

How Meditation Helps Anxiety

By MARGARITA TARTAKOVSKY, M.S.

Associate Editor



You've probably heard or read that meditation is helpful for [anxiety](#). It is — but not in the way you might think.

"Many people have the misconception that meditation is like a magic elixir that will quickly and effortlessly reduce their stress and anxiety," said Tom Corboy, MFT, co-author of *The Mindfulness Workbook for [OCD](#)*.

But the primary purpose of meditation isn't to melt your anxiety. Instead, it's to help you become more present right now, in this very moment, he said. "[T]he anxiety reduction is just a pleasant side effect."

We often experience anxiety because we fixate on the past or on the future, Corboy said. However, when you're meditating, you're intentionally focused on the here and now.

Meditation also helps with anxiety because it quiets an overactive brain. "For someone with anxiety, it sometimes feels like their mind is like a hamster on a wheel — constantly running, but not really getting anywhere," said Corboy, also founder and executive director of the [OCD Center of Los Angeles](#).

We get anxious because we buy into our thoughts and feelings, he said. We take them at face value and get overwhelmed. Yet our thoughts don't warrant this undivided attention. Again, it's just our minds spinning a slew of worries and what-ifs.

Meditating helps us stop overattending to our thoughts and feelings and "allows us to get off the wheel, catch our breath, and get some perspective."

It also cultivates an attitude of nonjudgmental acceptance, he said. "The goal is not to get to a place where your life is free of problems — that's not possible — but rather to develop the skill of accepting the existence of those problems without overvaluing them."

Corboy shared Shakespeare's quote from *Hamlet*: "There is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so."

According to Corboy, a basic meditation practice readers can try is to focus on your breath. Simply pay attention to the sensation and experience of breathing, he said. When your mind naturally wanders, redirect your attention back to your breath.

Again, using your breath as a focal point means that you're paying attention to the present instead of paying attention to the chatter and noise in your mind, he said.

"[Your breath] is life at its most basic — *what is happening right now ... I am sitting here breathing ... there is air moving in and out of my lungs.*"

Over time, meditating helps to strengthen our attention muscles, he said. As a result, "you become better and better at paying attention to now, rather than running on the mental hamster wheel."

The key is to be patient and committed. Meditation requires patience, because as Corboy said, you probably won't have much of a response in the beginning. "It's not like you sit down, meditate, and voila, you suddenly attain enlightenment."

It requires commitment because it's easy to quit when so many responsibilities compete for your attention, he said.

While meditation isn't a panacea for anxiety, it's still incredibly helpful.

"Ultimately, meditation helps us slow down, get perspective, and think more objectively and with less knee-jerk reactivity. And *that* helps us be less anxious," Corboy said.

Additional Resources

Corboy regularly recommends these Pema Chödrön books to his clients: *The Wisdom of No Escape*, *Start Where You Are*, and *When Things Fall Apart*.

Chödrön is an American Buddhist nun who "translates the principles of mindfulness into language that can be easily understood and implemented by westerners," Corboy said.

Margarita Tartakovsky, M.S. is an Associate Editor at Psych Central and blogs regularly about eating and self-image issues on her own blog, [Weightless](#)

Last reviewed: By John M. Grohol, Psy.D. on 12 Nov 2014 Published on PsychCentral.com. All rights reserved.