

## **Meditation Creates Space: What That Means in The Context of Anxiety**

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One of the benefits of meditation championed in virtually every wellness essay on the subject is that it reduces anxiety, but how that actually manifests, and how the results feel, are less commonly discussed in detail. The way I describe it to those with anxiety that are interested in exploring meditation as treatment, is that meditation creates space. This can sound very woo-woo, but is actually a relatively concrete description for what is a very abstract phenomenon. To effectively explain what it means for meditation to “create space,” it helps to first outline the process of a triggered anxious mind.

How anxiety has commonly manifested for me is as follows: a situation leads to a stream of consciousness that cascades into imagined doom scenarios. The rampant thinking drags with it strong emotions of worry, fear, and situational disorientation that then can trigger physiological responses in the body; rapid heart beat, stomach and chest cramping—breathing increases towards hyperventilation which exhausts your body of the CO<sub>2</sub> it requires for your muscles to work. Following that, things can begin to shut down as a full-on panic attack builds.

When I sit ( i.e. practice vipassana meditation), I follow the breath and observe my mind. I note when thoughts arise, acknowledge them and allow them to disappear as I return my focus to the breath. Initially this has a mild calming effect. With consistent repetition and time, however, the mind becomes more aware of its thoughts and emotions. It becomes better at noting what arises and letting it slip away behind the steady anchor of the breath. Naturally this practice bleeds over into regular life outside of meditation. The length of time between what I think and feel and my reaction to those things (both physiologically and psychologically) has perceptively increased. I notice that, with the increased time, I can now choose to not react at all to what I’m thinking and feeling. I now have “space” to notice what is coming, and I can adequately “prepare” for it rather than be swept away.

While it is calming, I want to emphasize that meditation is something much larger than a mere relaxation technique. Persistent meditation effectively creates a buffer around thoughts and feelings that “feels” like space—and enough of it to help prevent those thoughts and feelings from building up to the point where we may unconsciously react or become overwhelmed. It also fosters a general sense of equanimity. By recognizing thoughts, their qualities, and learning how they arise and fall away within our minds, we

are fundamentally changing how our mind works and how our body reacts. We are actively cultivating mindful awareness.

I want to note that I am not advocating meditation as treatment for anxiety in lieu of therapy, prescribed medication, and/or lifestyle change. I strongly recommend that *all* avenues of care be explored by each individual to find the best solution for their situation. My intention with what I have described so far, is to convey a reasonable understanding of how meditation helps with anxiety and what the experience is like (for me).

While an adequate description detailing how meditation creates space to mitigate anxiety may be interesting in and of itself, I am compelled to pair it with a call to action: try it for yourself. There is a minimum level of practice (based on my personal experience) that will yield noticeable results. But for readers to gauge whether meditation may be helpful to their particular situation, it may help to offer some context in terms of where I started with anxiety and where I have arrived:

My struggle with anxiety began in my mid-twenties. At the time, I was partially ignoring my bodily distress and partially unaware of the symptoms. When my first attack came on, I thought it was my heart. I had not been diagnosed with anxiety, and had never known anyone that suffered from it. I was completely unprepared for how my life would change.

During the most severe points of my experience, I suffered crippling panic attacks on at least a weekly basis. They were most commonly triggered in public social or workplace settings. This was cause for a great deal of embarrassment, illness, missed work, reinforced isolation, and substance abuse. It affected all aspects of my personal and professional life.

But rather than recount the details of nearly twenty years of coping with generalized and social anxiety, as well as panic disorder, I'll skip to where I ended up: In my early forties, I now have a daily meditation practice. I have not required any medication for anxiety, nor have I had a panic attack, in over a decade. Day-to-day, I do not experience anxiety at a level that even approaches what I'd consider unmanageable. I feel more collected and confident now than I have ever felt in my adult life. Meditation plays a large factor in that.

In the spirit of transparency, I want to add that I do not drink alcohol, I generally avoid caffeine after 11 AM, and I do not take any non-prescription drugs. I strongly believe these lifestyle choices also significantly contribute to my day-to-day mental health (and

also aid the effectiveness of my meditation). While I do view these lifestyle choices as wise observances for everyone, I don't think they are necessary for everyone. I prefer to focus on what I believe everyone *can* do rather than what I may or may not believe one *ought not* do.

To my core, I am an advocate of *daily* meditation practice. But having had my own personal struggles with establishing one through the years, I try to give conservative advice on establishing *consistent* practice. Realistically you want to do at least twenty minutes, three days per week. Try to do it on the same days every week. It can be done sitting cross-legged or up-right in a chair—whatever is comfortable. It doesn't have to be in complete silence and isolation, but should be somewhere relatively quiet and with low potential for disturbances or distraction (a parked car or bathroom, for example, works just fine). Anyone that does this consistently (even when you don't feel like it or it doesn't seem like it's "working") for six months, will begin to create space to not just better cope with anxiety, but also to build general confidence towards coping with whatever comes up in life.

Six months, for some, may seem like a lofty commitment to a new practice, but given that all you need to do is sit still for twenty minutes, three days per week, it's not a big ask. An hour per week for six months is less than 1% (0.6%, actually) of your total time during that period, and you get to spend it getting to better know the most important person in your life: yourself.

Hopefully in understanding what it means for meditation to create space, as well as how transformative that can be, you will commit to trying a consistent practice and see for yourself the difference it makes.

May you be filled with loving-kindness.

May you be healthy and safe.

May you be truly happy and free.