

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.

How do I know if I need help?

It is important to watch for physical symptoms during or after meditating, such as feeling jittery, shaking, sleep problems or hyperventilation. Psychological symptoms to be aware of include fluctuations in mood or very low mood, feeling more anxious than the usual, have an excessive amount of energy and feeling disconnected from reality. In general, if you notice that the practice of meditation is associated with you feeling unwell in any way or very different from your usual self, you should seek help.

What do I do if I need help?

If you are attending a meditation group or training, you should immediately tell your teacher about your symptoms. However do be aware that teachers vary in how much experience they have and what sort of advice they feel able to give. In particular be wary of teachers who dismiss your experience and do not show genuine concern.

If symptoms persist, you should stop meditating and consult your doctor. If you are away from home while meditating, such as attending an intensive course or retreat, and you are concerned about your mental state, you should arrange to go home asking to be collected by a friend or relative if necessary.

It may also be helpful to seek further spiritual guidance from your tradition/school.

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

STUDENTS