

FOR MANY, PRACTISING MEDITATION IS AKIN TO PULLING TEETH. *WH&F* CONTRIBUTOR **HILARY SIMMONS** SHOWS YOU HOW TO FIND THE BESPOKE APPROACH THAT WILL HAVE YOU BOUNDING OUT OF BED IN SEARCH OF THE OMM AND ITS ARRAY OF HEALTH BENEFITS – FROM BOOSTED IMMUNE SYSTEM TO IMPROVED POSTURE AND SLEEP.

Back to (*Meditative*) Basics

HISTORY HAS IT

It's a practice you either love or you hate, you swear by or you just don't 'get'. In recent years, meditation has gone mainstream; but some of the earliest written records of the custom date back to circa 1500 BCE, as part of the Hindu philosophic tradition of Vedantism. However, historians guess it was practised as early as 3000 BCE.

The word meditation comes from the Latin word *meditatum*, which literally means 'to ponder'. So in practice, the history of meditation may have started when a heavy-browed caveman or cavewoman sat down one evening after a long day of hunter-gathering, stared at the fire, and slipped into an altered state of consciousness.

Regardless of tradition, today the word 'meditation' comes with a very specific set of associations. The image of an Instagram model sitting cross-legged by the ocean

may spring to mind, or that of a Zen Buddhist monk's face beaming beneficently beside a gently flowing stream. According to naturopath Melinda King, these images create the misapprehension that meditation is only for the healthy and enlightened, and unattainable for the slightly cynical or the busy.

"Meditation needs to be recognised as a tool that benefits all human beings," says King.

"We all have emotions and an inner world that needs nourishment and support. It is commonly and mistakenly thought that meditation is about 'emptying the mind of all thoughts'. Not only is this impossible, it's inaccurate. Most meditation styles are about bringing your attention into the present moment by focusing on the breath or an object – not eliminating thoughts altogether, which, generally speaking, are free to come and go."



CUE THE BENEFITS

So how, in 2018, can we reap the benefits of meditation if we're not the stereotypical meditation 'type' – or if we find the idea of fitting a regular meditation practice into a modern, cerebral, hectic lifestyle a bit of a tall order?

It starts with understanding that meditation is a learned practice, and that it's also deeply personal. While meditation needs to be integrated into your lifestyle to be effective, there's flexibility in how to do that. You need to find a routine that suits you.

"We have very high expectations of ourselves when it comes to meditation," says meditation facilitator and founder of Meditate Now Sabina Vitacca. "I find that people overestimate what it takes to learn meditation techniques, which can set them up to fail from the get-go. People often feel so intimidated by meditation that they automatically strike it out as something they should do but can't find the time, money or circumstances for."

Similar to many people's exercise routines, while you understand the benefits and recognise the guilt associated with not hitting the gym, excuses are easy to cling to.

"Some people approach meditation with a performance-based attitude, as if it's something they'll be assessed on," says King. "This can intimidate the inner perfectionist who worries they won't be able to do it right and makes them end up avoiding it altogether. To be honest, meditation can also be scary if you're afraid of the emotions that might arise when you sit too long with nothing but your thoughts."

Both King and Vitacca agree that instead of seeing meditation as part of a mindfulness trend that we may or may not subscribe to, we should see it as a valuable life skill. Or simply as a healthy habit akin to going to the gym – hard to get started, but you won't regret it.

"The most common misconceptions I hear are along the lines of 'I don't have time, I'm not disciplined enough, my mind never stops, or it's a bit fluffy-new-age for me,'" says Vitacca.

"A lot of people assume that meditation is only for stress reduction. However, it has been proven to also enhance creativity, improve sleep, improve posture and increase immunity. It's not all about counting to 10 and cooling your jets, although it can definitely achieve this!"

USE IT

According to King and Vitacca, integrating meditation into your life in small increments is the best way to go. The basic exercise of taking three deep breaths while counting to three in your head, then, as you exhale, releasing your shoulders and counting down from three

again, is a simple yet effective practice that takes all of five seconds and can be completed while standing in line at the supermarket.

"Just start with five minutes a day, at a time that suits your lifestyle," says King. "This makes meditation achievable and less overwhelming. It could be during your morning shower or a bedtime routine to replace scrolling through social media feeds as so many of us do. A simple breathing technique for 30 to 60 seconds can do wonders for calming the central nervous system and moving out of the fight-or-flight mode caused by stress."

Vitacca agrees. "Meditation can take five seconds or 20 minutes – the timeframe is actually not important. You've got to make it work for you," she says.

"Different meditation styles will suit different lifestyles, temperaments and preferences. People are more likely to adopt an ongoing meditation practice if they come across the form or mix of techniques that is a good match for them. So experiment – not all meditation techniques will be the right fit and you can have more than one form of meditation in your toolbox to use for different reasons."

For some people, creating a specific meditation zone at home can help remind and inspire them to tune out: simply unplug and be still. Think a cushion, blanket, a candle, affirming words or motivating images on display. Whatever inspires you to take five minutes to yourself – do that!

FOR THE BRAVE: TRY THIS

EXERCISE ONE: BODY AWARENESS 101 METHOD

For longer meditations, King recommends trying the following easy (yet effective) meditation exercise:

1. Set the timer on your phone for the duration of five or 10 minutes.
2. Sit comfortably, close your eyes, and take two deep breaths in and out.
3. Starting with your feet, focus your attention on the weight of your feet and how they're touching the floor. Notice any pressure or tension within them. Take a deep breath in and as you exhale, allow your feet to relax further into the floor.
4. Now move your awareness to your calves. Notice any tension, heaviness or jumpiness within them. Take a deep breath in, and as you exhale, imagine your calves softening and releasing tension slowly and gently.
5. Repeat this process all the way up the body, moving from the knees to the thighs, hips, abdomen, ribs, chest, arms, hands, shoulders, neck, jaw, face and scalp. Be sure to take your time with each body area, focusing on bringing softness to each part.
6. Once you reach your scalp, bring your attention back to the whole of the body, noticing the presence your whole body has attained in this moment. Continue to breathe deeply until your timer goes.

EXERCISE TWO: RUB YOUR TUMMY, PAT YOUR HEAD METHOD

Vitacca recommends the following slightly less conventional exercise:

"Remember the tricky 'pat your head and rub your tummy at the same time' combo you always used to try to master as a kid? Well, it's a favourite technique of mine for meditation, and always manages to make my groups laugh. An element of humour in meditation is great because it plucks us out of our heads and attunes us to our bodies, freeing them up of tension," she says.

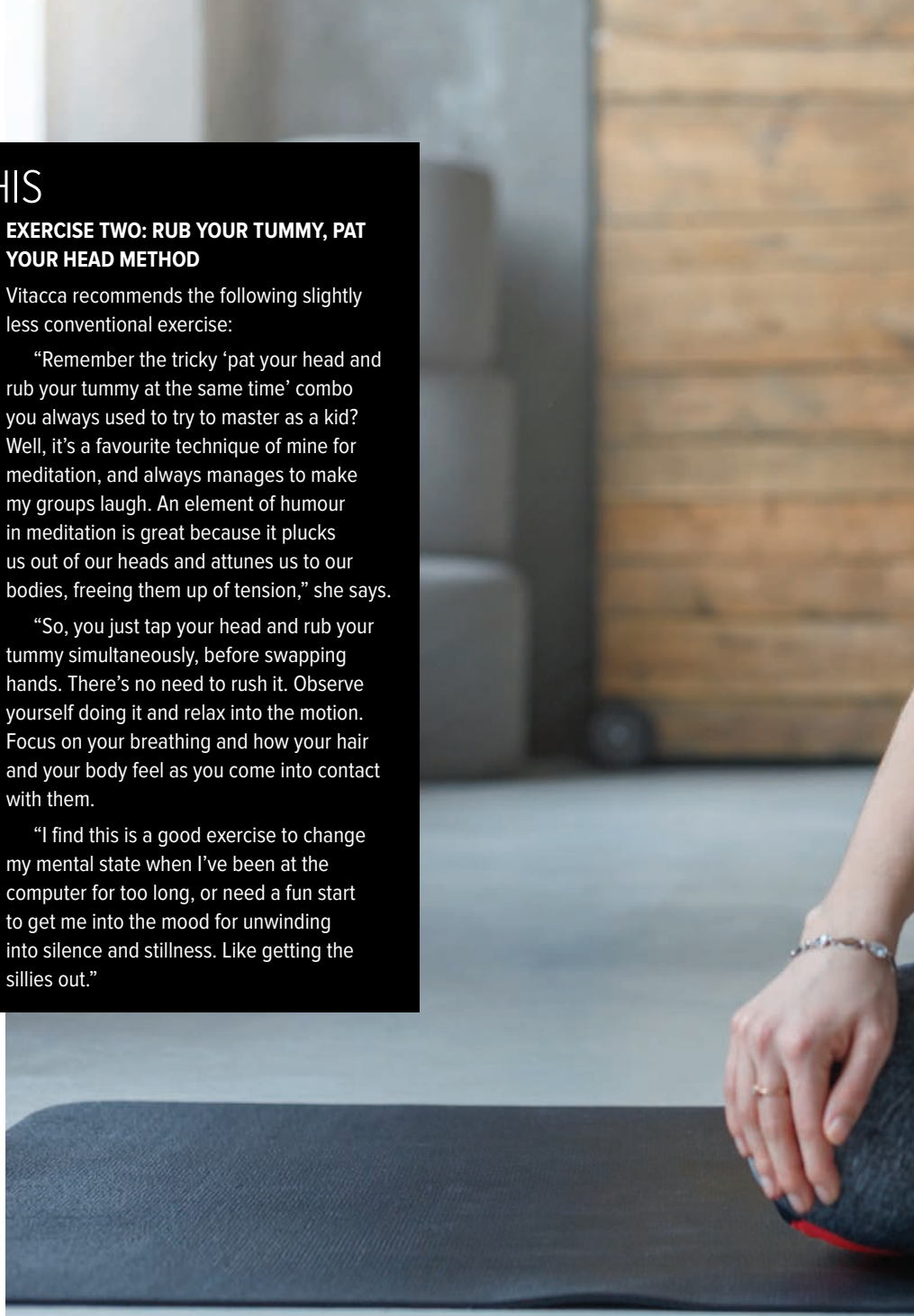
"So, you just tap your head and rub your tummy simultaneously, before swapping hands. There's no need to rush it. Observe yourself doing it and relax into the motion. Focus on your breathing and how your hair and your body feel as you come into contact with them.

"I find this is a good exercise to change my mental state when I've been at the computer for too long, or need a fun start to get me into the mood for unwinding into silence and stillness. Like getting the sillies out."

For the techno savvy, there are also a range of high-quality, effective apps available to guide you through a variety of different meditation routines. Play around with ones that speak to you and your personality: this can be a great way to experiment with the role meditation can play in your life before committing to classes or finding an instructor.

"We are all so unique; to expect everyone to find satori [sudden enlightenment] from a 10-day, silent vipassana meditation retreat is as absurd as claiming that every '90s kid likes punk rock," says Vitacca.

"Meditation is really a very personal journey, and different forms will suit you and your lifestyle at different points in your life, as your needs may change. Fortunately, with the rise of the internet and easy access to so many inspiring teachers and facilitators, there really is something for everyone. You just have to find what your individual 'something' is. This has partly inspired my work at Meditate Now, where the benefits of having a personalised meditation program help people adopt what will become a lifestyle with ease."





THE LAST WORD

Like anything else, meditation requires a skill set to get the most out of it and, fortunately, the skills required to meditate are innately within us.

“In the beginning, it can feel overwhelming trying to decide which meditation style to try,” says King. “Just choose one and stick to it for a period of time or until you get the urge to try another. This way you’ll give that particular style a chance to see if it’s suitable for your needs. One of the key lessons from meditation is that the mind and body are deeply interconnected; when you practise meditation you’ll notice the effects not just mentally, but also physically.”

Ultimately, meditation is free, timeless and accessible for everyone. Some people may be more drawn to it than others, particularly if they’re already into yoga or mindfulness; but on a core level, it’s just a matter of prioritising yourself – which is something we should all be doing, say the experts.

“A teacher once told me that our bodies are always present, so we should access the present moment through our bodies,” says Vitacca. “And this is true; our bodies are forever living in the present moment; it’s the mind that likes to wander. Luckily, all we need to do is focus on our breath to fast-track us back to the now.” ■



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