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As told to Joshua Sanchez, 1337 words.

Tags: Meditation, Focus, Beginnings, Process.

How to begin meditating

Tip from filmmaker and meditator Joshua Sanchez for using meditation as a tool to alleviate stress and anxiety, and to awaken a positive sense of self in the midst of intense uncertainty.

Many people discover meditation in times of trouble, and for good reason. It's a powerful tool to alleviate stress, anxiety, and depression by awakening a positive sense of self and providing stability in the midst of intense uncertainty.

I'd like to start off by telling you that I'm not a meditation teacher or an expert. I encourage you to explore the practice and its origins on your own and come to your own conclusions about its effectiveness. I take meditation mostly as a tool, not a belief system, although I've found studying the Buddhist dharma to be useful and engaging. If you're allergic to religion (as I am), let me reassure you that although meditation stems from Buddhism, you don't have to be a Buddhist to meditate.

My first experiences with meditation were in college in the mid-90s. I tried it a couple of times. After sitting for several seconds, I would get fussy and think, "Whatever, I fail". Back then you had to seek out meditation training, largely in person, often in weird spiritual centers run by what I deemed to be culty hippies. I found the whole thing to be more trouble than it was worth.

20 years later, In 2015, I went through a debilitating major depressive episode. Although I had little energy to accomplish even the most mundane tasks, I turned to meditation in a desperate attempt to alleviate the symptoms of my illness because, well...I'd simply tried everything else. How could it hurt?

I came across an app called [10% Happier](#) which was started in part by ABC News anchor Dan Harris, who came to meditation after he had a panic attack on live television. It was designed to be an entry point into meditation for "fidgety skeptics," which I took to mean people in the modern world who want no-frills, straight-forward meditation training. Through the app I took beginning guided meditation courses by well-regarded teachers like [Joseph Goldstein](#), [Sharon Salzberg](#), and [Anushka Fernandopulle](#).

After my early failed meditation attempts, I was indeed skeptical. But to my surprise I found this kind of app-based training to be easy to follow and apply, and the teachers to be quite engaging and knowledgeable. They seemed like real people with real lives, and I could practice on my own and not in a spiritual community that I felt uncomfortable with. After a few days of practicing, I found myself a little lighter. I began to savor the small moments of centeredness that I experienced with each sit. Most importantly, I felt a little less depressed. So I stuck with it.

There are many traditions of meditation, each with their own set of practices and histories. The app taught me mindfulness meditation which, as I understand it, stems from a variety of Buddhist traditions. This form of meditation has become increasingly popular in the West, perhaps because it can be taught in a very practical and simple way.

The first technique I learned is simple in theory: notice your breath (or sounds, or touch, or whatever you want to focus on that is immediate and tangible in the moment). Focus on breathing in and breathing out. When your mind wanders into thought, gently bring your focus back to your breathing. This practice produces an inherently calming effect on the body and mind, but it goes way deeper than that.

We humans are literally hard-wired to have lots and lots of complex thoughts—worried thoughts, joyful thoughts, memories, fears, wants, desires, annoyances, etc.. These complex thought patterns helped early humans to hunt, avoid predators, use tools, and have closer relationships that allowed us to form bigger, more successful societies.

In meditation, you're not trying to ignore your thoughts, but to slow down and see them for what they really are: passing instances of brain activity. They come and then they go, just like clouds in the sky. You notice the thoughts, then simply come back to what is in the present moment: the breath. You do this over and over and over and over again. Have a thought, come back to the breath.

What is the benefit of this? If you practice enough you start to realize, "Hey, I'm not my thoughts." This is liberating because it means you don't have to believe your thoughts. And if you're a depressed and anxious person like me, it means you don't have to believe that you're not good enough, or that there is danger around every corner, or that you're an utter failure, or that you're a terrible person. Then you start to feel better. You start to feel alive again.

In 2016, I attended a four-day silent meditation retreat for the queer community at the Insight Meditation Society in Barre, Massachusetts with some of the same meditation teachers I found on the app. For someone who couldn't sit still for 30 seconds 20 years ago, enduring four days of sitting in silence was no easy feat. But I loved it.

One great thing about meditation is that you can learn it by yourself and on your own time. However, you do need a guide. These days, it can be an app, a book, a podcast, or a person.

Here are a few options you can explore for easing into your own meditation practice:

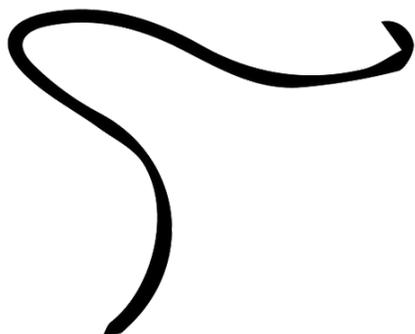
- **Apps:** As I mentioned, I found the app experience to be the easiest, fastest, and most cost-efficient way to learn and apply meditation quickly. I related to the 10% Happier approach, but Insight Timer and the UCLA Mindful app are two others that have great content that is backed by solid science and reputable teachers in the meditation world. There are many, many others, many of which you can try for free.
- **Books:** If books are more your speed, try Jack Kornfield's Meditation for Beginners or Tara Brach's Radical Compassion. Thich Haht Nahn's The Miracle of Mindfulness is a wonderful guide by one of the great masters of Zen Buddhism. The Trauma of Everyday Life by psychiatrist Mark Epstein explores Buddhism and meditation as a source of stability, even while the world is in chaos—globally, personally, or otherwise.
- **Podcasts:** There are also endless podcasts about meditation. You might start with Buddhist Geeks, a modern, youthful take. Or you can explore more traditional dharma talks and guided meditations with the Dharma Seed Podcast. I really love the Rubin Museum's Mindfulness Meditation Podcast which uses art from the museum's collection as inspiration for guided meditations.
- **Classes and retreats:** Once the Covid-19 quarantine has died down, you might want to hook up with your fellow meditators in person, or practice with a particular teacher. Most major cities have meditation centers that offer classes, group sits, and retreats.

Beyond the resources I've listed above, I again encourage anyone interested in meditation to do your own research. It's a vast and fascinating practice with a rich history going back thousands of years, and this guide is just the tip of the iceberg.

My advice is to ease into it. Be open to what in the practice you're most drawn to, and what seems to work best for your particular needs. In the beginning, most people can't sit still in silence for more than a few minutes before they start to get agitated. If this happens to you, don't get discouraged. Building a

meditation practice is like building a muscle. Sit for a minute, then two, then five. I found that sitting at a certain time each day made the practice feel more a part of my regular day-to-day routine, which helped me sit for longer and see results quicker.

I hope you find meditation to be as beneficial as I do. If you stick with it, you'll likely find an invaluable tool to help you through the toughest shit that life can throw at you.



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Vocation

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Fact

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