



# Active Meditation

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A basic tenet of many Eastern philosophies is that worrying about the future, as well as thinking about the past causes internal unrest. There is anxiety around the future, and many regrets and frustrations about the past. By staying only in the present, these disruptive thoughts can be minimized. But how do you accomplish this?

## “White Bears”

We know from a 1987 paper, *Paradoxical Effects of Thought Suppression*, (1) by Dr. Wegner out of Harvard, that the more you try not to think about something, the more you will think about it. The paper has been nicknamed, “White Bears.” This is not news to any of us.

But Dr. Wegner went further in demonstrating that there was also trampoline effect, in that in the act of trying to suppress a thought, you actually think about it a lot more. When you frame this discussion in terms neurological programming instead of psychology, this phenomenon becomes a huge problem.



## You are not your thoughts

As I discussed previously, you are not your thoughts. While skilled meditators are able to connect deeply with the environment and detach from their thoughts, I could never achieve a high enough level of skill to calm me down. Then, I discovered “active meditation,” which seems to really help my patients as well.

## The conversation

Here is what I discussed with my patients. “You cannot control your mind with your mind. When your mind is racing, your body will be tense and tight. Different organ systems will respond in their own specific way. The harder you try to force yourself to calm down, the faster your brain will spin.

Disruptive thought patterns are deeply imbedded, creating sustained elevations of stress hormones. One effect of this is to sensitize nerves and increase pain. Another effect is to create the sensation of anxiety.

As you cannot fix or repair these disruptive thought patterns, an alternative is to shift off of them and on to more functional and enjoyable circuits. Placing your attention on sensory input from your environment can quickly and easily do this. Any sense works – sound, smell, taste, feel, pressure, sight, etc.”



### **Three steps to active meditation:**

I attended a meditation retreat given by Alan Wallace, a prominent researcher in integrating Buddhist contemplative practices with Western science. The steps to active meditation are as follows:

- Relaxation
- Stabilization
- Focusing on a sensation

### **Active mediation in clinic**

I practice this daily while I'm on the run, including while I performed surgery. If I was a little behind and rushed during clinic, I would do it with my patients. We'd all sit back in our chairs, letting our shoulders sag,

and jaws relax. We would take a deep breath and let it go. (Relaxation). We then let ourselves stay relaxed for 5-10 seconds (stabilization), while I had them listen to the ventilation system. Then we'd shift our attention to people's voices outside the door, our feet on the floor, and back to the vent. It all took about a minute.

Invariably everyone in the room felt more relaxed. I could hear my voice change to a lower pitch. We had shifted our attention off of our racing thoughts to the current moment through sensory awareness. It was an exercise that I encouraged them to do often. Eventually, it became almost automatic.

During surgery, if I felt a little distracted, I would quickly take a breath, relax my shoulders and focus on having a light grip on my instruments. As I performed this maneuver multiple times a case for years, it became fairly automatic. By being connected to the move and the present moment, my technical complications significantly dropped.

### **The past is the past**

You cannot change the past. Your thoughts will become more disruptive the harder you analyze and try to fix them. You also cannot fix yourself. However, you can shift your attention to the sensory input that is immediately in front of you. It is truly that simple.

### **Reprogramming**

There are three steps in reprogramming your nervous system: awareness, detachment, and redirecting. The simple writing exercise of writing down your negative thoughts and ripping them up accomplishes awareness and detachment. You have now created space between you and your thoughts on paper. Those thoughts are associated with vision and feel, which is connected to your unconscious brain. Redirecting your attention through active mediation is one of the foundational reprogramming tools

Let the past go. It is over and done. Don't let the past continue to diminish the joy of being alive today. Let your attention settle on what is right in front of you and connect to it.

1. Wegener, D.M., et al. Paradoxical effects of thought suppression. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* (1987); 53: 5-13.