

Simple meditation technique for women 35+

Midlife Meditation

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Midlife Meditation

A Simple Technique for a Complicated Time

BY SUSAN BILHEIMER

Introduction

If you are a woman over 35, chances are you have experienced one or more symptoms caused by changes in your body as you move toward, or past, menopause. While you may still menstruate regularly, and perhaps even become pregnant, the natural cycle of life is progressing toward the time when your body produces lower levels of hormones, such as estrogen and progesterone, eventually causing a complete cessation of your period and the ability to become pregnant.

Perimenopause is the name of the period prior to menopause, during which your hormones are downshifting, often causing a host of difficult and frightening symptoms.¹ While menopause is the cessation of the menstrual cycle, having a finite beginning and end hormonally, perimenopause often begins subtly, long before women start thinking about “the change” ... and can last from five to 15 years before you finally reach menopause.

Symptoms that may be caused by perimenopause, such as erratic periods, hot flashes, and hormonal migraines, to name just a few, may confuse women who are still well into their childbearing years. Women suffering during perimenopause may dismiss such symptoms or go to the doctor, only to have their concerns “pooh-poohed” by physicians who insist they are much too young for menopause, so it must all be “in your head.”

Women in and beyond menopause may experience many of these symptoms as well, although numerous women report a cessation of symptoms once they no longer menstruate.

The truth is, women in midlife go through a profound transition on all levels—physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually. And it happens during a time when we play many crucial life roles, such as parent, caretaker to aging parents, partner and career woman.

Think about it:

From our 20s on, we may be used to plowing through life with endless exuberance and energy. No task was too daunting, no hurdle too great to overcome. Suddenly, in our 40s, and maybe even our late 30s, we get tired.

¹ See Chapter 21: Symptoms of Perimenopause and Menopause for a list of symptoms

Mentally ... physically ... and sometimes emotionally as well. Our determination to succeed, no, excel, in all areas of our lives is suddenly exhausting. Some women develop chronic conditions during this time, such as Fibromyalgia or Chronic Fatigue Syndrome.

And, just as important, as we move through this transitional period, we are probably confronting issues about our own mortality, which may be discomfiting. We may suffer from depression, anxiety, have eczema or other symptoms aggravated by stress and fear.

Pressures build, demands increase. We are in midlife, the best years of our life, so they say. But we are not ready for retirement. So, while our bodies may be slowing down, our lives continue racing ahead. And the message bombarding us from the media is the urgency of relaxation; the desperate need to find “me” time ... or else.

There’s barely enough time to do what we need to do each day. Sitting back and “smelling the roses”—they’ve got to be kidding.

It’s profoundly confusing. And upsetting.

So, what does all this have to do with meditation?

Everything.

Meditation during this changing time of life, or midlife meditation, the program you will learn in this book, can enhance your health, increase your lifespan, aid you in dealing with your symptoms and help you find joy on your journey through this transition.

Here are just a few reasons why you should incorporate midlife meditation into your life. Midlife meditation will:

- Help you adjust to physical and psychological symptoms as you move through menopause
- Provide you with a way to face the most difficult moments of your day with greater ease
- Balance you so that you can think more clearly

- Assist you in maintaining perspective during unnerving and upsetting situations and events
- Generate moments of powerful inspiration for your life
- Help you see situations more clearly, so you can make better decisions
- Relax your body, even if you don't immediately realize it

This book is designed to teach you simple techniques that you can easily fit into your life ... even if you have no time ... even if you have a racing mind ... even if you think you cannot meditate or feel you have failed at it before

If you follow the steps in this book, *really* follow them, you are sure to see positive results in your life within a few weeks. A day may seem too long a time from your current vantage point. But in the scheme of your lifetime, and considering you are investing the energy to develop a spiritual practice that can truly change your life, a few weeks is a drop in the ocean of your spirit.

All you need to do to begin the journey is to turn the page...

Chapter 1

What Is Midlife Meditation

Midlife Meditation is a simple, portable technique designed to help women get through a tumultuous period with more ease.

During this sometimes difficult phase of life, it is essential to find ways to manage your symptoms and the myriad of tasks and people demanding your time and energy, as well as to begin following or deepening a spiritual path. By incorporating midlife meditation into your life, you will elicit a profound shift in your spiritual consciousness that will better enable you to handle the complexities of your life.

The program was developed with the understanding that, at this stage of our lives, we simply don't have the time for intricate ethereal disciplines. What we need is an easy process to bring a spiritual path into our busy lives *just as they are*.

Life, especially during our move toward and through menopause, is like waves of the ocean. Sometimes the ocean of your life is smooth, but more often than not, waves crash into the shore ... some bigger ... some smaller.

Midlife Meditation doesn't make the waves disappear. Instead, midlife meditation gives you a surfboard with which to ride the waves.

The Answer to Your Prayers?

Midlife Meditation is not the answer to all your problems. You will not win the lottery because you practice midlife meditation. You will still face obstacles and challenges. Symptoms may worsen. Tragedy will pass through your life at some point.

What midlife meditation does provide are tools to better handle the problems that confront every one of us, tools you can continue to use for the rest of your life.

Studies have shown that meditation improves your physical health as well as your mental and emotional states. In fact, results from a 2004 study conducted by the University of Wisconsin-Madison showed that meditation

produced lasting positive changes on the immune system and brain electrical activity. Calmness and clarity are additional byproducts of engaging in a meditation program.

As women in midlife, we are going through a period where introspection becomes part of who we are. Suddenly, we are prey to an eruption of uncomfortable symptoms and conditions. We want, and need, to understand what is happening to us. *We want to feel better.*

We may have spent our 20s and 30s in unconscious pursuit of what we thought we desired, never pausing to reflect on where we were heading or the bigger issues that would face us later in life. Now, due to profound physiological, hormonal, and emotional changes, often more powerful than those of puberty, we are forced to look inward to find meaning and answers to our lives.

Midlife meditation differs from other techniques in a number of significant ways. Most current methods dismiss the chaos of the mind during meditation, advising the student to ignore those jangling thoughts, but giving no clear instructions on how to do so. Unfortunately, with the barrage of hormonal shifts and life demands experienced by women in midlife, they are often drowning in an ocean of “to-do” lists, crashing and pulling at them like a hurricane-force rip-tide.

Unlike these techniques, midlife meditation embraces the mind’s “movies” as an essential part of the process of dealing with the responsibilities, discomfort and reality of the present moment. In this program, you will find specific instructions how to work with your thoughts, instead of vaguely attempting to ignore them.

Experiencing thoughts without giving them power (also called “detachment”) is a powerful weapon against feeling helpless during the maelstrom of your life because you are not allowing your thoughts to dictate your reactions. While you may still feel the fear or sadness or panic a thought may bring, you will learn, by seeing that thoughts pass, not to react needlessly. The result is clarity of thought and the ability to more effectively deal with your health, your family and your life.

Chapter 2

Objections and Expectations

Many of us would like to meditate because we've heard it can help us find a measure of peace, but we come up with excuses why we cannot do so. We don't think of them as excuses, we consider them "reasons." However, the seemingly insurmountable obstacles and unrealistic expectations can be overcome, as they already have by millions who found ways around every one of these objections when their desire to achieve a goal overcame the fear that they would fail at it.

Objections

Here are the four biggest objections given by women when asked why they don't meditate:

1. I don't have time
2. I'm not religious
3. I can't stop my mind from racing
4. I don't know how to meditate

Let's discuss them one at a time.

Making Time

Let's be honest. Theoretically, you could get up 20 minutes earlier, couldn't you? Or go to bed 20 minutes later? We're not talking an eight-hour "Gandhi marathon." 20 minutes is all it takes. What about 10 minutes? Or five? Surely, even the busiest woman can find five minutes at the start of the day.

What most women do is get up and immediately begin racing through their day ... like a speeding train. Trying to stop, or even pause, when you're moving at that pace is likely to end up in a "crash."

While there is no "best" time to meditate, most women are far more likely to get it done if it's first thing in the morning than at any other time of the day.

I don't know about you, but even if I commit to any self-improvement task the night before (e.g., meditation, exercise, journaling), write it down, tell

my best friend, set an alarm ... once I'm wrapped up in my work, I simply won't stop to do it. I tell myself I'll get it done in the evening. But when the time comes, I'm usually so exhausted that I just flop into bed ... unwilling to keep my commitment.

Making meditation first priority will ensure it gets done. It's simple. You may not enjoy meditating when you first try it. You may grit your teeth through it for awhile. But I guarantee that if you persist, you will find it entirely worth the effort. And it will become a comforting and reassuring part of your life.

However, I must say that there are also benefits to meditating at other times of the day or evening, which will be discussed in the *When to Meditate* section of Chapter Five. But it takes a different type of discipline to come to a halt in mid-day or put off a desire to sleep. Your body clock will let you know when is best for you to meditate.

No Robes Here

Some people believe that only religious or spiritually evolved people meditate. They envision Zen monks in flowing robes “OMMMMMMM’ing” in peaceful harmony deep in the mountains of Tibet.

Midlife Meditation is about living in the real world and connecting with your core ... right where you are.

For some people, that manifests as a strengthened relationship with a Higher Power. For others, it means finding inner strength and deeper understanding about their lives and how to live them. Change can come slowly from the inside out. It doesn't require a lightning bolt to the spirit. Or living an isolated existence on a mountaintop.

Distractions, Distractions...

Midlife Meditation is essentially the process of watching and moving away from your thoughts, of stepping back from all that happens around us.

Why distance ourselves from our thoughts and distractions?

Simple. For one thing, we have lived lives run riot by our thinking. We may have even believed our thoughts controlled us. Day after day, we have been

tortured by our thoughts, not realizing that they were just movies in our mind and nothing more.

In addition, crises, illness, whatever was thrown into our path, often turned us inside out with worry and anxiety. We may not be able to control what happens in our lives. But we absolutely can control our reaction to those events.

By creating mental distance from thoughts and distractions, such as the hustle and bustle of our lives, or the aches, pains and ups and downs of these transitional years, we can face the rest of our life with more sanity, peace and equanimity.

Strange as it sounds, *distractions are the very soul of midlife meditation*. Why? Because without them, how on earth would we be able to practice the process of distancing ourselves from our thoughts?

Thoughts come in, we acknowledge them, and then we move back to the meditative process ... again, and again and again. So you see, we need those thoughts for midlife meditation to work at all.

When people use distracting thoughts as an excuse for not meditating, it is irrational. It goes back to that false image of meditators as only the most enlightened beings, living in some lofty spiritual place. Think about a diet club that only allowed thin members to join.

Distractions are a blessing, not a curse—whether it feels like it or not.

I'll share a story with you. One of my deepest meditation experiences occurred while waiting at the auto body shop while my car was being repaired. I hadn't been able to meditate before leaving that morning. And there I was, stuck at the shop for two hours.

I thought about my firm belief that noise, distractions and thoughts were not annoyances, but tools with which to practice. So, I shut my eyes and followed the instructions. It was amazing to experience the silence among the clanging and banging, shouts and motor noise all going on in the shop! In fact, the external clamor actually helped drown out the clattering thoughts in my head.

Now, don't get me wrong, I've often been annoyed by a ringing phone or an interrupting child. I've told my son more than once that unless there's blood involved, to leave me alone when I'm meditating. It rarely works, of course. But that's the point. *I don't stop.* I keep going. And if something comes up that I simply must attend to, I don't beat myself up. I just meditate again next time.

It's not about perfection. It's not about arriving at a destination. It's about practice and process. Simple.

I Can't Because I Don't Know How

Trust me when I tell you that the midlife meditation instructions are so simple you can learn them in less than an hour. As we discussed, there are an infinite variety of ways to meditate. Through this book, you'll be learning one particular method that meshes perfectly with the pressures of life experienced by women in their 30s, 40s, and 50s—the method of midlife meditation. But your path may not end here. So at the end of this book, there are links to other excellent resources on meditation you can explore further if you choose.²

Often, what is new is uncomfortable. And discomfort makes most of us want to stop doing that which makes us uncomfortable. However, the benefits of persisting with midlife meditation far outweigh the discomfort.

In addition, there are people who test out method after method of meditation, never making the commitment to work through the bumps and challenges of any one process. Others may try just one path that either isn't right for them or that becomes uncomfortable because it felt difficult to do. So they conclude they cannot meditate.

Make the commitment to midlife meditation for six months. You've got nothing to lose ... and a world of spiritual growth to gain.

Keys

There are three key ideas that are essential for you to understand before beginning the practice of midlife meditation. If you embrace these concepts, practicing midlife meditation will be even easier and produce more powerful results.

² See Chapter 22: Additional Resources

Key #1: Have no expectations

In life, our expectations often disappoint us. So please hear this: You cannot fail at midlife meditation. It is impossible.

Let's say you intend to practice for 20 minutes, but need to stop after five. You succeeded, because you sat at all.

You meditate and get interrupted by your dog, cat, son, daughter, husband, partner. The phone rings. There's a knock at the door. The teakettle screeches and no one turns it off. You are so frustrated you want to throw your chair out the window. If you sit until the time is up anyway, then you have succeeded. If not, you have also succeeded because you made the effort to sit at all.

Do you see why you cannot possibly fail at this?

Key #2: Silence doesn't matter

Whether it's the noise in your own head (*I have to get dog food; oh God, I forgot I have to make an appointment with the dermatologist; now, where did I leave my glasses?*) or external noise (cars, kids, birds, etc.), it all becomes part of your meditation experience. Rather than fighting and raging internally, midlife meditation will teach you how to use these interruptions in your meditation. And if you can't bear it ... get up and meditate later ... or tomorrow. But trying again is the greatest measure of success ... continuing despite obstacles. As the Chinese say, "Seven times down ... eight times up."

Key #3: Do not create obstacles out of illusions

If the time you planned to meditate today got eaten up by your daughter's need for you to iron her pants, and your schedule is so tight that you cannot imagine getting through the day in one piece ... let it go. So, you won't meditate today. Or maybe you'll miraculously find five minutes that you didn't expect to practice in your office.

When making a commitment to midlife meditation, *consistency is the goal*. The aim is to meditate daily. But sometimes, life has other plans for you.

Instead of fighting it, reschedule. You don't fail if you miss a day due to unexpected circumstances.

Midlife Meditation teaches you to discern between life events and crises, because...

Everything that goes wrong is not a crisis.

Life is fraught with obstacles and things going wrong (*meaning—not the way we want them to go*). But many of us have developed this immediate (panicked) reaction to the slightest inconsistency or blip in our day far out of proportion to the actual situation.

When you live a more conscious life, you learn that all situations pass and change.

Midlife Meditation teaches you how to take the path of least resistance to live a smoother life, accepting, and working with, reality.

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