Empty your mind

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If you are suffering from the stress and strains of life during the pandemic, have you considered meditation? By BADN Chief Executive **Pam Swain**

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May was World Meditation Day and, as someone who has been meditating for more than 30 years, I decided to write an article on my own experiences of meditation.

First of all, what is meditation? The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines it as 'serious and sustained reflection or mental contemplation'. Although often associated in the public mind with Buddhism, yoga and other Eastern philosophies, or with cloistered monks and nuns (someone famous once said 'Prayer is talking to God; meditation is listening to the

answer'), you don't have to be a follower of any particular religious practice to meditate.

Forms of meditation

There are many different forms of meditation – some which require instruction, some which don't. 'Mindfulness' is all the rage at the moment – to the extent of becoming a grossly over-used and ultimately meaningless expression – but it just means being aware. Some meditation practices require you to empty your mind; others to concentrate on just one thing – a candle flame, for example; while others use 'active' meditation.

Transcendental meditation (TM) was

founded by the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi (famously spiritual advisor and guru to the Beatles, back in the 1970s) and consists of sitting quietly and mentally repeating a 'mantra' – a word or sound which is given to you by the TM teacher. TMers practise twice a day, for 20 minutes each time (although advanced practitioners, known as Sidhis, practise for several hours at a time).

TM devotees believe that daily practice reduces stress, anxiety and depression, aids relaxation, improves digestion and sleep, and improves health. The so-called 'Maharishi Effect'* claims that if 1% of an area's population meditate, this has a beneficial effect on the

environment, reducing anger, violence and war in that region.

I first started practising in 1988 when I was living in Bermuda, and still practise – although intermittently! Anyone who has attended a National Dental Nursing Conference will probably have wondered why I'm sitting in a corner with my eyes closed – it is because meditating helps me deal with the stress of conference organisation and management! I'm in illustrious company – many famous people from the Beatles onwards are TM practitioners, including Russell Brand,² Hugh Jackman, Katy Perry, Cameron Diaz, David Lynch, Jennifer Aniston and Gisele Bündchen.³

The Silva Method

I can make my mind go blank at any given moment – but for those who prefer a more active meditation, there is the Silva Method. Jose Silva grew up in Laredo, Texas and, through his interest in electronics and radio, began his research into the human mind and brain waves in 1944. This work in the area of Psycho Neuro Immunology (PNI), originally to support his children with their schoolwork and educational development, led to the development of the Silva Method – which has been taught around the world since 1966 to more than 10 million people.

The Silva Method is based on the premise that humans use very little of their brain, and function mainly at the beta brainwave level,

'TM devotees believe that daily practice reduces stress, anxiety and depression, aids relaxation, improves digestion and sleep, and improves health.'

when conscious and awake. Silva graduates learn to slow their brain waves to the alpha level – independent scientific studies have demonstrated that alpha brain wave activity is associated with inner levels of mental activity, tranquillity, rest, inspiration, accelerated healing, creativity, intuition, learning and memory.

'The Silva Method course consists of guided exercises. You first learn how to put yourself into a relaxed state. You then progress to simple, yet highly effective mental techniques, using visualisation, imagination, positive thinking, and dynamic meditation. Each exercise leads you to greater awareness and a greater ability to take control of your thoughts and mind, which enables you to solve your problems and gain a better perspective of your life, so that you can manifest your desires and create personal happiness and success in all areas of your life.'⁴

When I originally did what was then called the basic Silva course in Bermuda in 1989, followed by the Ultimate course in Laredo with Jose Silva himself, graduates could repeat the course anywhere in the world with any teacher free of charge. Thirty years later, economic reality means that a repeater's fee is now required, but this is much less than the normal course cost.

UK Certified Silva Instructor Karin Barnes, with whom I repeated the course online last summer, spoke at a recent BADN Coffee CatchUp on stress and relaxation. Karin's presentation and relaxation exercise are available to view on the BADN YouTube channel.

Many well-known self-help authors – such as Shakti Gawain, Louise L. Hay, Wayne Dwyer, Dr O. Carl Simonton – started out by taking the Silva Method, and credit Jose Silva and the Silva Method in their own work. In accordance with Jose's own modesty and humility, the Silva Method does not advertise celebrity graduates – Jose himself never became a spiritual guru or media personality.

Again, you do not have to follow any spiritual or religious path to be a Silva grad

– graduates are from all religions... or no religion at all. You can find books on the Silva Method in good bookstores and on Amazon, but the best way to learn is to take a course – in person or, since mid-2020, online.

These are just two methods of meditation available in the UK today, the ones of which I – a confirmed agnostic – have personal experience. I am happy to discuss my experiences with both traditions with anyone who is interested in meditation but is hesitant about the first steps.

Outside her role as BADN Chief Exec, Pam Swain is a US certified massage therapist, an accredited facilitator for Heal Your Life workshops, a TM practitioner, a Silva Grad and a Mental Health First Aider.

Pam has written previously about the Silva Method in BDN Team: <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41407-020-0382-1>.

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'THE MAHARISHI EFFECT'

In 1960, Maharishi Mahesh Yogi predicted that 1% of a population practising the transcendental meditation (TM) technique would produce measurable improvements in the quality of life for the whole population. This phenomenon was first documented in scientific research in 1976 when it was found that when 1% of a community practised TM, the crime rate was reduced by 16% on average. At this time, the phenomenon was named the Maharishi Effect. The meaning of this term was later extended to cover the wider influence generated by group practice of the TM-Sidhi programme. Generally, the Maharishi Effect may be defined as the influence of coherence and positivity in the social and natural environment generated by the practice of the TM and TM-Sidhi programmes.¹