Crush stress, find calm, and learn to live in the present with this one-month plan.

BY NITA SWEENEY
OU’VE NO DOUBT HEARD about the scientifically proven benefits of meditation. The practice has been shown to lower blood pressure, improve athletic performance, enhance relationships, and even help grow new brain cells.

All that said, you’re an active guy with an active mind. You might think you don’t have time to meditate. You might think you can’t meditate.

But what if most things you thought you knew about meditation weren’t true? What if you didn’t have to practice for all that long? What if you didn’t have to sit to meditate? And what if meditation was actually ... easy?

The biggest myth about meditation is that you have to quiet your mind. You can’t stop thoughts. Instead, effective meditation is about creating the conditions necessary to help your mind calm and your thoughts to slow.

And you don’t have to go anywhere to meditate. You can meditate right where you are while doing ordinary things you do all day long. Plus, if you already exercise, you can make meditation part of your regular fitness plan.

(continued)
To meditate with ease, use this 30-day plan.

Every week you’ll focus on one activity. Similar to lifting weights, these activities will slowly train your mind to stay where you put it—in the here and now.

1. Each day during the workweek, you’ll adopt one small activity that will naturally help you keep your head where your feet are, in the present moment. That’s the point of meditation.

2. On the weekends, you get two days to keep those changes going before moving on to the next week’s challenge.

By the end of the month, those meditative habits will be part of your everyday life. Here’s exactly what to do.

WEEK 1
Hone Your Focus

In the same way you train a muscle, meditation trains your mind. The exercises this week gradually improve your ability to point your awareness on an object and keep it there while you also relax around that point of attention. That combination—focus and calm—is the secret sauce that makes meditation so powerful. But it must be developed, starting a few minutes at a time.

(continued →)
**Day 1  Five-minutes**
Set a timer for five minutes. Use the microwave, your phone, your watch. Anything will do. Sit in a comfortable position with your feet flat on the floor and your back straight, but relaxed.

Bring your attention to the place in your body where you naturally feel the breath. The spot might be your nostrils, your mouth, your chest, or your abdomen. Get curious about it and let it be exactly as it is: shallow, deep, invisible! If an image of this part of your body arises, let that go. Rather than thinking about your breath, feel the sensation of breathing.

When your mind wanders, which it will—the mind’s job is to think thoughts—gently bring your attention back to the place in your body where you naturally feel the breath. This is an important part of the practice: remembering that you have chosen to meditate and the care with which you treat your mind as you return to your breath.

**Day 2  Reps**
If you lift weights, you might count your repetitions. Today, to continue honing your focus, count your breaths. Set your five-minute timer again. Bring your attention to your breath. But this time, instead of noticing the sensations, count each inhale and exhale. On the inhale, count one. On the exhale, count two. Count from one up to ten. If you lose track, begin counting again at one. If you reach ten, return to one. Again, it is normal for your mind to wander. You are training it to lift the weight of attention. You don’t need to change the breath or force it in any way. Simply count what is there.

**Day 3  Steps**
Another way to train your mind is to count your steps. Choose a short walk, maybe across the parking lot to work or from the kitchen to the bedroom, and notice the way it feels to walk. Sense how your foot feels in your shoe or how it hits the floor. Similar to how you counted your breath, count your footfalls from one to ten. Any time your mind wanders, simply bring it back to the sensation of your foot hitting the ground.
Day 4  **Memory muscle**
Today, choose one of the previous three methods of training your attention. Begin and, as always, notice when your mind wanders. Again, this is normal. This is what minds do. And, when you remember that you had chosen these moments in which to meditate, give yourself a mental pat on the back for remembering. You’re training your mind to focus and remember.

Day 5  **Easy does it**
Again, choose a general breath focus, counting your breaths, or counting your steps as your practice. Once you’ve begun. Notice when your mind strays for wherever you have chosen to place the attention. This time, be aware to how you treat yourself when you bring your mind back to the thing on which you have selected to focus. Do you berate yourself? Are you criticizing yourself for a lack of attention? Instead of that negative energy, can you gently bring your mind back? A firm, but gentle awareness makes you more likely to stay with the practice.

---

**WEEK 2**

**Be in Your Body**

Many meditation practices use the breath as the primary focus. (It’s a common denominator because everyone breathes.) But you can also use your five senses as the “object” on which you meditate. Sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch provide tremendous variety and allow you to find the meditative practice most convenient and enjoyable for you.

Day 1  **Taste your food**
Many busy people inhale their food or eat while reading or scrolling on the phone. Try something different. During any meal, slow down enough to taste one bite of your food. Is it salty or sweet? Is it crunchy or smooth? Do sensations arise anywhere else in your body?

(continued)
Day 2 **Smell something pleasant**
Everything has a fragrance. Perfume. Cologne. Flowers. Food. Your partner. Your child. Even your pet. Today, choose something pleasant to smell. As you bring it to mind, before you even smell it, notice if you anticipate the pleasantness. Give it a good whiff. As you smell it, attend to any sensations in your nose. Also be awake to sensations that might flood through the rest of your body. If the fragrance lingers, notice that. And if it passes, be awake to any emotion that might result.

Day 3 **See something in a new way**
Tune into the visual field today. Choose your favorite color and, throughout the day, notice it when it appears. Does seeing it cause any emotions to arise; any sensations in your body? Also notice when it is not there. Does the absence of a color you find pleasant create any other type of experience? Don’t spend too much time on it. Just allow the color to present itself to you throughout the day.

Day 4 **All ears**
Is there a sound you hear regularly during the day? It might be your cell phone or an elevator voice or Siri or Alexa or your GPS. Choose one of those and really listen. Try to hear it without thinking about what it is. Is the sound pleasant or unpleasant? Do you notice an urge to act when you hear it? Resist that for now and simply listen to this familiar sound in a new way.

Day 5 **Clothes make the man**
Once you’re fully dressed today, be aware of any place where your clothes touch your skin. Does that place feel loose or tight? Is the surface touching you rough or smooth? Is it heavy or light? A few times today, stop long enough to notice any sensations that arise from the places where your clothes touch your body.
WEEK 3
Mindful Microhits

In addition to the type of intervals you did last week, you can ease into new meditative habits one mindful moment at a time, a few times each day. Research shows that as little as five minutes of meditation offers similar benefits as meditating for much longer periods.

Day 1 Three cleansing breaths
Several times during the day, take three extra-deep breaths. These big breaths bring you into the present moment. If you can extend the exhale for a second or two, that will also calm the flight-or-fight mechanism of the body.

Day 2 Door to awakening
Most of us go through doors all day long without paying much attention to them. Today, let doors serve as a reminder to bring your mind right into this moment, right where you are. Each time you open or close a door, notice the sensation of your hand on the handle. If it is a doorknob, feel the twist of your wrist as you turn it. If you push the door, notice your hand against it and the way your arm feels as you exert only enough pressure for the door to swing.

Day 3 Magic touch
Choose something inanimate that you regularly touch during the day: computer mouse, keyboard, touchpad, steering wheel, gear shift. The first time you use this today, notice how it feels. Is it cold, warm, soft, hard, smooth, or rough? Spend few seconds in the present moment becoming more familiar with this thing you use every day.

Day 4 The power pause
When you need to make a phone call, before you pick up your phone, stop. Count to three. Then pick up your phone and make the call. Part of meditative practice is learning to put your mind where you want it to be and acting rather than reacting. Let your phone be a reminder to bring your attention back to where you are, right here in this moment.

(continued)
Day 5 Doorway redux
For the final day of this week, use doorways again. All day long, most of us walk from one destination to another lost in thought. Today, as you walk, each time you walk through a doorway whether in a building or an entrance or exit, pay attention to which foot goes through the door first? Let doors and doorways serve as a meditation reminder and bring your attention to your foot. Once you’re through the door, go on with your day.

WEEK 4
Fit Body, Fit Mind
You’ve spent the past few weeks honing your meditation skills. This week, take it into your workout routine. Meditation can adapt to any environment and can be done anywhere at any time. And research shows that meditative skills enhance any fitness activity. These practices will help you meditate on the go.

Day 1 Choose an interval
In the previous weeks, I chose the interval for you. During each day of this week, since you will be meditating while you move, choose your own interval as it works with your chosen practice.

If you walk or run, choose a time period or distance. For a racquet or paddle sport, choose a place on the court or an activity such as when you serve. Baseball, basketball, soccer? Perhaps an inning or a quarter or a half. Make it manageable. Once you’ve decided on an interval, choose a focus such as one of your senses. Throughout the interval, practice keeping your mind on that focus as much as you can while doing your activity.
Day 2 **Choose an object**
The thing on which you focus your attention is called the “object of meditation.” In the previous exercises, you can see how I pointed you toward one of your senses such as taste, smell, vision, touch, or hearing. These are also what you will use for meditating during movement. It’s completely adaptable to whatever you choose.

Day 3 **Remember and return**
During your interval when you choose that object of meditation and engage in your activity, your mind will wander just as it does when you are sitting, standing, or lying down. It may wander more because you’re engaging in the activity. When you remember that you are also meditating as you move, give yourself a mental gold star for remembering. Then return to the practice.

Day 4 **Gentle giant**
Today, focus on being gentle with yourself when your mind wanders. You did this during a previous week, but now you’re meditating while you’re moving and it is even more important to give yourself even more kindness as you bring your mind back. Training your mind is difficult. You will more easily build that mental muscle with gentleness than force. It’s more efficient to not waste energy berating yourself. Only use as much effort as is needed and no more.

Day 5 **Drop the story**
For this final day, be aware of any stories you may tell yourself about meditation, effort, or what you have done this month. Meditation trains us in the art of efficiency. Extra layers of drama only drag us down. Be with exactly what is, no more, no less. Your effort is enough.

**NITA SWEENEY,** award-winning author, ultramarathoner, and certified meditation teacher
[https://nitasweeney.com](https://nitasweeney.com)