



Meditation Guide

The benefits of meditation for
emergency services workers
and volunteers



**EMERGENCY
SERVICES
HEALTH**

We've got your back

The benefits of meditation for emergency services workers and volunteers

Enough physical health. Let's talk mental health.

Volunteers are special type of people. They give their free time, and moments with their loved ones, to help strangers.

Volunteers come in many forms. Yes, you can run into burning buildings or swim out into dangerous surf to be a volunteer. But it's also as simple as taking time to help a new employee. However, for this guide, we're talking community volunteers – firefighters (paid and unpaid), CFS, recovery workers, surf lifesavers, paramedics, ambulance officers, and nurses.

If that's you, grab a coffee, put your feet up, and read on.

Being an emergency service worker takes guts. You face tragedy and experience miracles, every day. Emergencies happen anytime of the day or night. You always have to be on the ball. When was the last time you were truly relaxed?

But how can you help others when you're tired, distracted, and disconnected? Emotional wellbeing is crucial, and one of the most effective ways to gain this naturally is with meditation.

How meditation can help volunteers

Let's go east for a moment, where meditation started. Some of the earliest written records of meditation come from around 1500 BCE. The Vedas discuss the meditative traditions of ancient India. Around the 6th to 5th centuries BCE, other forms of meditation developed in Taoist China and Buddhist India.

More recently, it's been embraced by the western world as a way of combating stress, anxiety and improving overall health, peacefulness and wellbeing. It's said that the practice of meditation comes from an instinctive and primal need to connect to the universe and one's inner self.

The health benefits of meditation are well known – and the great thing is, they'll be different for everyone. While some people might become more self-aware, others will find they're less stressed and anxious. But what's common is, across the board, long-term practitioners of relaxation methods have shown there are far more 'disease-fighting genes' – according to researchers at Harvard Medical School.

They found genes that protect against pain, infertility, high blood pressure and even rheumatoid arthritis were switched on. This 'relaxation effect', researchers believe, can be just as powerful as any medical drug, but without the side effects.

More encouraging still, the benefits of the relaxation effect were found to increase with regular practice: the more people practised relaxation methods such as meditation or deep breathing, the greater their chances of remaining free of arthritis and joint pain, along with stronger immunity, healthier hormone levels and lower blood pressure.

This is proof that your state of mind affects the body on physical and genetic levels.

While there are many physical and mental benefits of meditation, here are some good ones;

- A MIND FREE OF STRESS
- REDUCES 'AGEING'
- HELPS YOU APPRECIATE LIFE
- HELPS YOU FEEL CONNECTED
- MAKES YOU HAPPIER
- IMPROVES YOUR BRAIN FUNCTIONALITY
- HELPS YOU SLEEP
- IMPROVES YOUR METABOLISM & AIDS IN WEIGHT LOSS
- BOOSTS IMMUNITY & HELPS FIGHT DISEASE
- INCREASES YOUR ATTENTION SPAN.

As you can see, meditation can heal the body and mind. A mind that always has to be 'on', in order to save lives.



The magic of mindfulness

Meditation and mindfulness is the quality or 'state' of being conscious or aware of something. It involves achieving a mental state by focusing on your awareness of the present moment, while calmly acknowledging and accepting your feelings, thoughts and bodily sensations.

Achieving mindfulness is the act of observing, describing and acting with awareness of the present moment – without judgement or reaction.

Mindfulness is all about feeling. Once you feel it, you can heal it. It's a great tool to help you become aware of thoughts that are stressing you – stresses you might not even be aware of. By practicing mindfulness, you can start to pay attention to what's going on in the present moment, instead of drawing your thoughts back to the past or into the future. You start to live, because life only exists right here and now.

Research shows that mindfulness enhances the emotion regulation, empathy, cognitive performance and working memory. Combined, these are ingredients of a healthy, empathetic and motivated emergency service worker.

Resilience isn't part of the job description, but it's one of the most important qualities for emergency service workers. The more you can build your resilience, the better you can perform at work. Mindfulness training is the bridge to nurturing our body, mind and spirit.

According to Loren Christensen in his book 'Meditation for Warriors: Practical Meditation for Cops, Soldiers & Martial Artists', you don't need to follow a particular religion, belief or guru. You don't need to believe in a higher being. Meditating, in its simplest form, is about making you a better 'warrior'. Christensen shows his readers how to meditate whenever and wherever you want – and without anyone knowing.

Guided meditations are a good place to start.

There are many free tools available for beginners. A few great apps to try include Take a Break, Headspace, Mindbody Connect, Buddhify and Calm.



Remember, mindfulness takes practice. 15 minutes a day, every day. Try one of these four meditations:

The body scan

Starting with your head and working down to your arms and feet, notice how you feel in your body. Sensing your head and neck, simply notice if you feel tense, relaxed, calm or anxious. See how far you can spread any sensations of softness and relaxation to areas of your body that feel tense. Once you reach your feet, work back up your body.

Focused breathing

Sit comfortably. Tune into your breathing, follow the sensation of inhaling from your nose, into abdomen and out again. Let any tension go with each exhalation. When you notice your mind wandering, return to your breath.

Repeat a mantra

The relaxation response can be evoked by sitting quietly with eyes closed for 15 minutes twice a day, and mentally repeating a simple word.

The science of sleeping

Volunteers don't just have to deal with shifts. We can get called at any hour of the day or night. We don't have the luxury of routine and regular sleeping patterns. For this reason, we need to take it into our own hands to find what works for each of us.

Getting a good night's sleep is important for everyone, but especially emergency workers. We're dealing with human lives every day. This pressure can get to us. But sometimes it's better to keep things simple. Get a good night's sleep. Eat well. Exercise often. Meditate to clear our minds. But, sleep - let's focus on this for a moment.

Australian Health Fund, Allianz and Warwick Medical School in the UK teamed up to conduct a study looking into the connection between sleep and disease.

The results indicated that people reporting sleep of six or fewer hours a night were at higher risk of developing coronary heart disease and stroke compared to people sleeping for the recommended seven to eight hours.

Poor work-life balance is an ongoing issue in Australia, and around the world. A major cause is poor sleep. According to the Lifetime Stress Poll, more than two thirds of Australians lost sleep due to stress. This evidence was backed up in the ABS Census, which showed that nearly 1.7 million Australian workers worked more than 49 hours a week.

More than half were managers and professionals, representing the biggest proportion of people working more than the standard 40-hour week. Compared to other OECD countries, Australians are working longer hours, but devoting less time to eating, sleeping and leisure activities, including socialising with family and friends.

Use meditation to relax your mind. Think of them as mini, power naps. And do what you can do make sleep a priority. Communicate this with your family so

they know not to wake you if you're sleeping during the afternoon or early at night.

This is critical for anyone working odd shifts. You only need a couple of bad nights sleep to start experiencing the side effects. Depression and anxiety arise, relationships start to suffer, and we're less focused, making it hard to think quickly.

And then there's the long-term issues. A lack of sleep causes melatonin production to decrease. This causes the risk of cancer to increase, as well as impairing the immune system, potentially leading to issues such as diabetes, heart disease and obesity. The production of cortisol also increases, too.

In our line of work, it's easy to put 'others' first. It's our job to keep our communities safe, but you can't if you don't look after yourself first.

Meditate, whenever you want

Worried about finding the time to sit down and meditate? There's a common misconception that you have to literally sit still to meditate. Active meditation is a style that embraces movement, followed by silence. Activities such as walking meditation, or turning a daily activity like cooking, cleaning, or your daily commute into meditation.

This is especially of value for volunteers and emergency service workers.

You can do it anywhere, for short or long periods of time. It's just another way of reviewing the tasks you do every day. Instead of being a burden, or another thing to check-off, it can be an opportunity to be mindful.

We all go out for walks or exercise every day. And one of the most effective ways to ground our body (and mind) is through the practice of walking meditation. We use this time to focus and become mindful of our surroundings. Obviously with a walking meditation, you keep your eyes open. This means we're not turning our attention away from the outside world, but rather making a conscious effort to be aware of it - the sun, wind, grass, birds, music, cars, and other people.

The point to active meditation is that any action can be a mindful exercise.

You don't have to dedicate 15 minutes every day with your spine straight and legs crossed. It could be something as simple as cooking your dinner. Turn this into your daily meditation. And when you do, keep these five tips in mind:

1. Don't think, notice

Clear your mind. Try your best not to judge or label what you're doing. Just notice every detail and trust the process.

2. Check your breathing

Your breath is the most important part of meditation. If you find your mind wandering, draw yourself back to your breathing. This will help bring you back to the present moment.

3. Explore your senses

One of the best ways to get in the 'right here, right now' is through your senses. Senses are never in the past or future, so the more you notice them, the more mindful you become. What can you see, hear, smell, feel or taste?

4. Handle negative thoughts

If you can't seem to focus no matter what you do, try something different. Write down your thoughts. Go for a walk. Listen to music. Take a bath. You might just be putting too much pressure on yourself to relax.

5. Accept that it works

If you haven't tried meditation before, it's easy to sweep it under the 'weird-stuff' rug. Your goal should be not to understand or analyse the process, but to simply go with it. Meditation looks different for everyone. Find your way to connect with your inner self.

Find any way to help you get present. It doesn't matter what activity it is.

The benefits of Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response (ASMR)?

Autonomous sensory meridian response, otherwise known as ASMR is a scientific term for brain tingling. It most commonly starts on the scalp and travels down the back of the neck and upper spine, striking relaxation.

It usually comes about through a number of 'triggers'. Mainly vocal and visual, here are a few things that may encourage ASMR:

- LISTENING TO A SOFTLY SPOKEN OR WHISPERING VOICE
- LISTENING TO QUIET, REPETITIVE SOUNDS RESULTING FROM SOMEONE ENGAGING IN A MUNDANE TASK SUCH AS TURNING THE PAGES OF A BOOK
- WATCHING SOMEBODY ATTENTIVELY EXECUTE A MUNDANE TASK SUCH AS PREPARING FOOD
- RECEIVING RANDOM, TENDER PERSONAL ATTENTION.

Try not to think of ASMR as some strange, hippie craze. It's rather a bodily reaction that induces relaxation.

ASMR is similar to meditation, in that it helps us focus and relax, by turning off parts of the brain that are linked to stress and anxiety. Guided imagery, hypnosis and meditation are proven strategies to help encourage ASMR.

Two psychologists at Swansea University, Dr Nick Davis and Emma Barratt interviewed 500 people about their experience of ASMR. The study concluded that ASMR:

"provides temporary relief in mood for those suffering from depression, with many individuals consciously using it for this purpose."

Many reported that they felt their mood and symptoms of pain improve.

We all go through periods of high stress, but this is particularly relevant for volunteers and emergency workers.

Temporary states of depression may be present after experiencing a traumatic event at work. ASMR can be used to treat dark moods and feeling low. Common in guided meditations, ASMR can be incorporated in your daily relaxation to help unwind and feel good.

Improve your mental health. Make a difference. Meditate.

Volunteering is a beautiful thing. It allows us to feel a sense of achievement, to be purposeful, and be valued part of something greater.

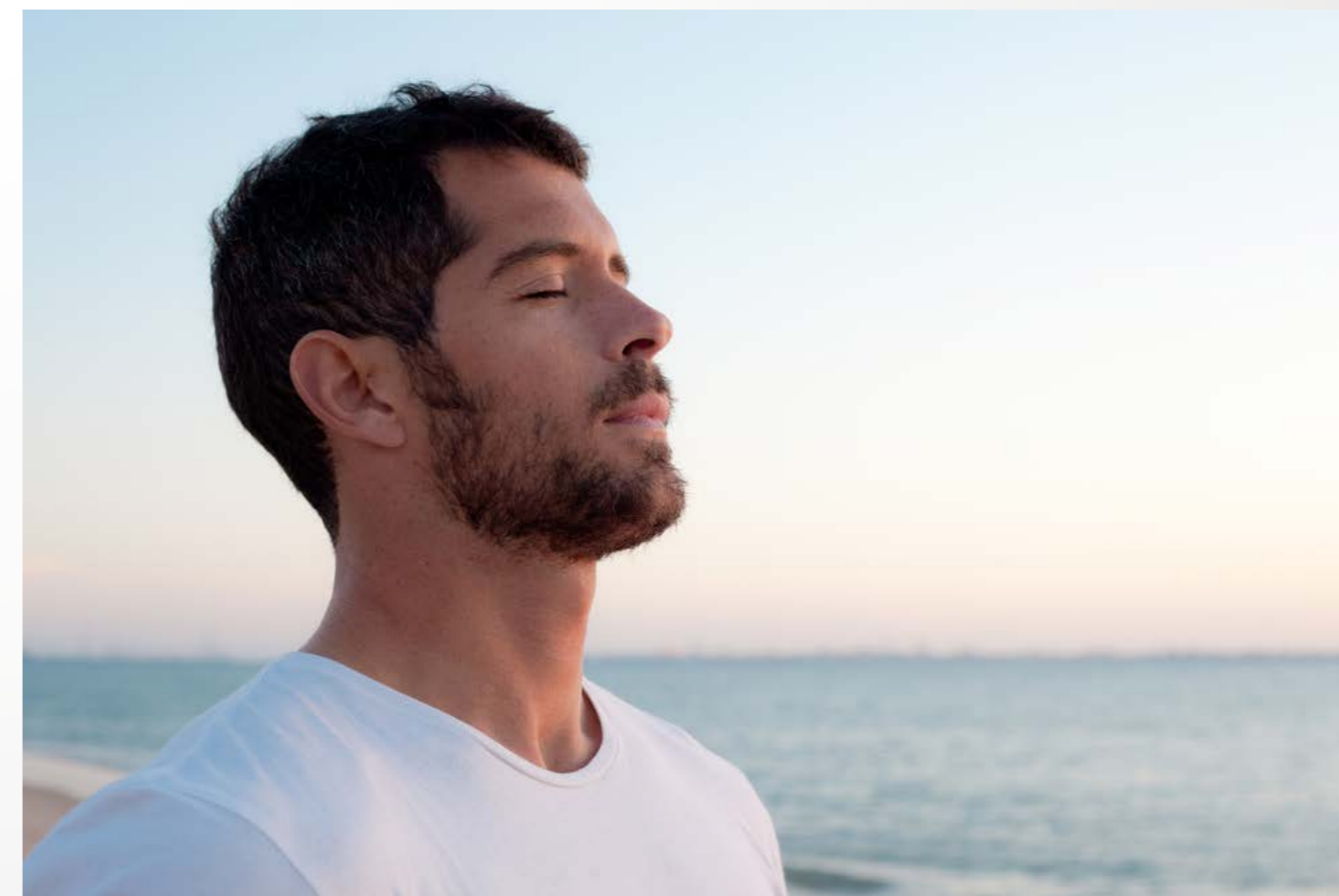
But sometimes we're the ones who need to take a step back and accept a helping hand.

Meditation helps us process traumatic events and clear our mind. Most people don't experience what we do in our every day, so we need to pay close attention to what's going on inside.

It's one of the best, natural tools that we can incorporate into our lives to help us cope with the negatives of emergency services. Stress, anxiety, depression, bipolar disorder, and general unhappiness can all be managed through meditation.

Look after yourself first, before you can do so for others.

And remember, we're all in this together.





EMERGENCY SERVICES HEALTH

We've got your back

For more information about eligibility or for a benefit comparison
Phone **1300 703 703** Follow us on Facebook or Visit eshealth.com.au

Emergency Services Health Pty Ltd ABN 98 131 093 877 © Copyright 10/07/17