

“Meditation” by Linda Wasmer Andrews: Scholastic Inc., 2004.

Andrews ultimately encourages anyone of any background to consider meditation as a “secret to success”. What is important while meditating is quieting the mind, relaxing and coming to focus on whatever one is doing. “The idea is that you get so wrapped up in what you're doing that you lose yourself completely in the activity. You feel thrilled just to be doing whatever it is you are doing, whether it's running a race, writing a story, painting a picture, or simply gazing at a sunset.”

The research of Hans Selye demonstrated that “stress can make you sick” and Walter Cannon's work described the fight-or-flight response, “the body's automatic reaction to any threat - real or imagined, physical or emotional. It is this response that gives stress power to help or harm.” Since we know how “stress can make us sick,” it is important to not let stress overload the body. In order to undo stress, it is important to relax.

Andrews targets younger audiences and explains popular methods of meditation such as zen, transcendental meditation, and yoga and discusses their effects on stress and general mental health. Andrews begins by defining meditation as “nothing more than the practice of focusing your mind on a particular thing or activity. Some forms of it can be done by just about anyone, anywhere, anytime.”

Andrews debunks several myths regarding meditation. The myths include the following:

“You have to be a little flaky to meditate”

“You have to be a religious person to meditate”

“Adults are the only ones faced with real stress”

As it turns out, the body cannot tell the difference between stressors and reacts in the same way physiologically to being chased by tiger as it does to a demanding math teacher - it goes into the same state of high alert. Andrews also goes on to discuss some of the biochemistry involved with meditation; specifically as it relates to the “Relaxation Response”.

When one practices meditation, the body can experience the relaxation response: a state in which the body experiences a decrease in metabolism, breathing rate, and heart rate.

Below are some basic guidelines for inducing the relaxation response. Like any new skill, calling up the relaxation response can take some practice. With a little time and effort, however, almost anyone can learn to do it by following these steps....

1. Pick a focus word, phrase, sound or activity. Some people choose a word or phrase that has meaning for them, such as “Hail Mary,” “hashem”, “shalom,” or “peace.” Others prefer a sound, such as “om.” Still others prefer a rhythmic activity, such as breathing, walking on a footpath, or pedaling a stationary bicycle. (Of course, you would need to pay attention to your surroundings if you were walking or cycling in traffic.)
2. Sit in a comfortable position You can also lie down, but remember that the goal is to meditate, not sleep. Close your eyes, if you wish. Try to relax all your muscles in turn, moving from your feet to your head. If you have a lot of trouble sitting quietly, a rhythmic activity that lets you move around is another option.
3. Breathe slowly and naturally. As you do so, start to repeat your focus word, phrase, or sound on each breath out. You can do this silently or aloud. If you have chosen to focus on an activity, do it in time with your breathing as well. For example, you might take four steps on every breath in and four more steps on every breath out.
4. Passively disregard other thoughts that may arise. Don't worry if you become distracted at times. This is normal. Just let other thoughts, feelings and sensations pass right through your mind. Then gently return your mind

to the focus point.

5. Practice every day, if you can. Start out meditating for ten minutes or less at a time. As it becomes easier, you may work up to twenty minutes. Don't get too wrapped up in meeting a time goal, however. The wonderful thing about meditation is that you can simply accept it as it comes. There is no such thing as a failing grade in meditation.”

