

Candle Relaxation

The candle relaxation is a very simple and effective method for relaxing the mind. There are many benefits to this practice. It is a simple form of relaxation/meditation where a visual image is used to help focus the mind.

Why should I relax my mind?

Throughout the day, when we experience stress, our bodies automatically react in ways that prepare us to fight or run. In ME/CFS this natural survival strategy can become over-stimulated. Part of this process includes the increased production of stress chemicals including adrenaline and cortisol. Adrenaline is a good response to short term stress, but long term production of it exhausts us, affects our blood sugar and thyroid levels, suppresses our immune system and makes us prone to illness and fatigue.



Meditation affects the body in exactly the opposite way that stress does; triggering the relaxation response, restoring bodily systems to a calm state, allowing the body to rest and repair itself.

Meditation's effects on the body

When practicing meditation, your heart rate and breathing slow down, your blood pressure normalises, you use oxygen more efficiently and you sweat less. Your production of adrenaline and cortisol normalises, your mind ages at a slower rate and your immune function improves.

The Practice

Find a seated position where you feel most comfortable. Place a lit candle safely on a flat surface approximately 3 to 4 feet in front of you. The candle should be as close to eye level as possible. Stare at the candle for approximately 1 minute then close your eyes and focus on the glowing image that the candle flame has left with you.

As you turn your attention inwards, you will most likely notice the stream of thoughts and self-talk that is running through your mind. The point of this practice is to become aware of the thoughts as they arise and to avoid engaging in them when they do. This can be quite unfamiliar if you haven't tried this type of practice before.

What if my thoughts just keep coming?

Try to just notice the thought and let it pass by without engaging in it. If you notice that you have entered into an internal conversation or thought process, that's fine, just gently pull yourself back to becoming the observer. Don't judge your performance or enter into guilt, regret or anger, or any thoughts of failure as that would defeat the object of the practice. These relaxations or meditations will vary from day-to-day depending on your mental state and stress levels at the time. Try not to have any expectation of how the practice should or shouldn't be.

Some people find it helpful to visualize their thoughts as being attached to clouds or balloons that just float easily away. Use any similar visualization that helps; the object is to become the observer and to just let the thoughts pass by without judgment.

Using the Energy Maintenance practice before this relaxation is a good way to set up the system and encourage a calm internal state. The stimulation of acu-points described in the process encourages production of serotonin and endorphines - natural feel good chemicals.

How long should I practice for?

Keep your eyes closed until the glowing image has disappeared, now open your eyes and stare at the candle again for a minute and repeat the whole process. If you are unfamiliar with this type of practice start small and work up to longer sessions. The effects are cumulative; it gets easier and more rewarding with practice. Try just 5 minutes in total at first and if this feels comfortable start to gradually increase the duration. Ideally 20 minutes twice a day would be good, but just do what feels right for you. Any amount done regularly will have benefits.

With regular practice the process will become familiar with increasingly calmer states of mind being attained. There are many benefits of relaxing the mind, more are being discovered all the time.

What about research?

Some neuroscientists are conducting research into mental states and areas of activity in the brain. During this research they are comparing the brain scans of Tibetan monks who are long-term meditators alongside non-meditating individuals.

During their meditation, the monks show an increased level of activity in key areas of the brain, along with comparatively large increases in high-frequency brain activity called gamma waves. Thought to be the signature of neuronal activity that knits together far-flung brain circuits, gamma waves underlie higher mental activity such as consciousness.



The research by neuroscientist Richard Davidson, of the University of Wisconsin, is centered around the topic of neuroplasticity. The term refers to the brain's recently discovered ability to change its structure and function, in particular by expanding or strengthening circuits that are used and by shrinking or weakening those that are rarely engaged.

Prof. Davidson states, "the fact that monks with the most hours of meditation showed the greatest brain changes gives us confidence that the changes are actually produced by mental training." That opens up the possibility that the brain, like the rest of the body, can be altered intentionally. Just as resistance exercises sculpt the muscles, so mental training sculpts the grey matter in ways scientists are only beginning to fathom.

A different kind of rest

Considering all of the benefits involved, I would encourage everyone to use some form of relaxation or meditation, whether experiencing or recovering from ME/CFS or not. This type of rest is not accessed through sleep. The candle relaxation is an easy way to start and there are many other forms to explore.

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