

Coping Through Meditation... for the Non-Meditator

By Leslie Becker-Phelps, PhD



When life gets hard, it can leave you feeling emotionally weak. You may be driven to hash and re-hash your struggles, only to find yourself all tangled up and overwhelmed by your emotions. Or, you may feel the need to avoid thinking about what's upsetting you...so your mind just keeps working on (actually running from) what it's feeling underneath the distraction you've created. Most people experience this as anxiety. If you can relate to these kinds of struggles, meditation may be the answer.

Merely the idea of meditation can be intimidating... especially if it brings to mind burning incense, saffron robes, chanting, or silent mountaintop retreats. But meditation is really just a simple and down-to-earth way to practice paying attention – *without judgment* – to your current experience. Along with learning to accept other experiences, it helps you to recognize your emotions as feeling “right” (or natural) even when they don't feel good. And there is a calm acceptance that comes with it. Maintaining this kind of accepting, nonjudgmental attention is called mindfulness.

You might like the idea of meditating your way into mindfulness – but you might also be sure that you can't meditate. You can't imagine sitting quietly for minutes, never mind hours. And you're sure that you're just not a calm enough person to meditate. If that sounds like you, it's important to understand that the purpose of meditation is *not* to force yourself into calmness. Instead, the main goal of meditation is to be more aware of your consciousness (the flow of your thoughts, feelings, and inner experiences). Most people are not aware of just how busy their minds are until they start really paying attention. Then a calm acceptance grows as they develop this awareness. So, if you approach meditation as a way to practice seeing your consciousness, you can meditate – because all you need to do is be willing to pay attention. It might feel difficult and frustrating – but you *can* do it.

Still skeptical? Try this three-minute experiment. Sit comfortably in a quiet place. Close your eyes and pay attention to your breathing; don't try to control it. Be aware of how you are feeling and of your thoughts. Notice any sensations in your body. Whether these experiences are pleasant or unpleasant, don't try to change them. Just notice each sensation, thought, or feeling; experience it; then let it go. After about three minutes, gently open your eyes. – That's it. By doing this, you can get a sense of what mindfulness is about; allowing yourself to be in the moment without judgment or evaluation.

If you'd like to learn more about meditation, you might find two of Jon Kabat-Zinn's books helpful: *Wherever You Go, There You Are* and *Mindfulness for Beginners* (with a cd). And there are many

meditations that you can download, so try looking for them in your favorite search engine. There are also a number of applications you can download, such as Smiling Mind, which helps people of differing age groups to develop a meditation practice. You may need to look at a number of different resources to find the ones most helpful for you.

While meditation is not for everyone, many people find it to a very effective tool. It provides a way for them to explore – and become more comfortable with – their thinking, feeling, perceptions, biases, and reactions. With time and practice, meditation also helps people attain greater self-acceptance, more inner peace, and happier relationships with the world around them.

Leslie Becker-Phelps, PhD, is a licensed psychologist who treats individuals and couples in her private practice in Basking Ridge, NJ. She writes for WebMD's [Relationships](#) blog and writes another blog called [Making Change](#) for *Psychology Today*. She is the author of *Insecure in Love* (2014). Read more at www.drbecker-phelps.com.