

77 AN INTRODUCTION TO MEDITATION

Antonio E. Puente

University of North Carolina at Wilmington

This activity can be used with any size class if the classroom can be made free from distractions for 10 to 15 minutes. A clock or timepiece with a second hand is needed. No advance preparation is required. The activity can be elaborated by having the class examine the process and results in various ways, for example, by writing narrative descriptions or analyzing the physiological changes with some simple descriptive statistics.

CONCEPT In any introductory psychology course, the lecture on altered states of consciousness not only creates a great deal of interest but also a significant degree of misunderstanding. Students have heard about meditation and relaxation from numerous popular sources and thus may have formulated some preconceived notions about the topic. This exercise is designed to help students develop a more accurate understanding of altered states of consciousness and of meditation in particular.

MATERIALS NEEDED You will need something to keep time with; a large classroom laboratory clock with a second hand is preferable, although a wristwatch with a second hand could be used. Paper and pencil is also required. If possible, you should do the activity in a room free from distractions.

INSTRUCTIONS First, you should explain basic meditation and relaxation strategies to the students. A clear understanding of the purposes of meditation is necessary to dispel myths, misconceptions, or fears that they may have. A few words about the potential benefits of these practices would also be helpful. Give students the option to simply sit quietly with their eyes closed if they do not wish to participate in the activity. After you have answered their questions, begin the exercise by asking students to write a brief paragraph on what they are thinking and how they feel. Then have them record their pulse and respiration rate per minute. Explain that you will be providing a series of simple instructions that they must follow carefully. Turn off the room lights and make sure the room is free from distractions for the next 10 to 15 minutes. Instruct the students to sit erect in a comfortable posture, with their hands on the desk or lap, legs uncrossed, and feet on the ground. After students are in a relaxed position, ask them to take at least 30 seconds (if not longer) to slowly close their eyes. Encourage them to focus on whatever thoughts come into their minds, but to begin letting go of these thoughts; they should "entertain these thoughts briefly." At this point, tell students to clear their minds and to focus on their breathing. Say the following out loud: "Each breath should come from your abdomen; if possible, breathe through your nostrils."

Inhale, let the air in, hold it, let it out slowly." As the students begin to breathe rhythmically, ask them to repeat the word *One* to themselves in an effortless and passive manner. Once they have initiated this pattern, encourage them to briefly entertain new thoughts or ideas that come into their minds, but to always return to breathing and repeating the word *One*. After 10 minutes of this exercise, ask them to stop repeating the word *One* and to focus only on their breathing. After approximately 1 minute of breathing only, tell the students to start focusing on bodily sensations as well as the sounds of the room around them. Give the students about 30 to 60 seconds of this reorientation period before asking them to slowly open their eyes and sit quietly for a moment. Then ask them to take their pulse and respiration rates again and to write a brief paragraph about how they feel now.

DISCUSSION

You should elicit general comments, positive and negative, about the exercise from the class. Next, have the students chart group pulse and respiration data to determine whether any physiological effects were noted. Descriptive statistics, including a distribution graph, could be the basis of student discussion. Emphasize the limitations not only of the meditation experience (e.g., the classroom setting) but also of the limited sophistication of the dependent variables. More detailed meditation instructions can be found in either Benson (1975) or Shapiro (1980).

REFERENCES

Benson, H. (1975). *The relaxation response*. New York: William Morrow.
Shapiro, D. H. (1980). *Meditation: Self-regulation strategy and altered states of consciousness*. New York: Aldine.

**SUGGESTED
READING**

Naranjo, C., & Ornstein, R. (1971). *On the psychology of meditation*. New York: Viking.
Shapiro, D. H., & Walsh, R. N. (1984). *Meditation: Classical and contemporary perspectives*. New York: Aldine.