

Can Meditation Help Caregivers?

by Rosanne Burke, PAC Certified Independent Trainer

Do you meditate? Do you know people who do? Meditation is a practice that is gaining in popularity. An increasing number of people are interested in learning how to meditate and how to incorporate meditation into their busy lives. The practice of meditation, however is not new. It has been around for hundreds, perhaps thousands, of years. Science in recent years has been catching up in terms of proving its many benefits. What exactly is meditation and mindfulness? What role can it play in improving our health?

Meditation is a mind-body practice and in simple terms, it means being aware and focusing our attention. Mindfulness is the ability to be present and not overly reactive to what is going on around us. Mindfulness can be cultivated by meditation and is a muscle that gets stronger the more we use it and *exercise* it. The great thing about meditation is that anyone can do it regardless of age, and there are many books, apps, or classes available to help a person learn.

There are different types of meditation including sitting, walking, yoga, tai chi, and qi gong. Regardless of the type, they have several benefits in common. Meditation has been shown to reduce stress, anxiety, and depression, improve concentration and focus, increase happiness and provide a sense of peace and wellbeing, induce relaxation, boost immunity, lower blood pressure, and improve cardiovascular health.

Perhaps the greatest impact meditation can have on our health is in dealing with the harmful effects of stress. Many people in our society report having high levels of stress due to the difficulty of juggling the demands of work, school, family, and other responsibilities. Chronic stress is correlated with adverse effects on both physical and emotional health. High levels of the stress hormone cortisol can damage the hippocampus, the memory and learning centre of the brain. Meditation can help to reduce cortisol levels which is good for our brain. People who meditate on a regular basis have also been found to be less anxious, depressed, and better able to handle stress overall.

Caregivers of persons with dementia may experience higher levels of stress than other people as a result of the caregiving role. They have an increased risk of developing depression and anxiety. Family members must deal with and adapt to the changing needs of the person they care for, the many unknowns of the disease and the unpredictability of living with and caring for a person with dementia. As a group, caregivers may benefit from meditation as a technique for helping to reduce stress and improve overall wellbeing.

I have been meditating for 10 years and can speak firsthand to the tremendous benefit it has had on my life. Early on, I experienced improvements to my sleep and mood. I was less irritable and depressed and better able to cope with stress. I have developed many friendships through the workshops that I have gone to and I look forward to a weekly group that I attend. Meditation has impacted my life in almost every area and has provided me with physical, mental, and social benefits.

As I moved into the role of caregiver to my father about five years ago, my meditation practice has been a great tool to have in my toolbox. It has helped me to cope with the stress and challenges of caregiving. It has improved my quality of life, and that of my dad's, by allowing me to be more mindful of what is going on around me in a variety of situations, to practice my Positive Approach® to Care without being overwhelmed, and to enjoy the small moments as they happen. And because I am more mindful, I also recognize when I need a break and need to step away or take a time-out.

How long do you need to meditate each day? The answer is unclear and more research is needed. Any small amount of time is likely to provide benefit and some people recommend starting with as little as five minutes a day. If you are interested in meditation, you may want to check with a healthcare provider prior to starting. Getting their advice on how and where you can get started may be very helpful. Many people find out about the meditation classes that I attend through their doctor who has recommended it as a safe place to go.

You may want to try different types of meditation until you find one that appeals to you. Try to stick with it for at least a few months. Like any skill, it takes time to develop and it's a *muscle* that will get stronger the more you do it. Undoubtedly, we will continue to hear about the many ways that meditation can positively affect both our body and our brain.