditation. We may also find ourselves irritated by the noises in the room, such as a ticking clock or the breathing of a fellow meditator. Resistance might arise, as well, due to uncomfortable sensations in the body.
3. ***Sleepiness, lethargy or boredom can occur during meditation.*** This might be especially difficult if we are lying down during meditation or haven’t had enough sleep.
4. ***Shifting from “doing” in our lives to the practice of just “being” with ourselves*** during meditation. This can result in a physical, mental or emotional struggle around “settling down” to the meditation practice. Our mind might be very distractible on a particular day, or we might be coming into meditation with emotional distress or a feeling of physical restlessness.
5. ***Doubting*** why we are setting aside time to meditate, questioning the validity of the practice, and/or feeling uncertain about the technique we are using. Certainly, in a culture where we often tend to focus on what we accomplish, rather than internal well-being, it is understandable that this is a frequent obstacle.

## When Obstacles Are Encountered During Meditation

It would be a mistake to conclude that difficulty in meditation signifies that meditation is not something you can do. Being aware of these obstacles can normalize the experience, rather than being a deterrent to a meditation practice. It is helpful to understand that these obstacles are very common, both for beginners as well as for more experienced meditators. When obstacles arise, as they naturally will, it is best to merely recognize them for what they are in the moment without judging them. Then, return to our practice (e.g., refocus back on a word, a mantra, or your breath).

### **The distractible mind**

It is important to remind ourselves that we have not failed as a meditator if our minds become distracted. Distractibility, sometimes referred to as “the monkey mind,” is part of the human condition. An attitude of non-judgment about this common problem and then a gentle refocusing back on our meditation practice is generally most helpful.

## Instructions: Simple Ways to Begin a Meditation Practice

Utilize the following elements to begin a simple **concentration** meditation practice.

1. Find a place where you can be comfortable and free of distractions.
2. Develop a comfortable position. This can be sitting in a chair, on a cushion, or on a bench on the floor (see the photos of meditation postures above). If lying down is your only comfortable option, you may need to be aware of the tendency to become sleepy or fall asleep.
3. Close your eyes if you are comfortable. If your eyes remain open, let your gaze remain soft and with a focus on the floor in front of you.
4. Allow your body to relax as much as you can.
5. Breathe through your nose.
6. Use a focal point of attention during your meditation. This can be your breathing, a word, a sound, prayer or even a candle flame. Consider this object to be an anchor you may return to each time distraction occurs.
  - Many meditation practices focus on the breath. You can become aware of the sensations associated with your breath, including the rise and fall of the abdomen or chest during breathing, or the feel of the air coming in and out of the nose.
  - Word/sound: Breathing in and out to the word “one” or some other word. Some meditation practices include a mantra given specifically to an individual.
  - A prayer or part of a prayer can be utilized, often repeated with the rhythm of the inhalation and/or exhalation.
7. Continue for 10 to 20 minutes. At first, you may experiment for shorter time periods, eventually building up to the 10-20 minutes.
8. When obstacles to meditation arise, just become aware of them without judgment and gently return to your anchor/focus (See the section on obstacles, above).

For more information, see the educational overviews, [Mindful Awareness](#) and [Power of the Mind](#). Explore your local mindfulness-based stress reduction programs, local meditation centers and groups.

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| Additional Resources  |   |
|---|---|
| <b>Online</b>   |   |
| Buddha Dharma Education Association   | <a href="http://www.Buddhanet.net">http://www.Buddhanet.net</a>   |
| Sounds True—a variety of CDs and books on meditations   | <a href="http://www.soundstrue.com">www.soundstrue.com</a>  |
| American Meditation Institute   | <a href="http://www.americanmeditation.org">http://www.americanmeditation.org</a>   |
| Online guided practices and resources for mindfulness in medicine from the University of Wisconsin  | <a href="http://www.fammed.wisc.edu/mindfulness">http://www.fammed.wisc.edu/mindfulness</a>                                 |
| University of Massachusetts Center for Mindfulness  | <a href="http://www.umassmed.edu/cfm">http://www.umassmed.edu/cfm</a>   |
| Contains University of Wisconsin Aware Medicine Curriculum  | <a href="https://www.fammed.wisc.edu/aware-medicine/mindfulness">https://www.fammed.wisc.edu/aware-medicine/mindfulness</a> |
| Benson-Henry Institute for Mind Body Medicine   | <a href="http://massgeneral.org">http://massgeneral.org</a>   |
| Omega Institute offers workshops, conferences in New York state   | <a href="http://www.eomega.org">http://www.eomega.org</a>   |
| Organization dedicated to promoting the teachings of Buddhist teacher, Pema Chödrön   | <a href="http://pemachodronfoundation.org">http://pemachodronfoundation.org</a>   |
| National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine  | <a href="http://nccam.nih.gov">http://nccam.nih.gov</a>   |
| Kabbalah Online includes Jewish meditation  | <a href="http://www.chabad.org/kabbalah">http://www.chabad.org/kabbalah</a>   |
| Do It Yourself Dharma   | <a href="http://diydharm.org/about-us">http://diydharm.org/about-us</a>   |
| Spirit Rock Meditation Center in California   | <a href="http://www.spiritrock.org">http://www.spiritrock.org</a>   |
| Contemplative Outreach, organization for Centering Prayer   | <a href="http://www.contemplativeoutreach.org">http://www.contemplativeoutreach.org</a>                                     |
| Zen teacher Thich Nhat Hanh   | <a href="http://www.plumvillage.org">http://www.plumvillage.org</a>   |
| Official website for Transcendental Meditation  | <a href="http://www.tm.org">http://www.tm.org</a>   |
| Sufi Meditation Center  | <a href="http://www.sufimeditationcenter.com">http://www.sufimeditationcenter.com</a>                                       |
| Center for Investigating Healthy Minds offers free downloadable meditations and mindfulness resources   | <a href="http://www.investigatinghealthyminds.org">http://www.investigatinghealthyminds.org</a>                             |
| <b>Books</b>  |   |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Meditation for Beginners, Guided Meditation</i>, by Jack Kornfield, PhD (book, CD)</li> <li>• <i>Guided Mindfulness Meditation, Mindfulness for Beginners</i> by Jon Kabat-Zinn (CDs)</li> <li>• <i>Full Catastrophe Living</i>, by Jon Kabat-Zinn (book)</li> <li>• <i>Open Mind Open Heart</i>, by Fr. Thomas Keating, OCSO (book)</li> <li>• <i>The Beginner's Guide to Contemplative Prayer</i>, by James Finley, PhD (CD)</li> </ul> |   |

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## Whole Health Library Website

Interested in learning more about Whole Health?  
Browse our website for information on personal and professional care.

<http://projects.hsl.wisc.edu/SERVICE/index.php>

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