



Creating Calmness in an Uncertain World

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Meditation can help release dopamine and serotonin—the “happy chemicals” that can improve mood, focus and overall health.
- Timed breathing exercises can help foster calmness.
- The way you organize your day can promote better health too.

It's been said that when the world around us becomes more chaotic, the need for our inner world to be more peaceful increases. If that's true, then there are probably many of us who could use *a lot* more inner peace these days.

That's why we turned to Jason Campbell, one of our favorite meditation and wellness experts. Campbell, co-founder of Zen Wellness, has more than 20 years' experience teaching meditation, tai chi, yoga and martial arts. He also teaches entrepreneurs through his Zen Business Bootcamps and composes music for meditation (jasoncampbellmusic.com).

Campbell recently shared some foundational advice about meditation and other methods for finding inner calmness for those who may be new to it, as well as a few action steps—and yes, meditation can involve activity—to help you raise your practice to a higher level when the stress of the outside world heats up.

The case for meditation

Campbell says that the average person has between 60,000 and 100,000 thoughts each day. If you think that's a lot to process, consider this: Most of those thoughts are the same ones we had yesterday and the day before that—our thoughts about what went wrong or what could go wrong play over and over in our heads like a skipping record, creating stress.

A key purpose of meditation is to turn off that incessant and churning stream of thinking, or at least to create some gaps between those thoughts where stillness can occur. When that happens, says Campbell, the brain relaxes and releases dopamine and serotonin—the “happy chemicals” that can improve mood, focus and overall health.

Campbell boils meditation down to what he calls the snow globe analogy. When you shake up a snow globe, the snow flies everywhere—there’s no clarity, only a swirling mass of stuff. But once it’s still, the turbidity settles and clarity reemerges. Our brains work in much the same way—especially if you’re intelligent and successful and have a lot of mental “balls in the air.” Says Campbell: “If you can get into the habit of making your body still and connecting with your breath, you strengthen the nervous system and better regulate your emotions. This reduces mental turbidity, giving you greater mental clarity.”

The power of simply breathing

A big mistake, says Campbell, is when people think they have to sit perfectly still in the “right” position to make meditation work for them. Not so. Simply breathing calmly and methodically can create positive health benefits. Our breath, he points out, indicates our state of mind as well as anything: When we’re stressed, we often don’t breathe or we do so shallowly and rapidly. Calmness is usually accompanied by deeper, slower breathing.

For example, Campbell recommends timed breathing exercises: Breathe in slowly every four seconds (a timed bell can help here), and breathe out four seconds later, over a period of just five minutes. This can be an especially good and easy way for beginners to get started and not put unnecessary pressure on themselves out of the gate.

One technique is to do a type of breathing exercise before you even get out of bed. Known as “the brass basin,” it involves lying in bed and doing timed breathing for five minutes. When exhaling, however, instead of pushing your abdomen outward, pull your navel in toward you. This will heat up your body and help jump-start circulation and digestion as you begin your day. (An added benefit is that by doing this while still in bed, you get some meditation done before any chaos in the day has a chance to strike.)

Tip: Since pulling your stomach inward on an exhalation may feel odd at first, put a pillow on your stomach so you can see your movement more clearly.

That said, there are additional techniques that you can add to your breathing:

- Touch your tongue to the roof of your mouth when doing breathing exercises. This creates moisture, which is healthier than having a dry mouth. It also helps you stay better focused.

- Smile an “inner smile”—a subtle move of stretching your lips outward toward your earlobes and gently lifting the corners of your mouth as you breathe. (Think of it as smiling like the Mona Lisa.) Throughout the day, our faces tend to scrunch from stress and other factors. An inner smile is one small way to help your body open up and release tightness.

Managing your time throughout the day

Another way to achieve greater inner peace that complements meditation is to understand how our bodies, energy and emotions change at various points throughout a typical day. Basing activities around the condition of the body can help smooth the road and make us happier, calmer and more productive in general. For example:

5:00 a.m.–7:00 a.m.: This is the time of the sharpest rise in blood pressure, and a good time to do breathing exercises while in bed.

7:00 a.m.–9:00 a.m.: The stomach is most active. Good time to eat breakfast and take a walk.

9:00 a.m.–11:00 a.m.: The highest testosterone secretion of the day occurs in this window, making this the optimal time for concentrating and planning.

11:00 a.m.–1:00 p.m.: The heart is at its peak level of activity, making this a good time period to exercise, work and eat the day’s main meal.

1:00 p.m.–3:00 p.m.: While the body absorbs nutrients from earlier, it’s a good time to work (and take a short nap, if possible).

3:00 p.m.–5:00 p.m.: Your reaction time is fastest now—making it the ideal period to work, study or walk.

5:00 p.m.–7:00 p.m.: This is when we enjoy the greatest cardiovascular efficiency and muscle strength and have the highest body temperature. Exercise and a light dinner are best.

7:00 p.m.–11:00 p.m.: This is the best time for recovery from the day’s activity. A good time for reading and light massaging of the body before going to bed and starting up again the next day.

Avoiding pitfalls

As with a diet or a gym workout routine, meditation and managing your time around your body's activity throughout the day can quickly get jettisoned when you feel busier than usual or under stress from deadlines and life in general. To maintain a disciplined approach, take note:

- **Don't worry if you miss a day or two.** Five minutes of meditation each day is a great goal to start with. But let's face it: You're going to miss a day or two, especially at the beginning when you're just getting going. Don't beat yourself up about it. Tell yourself going in that you will get distracted sometimes. The same goes for lining up your activities throughout the day: Life will intrude, so don't get discouraged if you find yourself up at midnight getting a task done.
- **Don't stop if you have a "bad" meditation session.** Sometimes, says Campbell, your meditation efforts won't give you clarity—the mental turbidity will remain. Don't get discouraged. Understand going into meditation that it doesn't work every single time. "That's important if you're a driven person, especially, because you tend to be so focused on results," he notes. "If you give up because the results aren't there every time, that turbidity just gets more set in."



Conclusion

The past year or so has really reinforced the idea that there can be a lot of uncertainty and chaos surrounding us that we simply can't control. The good news: If you take a few straightforward actions and apply them consistently over time, you can position yourself to potentially surf on top of that chaos instead of drowning in it.



VFO Inner Circle Special Report

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