





Science shows that
Transcendental Meditation
has real benefits for
body and mind.

Can you afford to try it?

BY SHARLENE BREakey

A Powerful (and Pricey) Way to Better Health

For people of a certain age,

the term “Transcendental Meditation,” or TM, brings flashbacks to the groovy 1960s, when the Beatles took off for India to study the ancient practice with the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi. But far from being just a blast from the past, TM is becoming increasingly mainstream. Fans—and researchers—say it can improve sleep and lower stress and that it’s a powerful health tool for everyone from middle schoolers to veterans with PTSD. There’s one caveat, though: TM comes with a big price tag. Here, we explore whether it’s worth it.

What exactly is TM?

■ ■ ■ Transcendental Meditation evolved from an inner-peace-finding technique that mystics passed among themselves for centuries—it’s part of the same Vedic tradition that developed yoga. It works like this: Twice a day, for 20 minutes, you sit quietly, eyes closed, and mentally recite a mantra. This keeps the mind active while distracting itself from external noise so you can fully turn within. There’s a misconception that practicing TM means learning to push thoughts away, but the reality is quite the opposite, says Norman Rosenthal, M.D., a clinical professor of psychi-

atry at Georgetown University School of Medicine. TM works on the assumption that it’s normal for random thoughts to come and go and that having those thoughts releases tension, he explains.

The vehicle for accomplishing this is the mantra, proponents say. The mantra is a positive and life-affirming vibratory sound that is chosen by the teacher during the first instruction session. “Use of the mantra allows the mind to stay lively but undirected,” says Stuart Rothenberg, M.D., chief medical officer of the David Lynch Foundation. (The nonprofit was founded 18 years ago by the *Twin Peaks* creator to introduce TM to inner-city schoolkids, victims of domestic abuse, and other at-risk populations.) And while some other types of meditation may use a personally meaningful word as the focus, in TM the mantra works precisely because it has no particular meaning for the person meditating. “If it had one, the mind would get caught up thinking about that and stay on the surface level; because it doesn’t, that lets the mind effortlessly sink to quieter and quieter levels,” explains Dr. Rothenberg.

What does the SCIENCE say?

■ ■ ■ Hundreds of studies since the 1970s have shown that TM decreases heart rate, breath rate, and blood pressure. A 2017 review showed that a regular practice effectively lowers blood pressure as much as a weight-loss



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diet and exercise, a benefit that led the American Heart Association to recommend TM. An earlier review concluded that TM was an effective treatment for anxiety. “Even in relatively new meditators with high levels of the stress hormone cortisol, we see the levels go down 10% to 15%,” says Dr. Rothenberg. More recent studies have shown that TM is very effective for treating those who work in high-stress environments. A 2018 study in *The Lancet Psychiatry* suggests that it’s a promising treatment for reducing PTSD in veterans. Other research focuses on first responders. One three-month trial involving health care workers showed that TM significantly reduced chronic stress—especially

burnout. “Health care workers can get emotionally exhausted to the extent that they may stop caring, and that’s where we saw the biggest improvements,” says the study’s author, Sangeeta P. Joshi, M.D., a critical care and pulmonary specialist at Duke Health. The study’s secondary outcomes proved equally interesting: Participants in the TM practice arm reported considerably lower levels of anxiety and an improvement in insomnia. “One of the appealing things is that this intervention is non-pharmacological, and once you learn it, you can carry it with you,” says Dr. Joshi.

A particularly intriguing finding is that a 20-minute meditation allows metabolic rate to drop to a lower

rate than it does during deep sleep, a state known as “restful alertness,” says Andrew Newberg, M.D., director of research at the Marcus Institute of Integrative Health at Thomas Jefferson University Hospital. He explains that this shift is driven by the autonomic nervous system and happens when certain types of intense meditation or spiritual practices calm the sympathetic nervous system, which is responsible for the fight-or-flight response, while also turning on the parasympathetic nervous system, which makes you feel peaceful and relaxed. At the same time, the practices keep your mind alert. This leaves you with a profound sense of arousal and focus but also a deep calm that some describe as bliss.

Dr. Rothenberg says anyone can learn to tap into their body’s natural ability to do this. “Brain research has shown us that TM seems to unlock a hardwired response we all have access to,” he says. “Transcending is like diving into an ocean, which, even when it is turbulent and choppy on top, is calm and still as you go deeper.” While Dr. Joshi says that the study she authored is relevant to health care provider burnout, she is hopeful that inducing this feeling can potentially assist patients with stress-related chronic conditions and further positive changes. “It is potentially powerful because it helps people look at things differently, and if that translates into a change in behavior, we need to study it in the larger population,” she says.

So, why the high **PRICE** to learn it?

■ ■ ■ While TM may seem self-explanatory, practitioners are adamant that you can master it only through taking a course, making it a much bigger commitment than simply downloading an app. “If we pick up a tennis racket without any training, then we’re putting a lot of effort into trying to hit the ball unsuccessfully. In contrast, a pro tennis player makes the game look effortless, but only because they’ve been trained by a coach,” says Lea Cho, the executive director of special projects for the U.S. TM organization, as a comparison.

To learn TM, you must sign up for a course with a licensed teacher (go to tm.org to find one near you). You have four 90-minute sessions over four days, the first of which is always in person with your teacher, who will choose a mantra for you and explain how to use it. After completing the training, you have lifelong access to teachers and the TM app. Still, the time commitment and cost for the four-day course, ranging from \$420 to nearly \$1,000 (based on income), is a big investment. The TM Foundation, which says this money helps cover the operating costs of 180 TM centers and the national offices, offers scholarships and a sliding scale for payment, and groups such as the Lynch Foundation run outreach programs and have helped open meditation centers for children and families in Los Angeles and in one of the poorest neighborhoods in

Washington, DC. Similar centers in New York City and Miami are planned.

In April 2020, just as hospitals became overwhelmed with COVID-19 patients, the Lynch Foundation began a program for health care workers: “Heal the Healers Now” is currently offered in 78 hospitals across the country; it teaches health workers TM techniques and in some cases offers them a place to meditate together in the workplace. Jenny Uguru, D.N.P., director of nursing

at New York City’s Health + Hospitals/ Woodhull, says she was looking for tools to help her staff cope with stress and avoid burnout. While learning TM with her staff, she discovered how much she needed the tools herself. “TM allows me to let go of thoughts about my long list of things to do. I don’t always get a chance to fit it in, but when I do, I am happier, I sleep better, and I’m kinder,” Uguru says. “That filters down to my patients, my staff, and my colleagues.”

3 WAYS TO MEDITATE ON A BUDGET

If you can’t afford the time or money required for TM, here are no-cost options:

1 MINDFULNESS MEDITATION:

The type of meditation offered on apps such as Calm, Headspace, and Insight Timer, mindfulness has been shown in numerous studies to increase focus and reduce stress. Techniques include guided body scans and deep-breathing methods; all involve being intensely

aware of what you are feeling in the moment.

2 KIRTAN KRIYA:

In this simple 12-minute technique, meditators sing “Saa Taa Naa Maa” first aloud, then to themselves, while tapping their fingers in a way that enhances blood flow to the motor-sensory part of the brain. Several small studies have shown that it can improve memory and sleep, decrease anxiety, and raise insulin levels.

3 THE BENSON TECHNIQUE:

Developed at Massachusetts General Hospital, this technique induces a “relaxation response” that lowers metabolism and heart rate. The suggested protocol includes spending about 10 minutes sitting quietly while repeating a word—such as “one” or “peace”—each time you breathe out. You can also perform this exercise during any type of meditative activity, from tai chi to diaphragmatic breathing to jogging to knitting.