

Title: Meditation for the Medical Student

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Why would a medical student wish to begin a meditation practice?

Medical school is challenging in ways that might lend themselves to self-improvement through meditation. As a medical student, you face constant demands, and these demands are stressful and sometimes contradictory. You are asked to consistently demonstrate competence and mastery, and at the same time allow yourself to be in a learning process – to be a fumbling beginner.

Meditation can help foster new strengths and sources of calm for the medical student. Medical school requires intense concentration and preparation, which can lead to insecurities and worries about the future, as a physician and in your personal life. Luckily, two simple approaches to meditation tackle these concerns head-on. The first, aptly named "**concentration meditation**," is a method for developing the exact skills needed for exam preparation. The second, "**mindfulness meditation**" emphasizes the importance of non-judgment about ourselves and our thoughts. Both methods can be easily applied to the unique struggles one faces as a medical student and can offer practical solutions to stress and self-doubt, while improving one's aptitude for medical education.

Examinations are ever-present and another important source of stress for students. Studying requires long periods of concentration on detailed material, in the hope of weaving together a semi-coherent whole. In concentration meditation, you practice attending to the present-moment sensation of breathing... until your thoughts start to wander... and then you gently, with acceptance, notice your thoughts and bring your attention back to the breath. With practice, your ability to concentrate on the breath lasts longer and longer, and the ability to gently redirect attention gets better and better.

Lack of concentration on the task at hand sometimes comes when your mind wanders to anxieties about potential future outcomes. While your task in the present is to focus on a particular piece of information – a list of ECG tracings, for example – your thoughts may wander. You might go to speculation about what your exam score will be... then to doubts about passing... or to attaining the specialty you always wanted... and then perhaps to random thoughts and sounds. With a mindset informed by concentration meditation, you can notice fretful thoughts with acceptance and self-compassion, and gently bring your attention back to the material you are learning in this moment. With practice, you can get better at this process.

Here's another thing meditation is good for: putting those fretful thoughts about the future into their proper place. How does this work? Meditation is a great way to study your mind. In mindfulness meditation, you learn to watch your thoughts and feelings without judgment. Noticing and accepting a thought is a great way to begin to detach from it. For example, take this idea: "I need at least a 230 on Step 1 to have a good career and a good life." When we are not

in a mindful state, we might over-identify with thoughts like this, without pausing to question their veracity or utility. With a mindfulness meditation practice, thoughts like this can begin to transform. We see them for what they are: desires to control the future and modulate anxiety by focusing on a specific outcome.

As a medical student, you have been trained to focus on outcomes. Before medical school, you were used to setting and achieving goals. To get into school, you must have been pretty good at achieving goals! Goal-orientation certainly has its utility, but it also presupposes that by working toward a goal, you can control the future. Being rigidly attached to goals can interfere with being fully present with your current experience. In medical school, rigid adherence to goals may outlive its usefulness. It is helpful to perceive how patterns of thinking and behavior that may have been adaptive at getting you into medical school can become mal-adaptive.

Concentration Meditation Instructions

The immediate goal of concentration meditation is to focus your complete attention on the breath. This practice can bring about a sense of calm and develop your capacity to attend to the present moment.

- Before you begin, choose a length of time for your session. Beginning a meditation practice is much like beginning an exercise training program. You want to avoid starting out too ambitiously and risk getting discouraged or overwhelmed. Shorter and more frequent sessions are preferable to longer ones. Choose a time that feels manageable; as few as three minutes is acceptable.
- Use a device to keep track of time. There are several good smartphone apps that can help keep track of time. “Insight Timer” is a good one.
- What to do with your body. Many teachers recommend sitting on a small pillow, with legs crossed, to maintain a stable and erect posture. We recommend that you find a position that you can hold comfortably for several minutes: sitting on a chair or even lying down are acceptable. Experiment with different postures to find the one that works for you.
- Close your eyes, and try to keep your body still. Your mind is analogous to a cup of muddy water; the longer you keep the cup still, the more the mud settles and the clearer the water will appear. If you keep quiet without moving your body, sometimes your mind will follow.
- Breathe normally, and focus on the breath. Try to focus your attention on wherever you can feel the sensation of it most distinctly. For many people, this is at the rims of the nostrils.
- In order to help you concentrate on the breath, count your breaths. Take a breath in, and when the lungs are full, mentally count “one,” and then breathe out completely. Then mentally count “two.” Take another breathe in and count “three,” and breathe out completely again. When you have finished breathing out, mentally count “four.” Count your breaths in this manner up to ten. Then count backwards from ten to one.
- In spite of your effort to keep your mind on your breathing, the mind will wander. When you notice your focus has drifted, notice and accept that your mind has wandered, perhaps noting where it was drawn, and then gently direct your attention back to the breath and begin counting again.
- Continue counting your breaths until time is up.

Mindfulness Meditation Instructions

Mindfulness meditation has much in common with concentration meditation, but it differs in important ways. While the main goal of concentration meditation is to focus your bare attention on your breath, the main goal of insight meditation is to develop non-judgmental and curious awareness through close observation of your moment-to-moment experience. .

- Follow the same steps as above through “Breathe normally, and focus on the breathe.”
- Instead of counting your breaths, continue merely focusing your attention on the sensation of your breathing.
- You will find that your mind will wander. If you pay careful attention to the present moment, you will notice that thoughts tend to emerge spontaneously. You may have thought about the future, the past, or the present. Your thoughts may seem to arise in the form of ideas, sounds or images. Likewise, your attention may be drawn to a bodily sensation, or emotional states. .
- When a thought arises, try to observe it with curiosity and acceptance. Note its presence and its nature. If you focus your attention on it, you may find that it soon fades away. Then gently bring your attention back to the breath.
- Sometimes thoughts will grab your attention and pull you in. This is okay! If you notice this has happened, simply note this with acceptance, and bring your attention back to the breath.
- If you’re not sure what to do, or if you become confused or disoriented, you can always bring your attention back to the breath. In this respect, your breath acts as your “anchor.”
- Continue with this practice until time is up.

I can’t meditate because I’m too easily distracted.

If you tend to be easily distracted, then all the better! Distracting thoughts are not only inevitable in meditation, they are expected and form the basis for your practice. The repeated cycles of getting distractions, noticing those distractions, and then pulling your attention back to your breath are the basic units of meditation. Furthermore, constantly pulling your attention back to your breath cultivates the capacity for attention and avoiding being consumed by distractions.

My body gets uncomfortable or even starts hurting. Is it okay to move to feel better?

At early stages of practice, moving to relieve significant discomfort is perfectly fine. If you feel that you need to move to relieve discomfort, we recommend you move deliberately and mindfully.

I tried meditating and I’m so bad at this! I can’t focus, can’t sit still, can’t count my breathes, etc...

Try not to judge yourself! If you end a session and have had a very hard time concentrating, this is fine. Simply note this fact, and try again. Go easy on yourself.

I am a goal-oriented person, and I need to become better and better at meditating to know that I am making progress toward my goals.

While it is important to have goals with respect to your practice, the sorts of goals one has with respect to a meditation practice are very different than the sorts of goals that orient most medical students. Having rigid, performance-oriented goals can actually *inhibit* your progress in a meditation practice. For example, some practitioners may become annoyed or disappointed if they have not achieved the sense of calm that meditation can bring about. Then they attempt to force it, which sabotages their practice.

What sorts of goals *are* productive for meditation, then? And what goals are unproductive?

Productive goals include setting aside time to meditate; eliminating or reducing outside distractions while meditation; having a sense of humility; and having perseverance after a session that has not matched your expectations. Unproductive goals include being competitive about your meditation and being overly focused on results.

Where to Go From Here

What we have outlined above is two brief sets of instructions to get you started. If you have tried these exercises and want to take your practice further, here we offer a few suggestions for where you might look next.

There are several modalities you might consider if you want to expand your meditation practice. These modalities are not mutually exclusive. Each has attributes that may make it more or less suited to your preferences. We outline these below.

Apps

There are many meditation apps. Here are a few we suggest. Most have a free version that enables you to work on the basics, and a paid-subscription version that allows access for further exploration.

Insight Timer. Among popular meditation apps, this is an all-around good option to start with. It is both a customizable meditation timer and a free library of guided meditation sessions. Its guided meditations are grouped by topics that include “sleep,” “love,” “insight,” and “concentration.” It also features many lectures on these topics.

Calm and *Headspace*. These apps are highly-reviewed, but cost money to access the vast majority of content. They feature guided meditation courses on different themes, like compassion or body relaxation, and focus on the health benefits of a meditation practice.

Waking Up. This is a meditation course created and led by Sam Harris, a neuroscientist, philosopher, and author.

Apps can be good for those with time constraints or those who would prefer exploring their practice alone. One word of caution about meditation apps: Some apps conflate meditation-like practices (e.g. body scans) with meditation, or even feature content that is non-empirical or pseudo-scientific.

Books

Mindfulness in Plain English is a book by Sri Lankan Buddhist monk and academic Henepola Gunaratana published in 1992. It is considered a foundational text in the American Mindfulness Meditation movement and is accessible to meditators at all levels of experience. It begins with the very basics and progresses from there. The author writes simply, but with psychological depth and humor.

Buddhism is True is written by Robert Wright, an evolutionary psychologist. He discusses the evolutionary origins of our emotional experiences, along with a discussion of how meditation might be particularly well-suited to address the difficulties presented by the evolved nature of our minds and their mismatch to our current circumstances.

In-person instruction

Classes:

There are several good meditation resources here at UVM. The UVM Mindfulness program at Living Well offers free drop-in meditation classes and is a great place to start. They assume no prior experience with meditation and typically involve a brief introduction before the session and a short discussion following the session to share and reflect. Living Well also offers multiple-session classes. In our experience, instructors are friendly and welcoming, and can be great resources for both practical meditation advice and guidance toward other resources for advancing your practice. Classes afford the opportunity to connect with others in the UVM meditation community.

Retreats:

UVM Mindfulness offers full- and half-day meditation retreats. These may be ideal if you have already attended several drop-in meditation sessions offered by UVM Mindfulness. Commercial meditation retreats away from UVM are generally better-suited to meditators with more experience. They may last from several days to several weeks or months, and they are usually not cheap. They are described as intense - many require that participants not speak, and you will be meditating many hours per day. However, if what you are after is an intense, immersive, and challenging experience, then we encourage you to consider a retreat