

Meditating In Safety

Meditation techniques are widely practised across the world. Originally being spiritual practices to develop calm and insight, they are now used in schools, hospitals, city councils and the workplace to promote well-being. There is evidence that the practice of meditation brings health benefits and Health Services currently use mindfulness meditation-based techniques to treat depression and anxiety.

However there is also growing evidence that meditation can trigger a variety of unexpected negative psychological, or adverse, effects that anyone practising meditation should be aware of. This can happen whether you are new to meditation or have considerable experience of meditation practice.

What are the potential adverse effects of meditation?

These are some of the reported adverse effects of meditation:

- Increased anxiety, including panic attacks
- Deterioration of mood and worsening of depression
- Feelings of disorientation, dissociation, depersonalisation
- Visual and auditory hallucinations
- Lack of focus and hyperactive behaviour
- Remembering difficult or traumatic memories

How often and why do these adverse effects happen?

Many people practise meditation without such ill effects but occasionally people experience adverse effects from meditating with the most serious symptoms being relatively uncommon. We do not yet know the exact causes of these adverse effects but it is likely the triggers relate to stressful life circumstances.

It is important to note that, within certain meditation traditions, difficulties and challenges are expected to occur but usually go away. However, if the adverse symptoms persist or are difficult to handle

they need to be taken seriously. People very often turn to meditation practice because of problems in their lives but we need to monitor that the practice is liberating them not making matters worse.

In the light of this information here are some suggested safeguards which we hope you will find helpful on your courses and retreats

Suggested safeguards

At a suitable juncture on your course or retreat discuss these issues with your students and if you feel it is helpful distribute our leaflet *Meditating in Safety*; A leaflet for meditation and mindfulness students.

This leaflet can be downloaded from our website:

www.meditatinginsafety.org.uk

Residential courses/retreats

At the start of a residential course/ retreat encourage students to approach a designated person if they feel unwell in anyway, physically or mentally, during the course/retreat. This is particularly important on a silent retreat. You are giving the student permission to break the silence if they have a pressing need. Ideally the designated person should be medically trained or have training in such skills as counselling or Mental Health First Aid (MHFA). Training in MHFA, an internationally accredited course, is available in many countries; see our website for more information.

Look out for signs, such as missing sessions of the programme, being agitated, eating little at meals, that may indicate that the student is struggling and needs to be approached so you can assess their condition. Once you are talking with the student other signs of mental health problems would be having a disturbed sleep pattern, pressured speech, thought disturbance and lowness of mood. It is important to realise that it is common for people, who develop such problems, to lack self-awareness resulting in them not identifying that they are in need of help.

If a student is struggling or experiencing difficulties they should stop attending the sessions of the course and if in a fit state prepare to go home arranging to be collected by a relative or friend if need be. They should then seek appropriate help consulting with their doctor.

Weekly Courses

The teacher should get to know their students so that they would become aware if they were having serious difficulties and give appropriate support, which might involve advising the student to seek medical help.

If a student drops out of the course without talking with the teacher, it would be safe practice to contact them to check everything is all right.

Remember that a student who presents with a mental health problem on your course/retreat may have come with a pre-existing mental health condition or just happens to become mentally ill on your course/retreat independent of the meditation practice.

For more information on the adverse effects of meditation, please see our website: www.meditatinginsafety.org.uk

To arrange a talk/workshop in your area contact:
info@meditatinginsafety.org.uk

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This leaflet was compiled by a Buddhist in consultation with a research psychologist. They sought the advice of a psychiatrist, psychiatric nurses, mindfulness teachers, Buddhist teachers and meditators in creating the final version of this leaflet.



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A leaflet for
meditation and mindfulness

**TEACHERS
and
RETREAT LEADERS**