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The Value of Stillness *Marie Bouvier-Newman*

Life can get really hectic. Our world moves at a pretty fast pace. Sometimes this pace is exhilarating and fun while other times it is challenging and wearisome. This never-ending pace causes us to get caught up in “WHAT” we are rather than “WHO” we are.

Meditation, sometimes called conscious relaxation is a way of re-focusing on “who” we are. It helps us reduce the amount of “noise” and grounds us in something more powerful than our environment. If meditation was a prescription medicine it would be successful in improving many health conditions. It costs nothing, needs no special equipment, is not contraindicated to any medicine or condition, and conforms to any kind of schedule and any kind of individual or circumstance. The one major challenge is that its effects wear off so it must be done regularly to be effective.

So what are the health benefits? Regular meditation increases blood flow and reduces heart rate and blood pressure. It improves breathing, making it great for asthmatics and allergy sufferers. It reduces stress and anxiety as it reduces the production of cortisol and other stress hormones. It can also relieve muscle tension and pain. I have known individuals with chronic, painful conditions who have managed their pain with meditation in addition to or in lieu of pain medication. Want more benefits? Meditation improves the ability to concentrate and learn while improving problem-solving abilities and deepening overall relaxation. Regular meditation also slows the aging process.

So what is meditation? Do you have to sit cross-legged on the floor wearing a robe and chanting special mantras or sounds? Only if that style works for you. Meditation takes many different forms but can be boiled down to two distinct types; passive and active.

Passive meditation involves sitting still, closing your eyes, quieting your mind, slowing your breath, and letting all thoughts and sensations pass by without giving them any attention. Want to try it?

Find a comfortable place away from the television and other distractions. Feel free to sit on a pillow or a straight-backed chair or even a cushy chair so long as you don't get soooooo comfortable that you fall asleep. It is also nice to surround yourself with a candle or two or even something scented. Soft music or a CD with soothing sounds from nature may be a nice touch as well. Just make the space special. It is a good idea to meditate in the same place regularly, at least at first, so your mind can make the connection between the space and your meditation time.

Now that you are comfortable, close your eyes and just notice your breath. Don't try to breathe any special way. Just notice it. The mind chatter will probably start as soon as you get comfortable. In the beginning your mind will tempt you toward other things. It

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will tell you things like, “I should have put that load of laundry in before I sat down”. It might also start thinking ahead with thoughts like “What am I going to make for dinner?” You may also notice every noise in the building and the surrounding neighborhood as well.

You may even begin to wonder how you will ever sit still for any period of time with all this mind chatter and noise but hang in there. Let the thoughts and sounds pass. Don't dwell on them and don't set unrealistic expectations for yourself either. Plan on setting aside five minutes a couple of times each day then build up to ten, fifteen and longer as you are ready.

Sometimes active meditation is an easier place to start because it gives your mind and in some cases your body something to focus on. Active meditation may involve visualizing a place or a color or a situation or focusing on your breath or a candle or a sound while sitting still. It may also be a series of physical movements repeated for a period of time while listening to some soft background music. It may even involve walking a labyrinth – a maze-like creation that can be drawn on a large cloth or made with rocks in the yard or painted on a driveway, or even made small enough so you can walk it with your fingers.

It is nice to vary between active and passive meditations since some days are more conducive to movement while others are more conducive to stillness although we often settle into one or the other for our primary practice. The key is to find the right balance and to make meditation a regular habit. Sometimes meditating with a group or working with a person experienced in meditation techniques can help get you going. The key is to be persistent. Don't quit before you begin just because you can't conceive success. Meditation may be the one thing, once you have mastered it, that will take you to that level of health and well-being that has been eluding you.

Every journey begins with a first step and you have to take that first step if you are ever going to fully experience the adventure.

Namasté – I celebrate that place within you and within me where we are all one

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