

MEDITATION APPS

What is Meditation?

Meditation is the act of training your mind to be calm or silent in order to relax. There are many kinds of meditation but most share four common elements: a quiet, distraction-free location, a comfortable posture, something to focus your attention on, and an open attitude of letting distractions come and go freely without judging them. Scientific evidence on the effects of meditation is still inconclusive, but many studies have suggested it could help reduce anxiety, depression, insomnia, blood pressure and chronic pain.

Beginning to meditate can seem intimidating, which is where meditation apps come in handy. Turning to smartphones for a quiet respite from daily stresses might seem counter-intuitive. Nevertheless, a rapidly swelling pool of mobile meditation apps is trying to help. Here are five of the best to try out:

Headspace

If there is one app that really excels at meeting beginners' needs it is Headspace. After downloading the app, you're encouraged to follow their free ten minute per day introductory program which lasts for ten days. This course covers a variety of meditative techniques with an emphasis on deep breathing, clearing your mind and absorbing your surroundings. The guided



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meditations are clear and well thought out. It is easy to understand what you're supposed to be doing at each point in time, which makes focusing relatively straightforward. The narrator addresses you directly throughout each lesson, providing encouragement, inquiring about your progress and recapping what has been covered. There are also short animated clips that help explain the concepts being introduced.

If you're unsure of how to begin meditating this structure provides a thorough and easy to follow, albeit repetitive, framework to ease you into the practice. Headspace is also aesthetically appealing, both visually and sonically. The interface is clean and minimalist and the animated videos are high quality with a hint of whimsy. The narrator's voice is calming, reassuring and conversational in tone, helping me emerge from a session feeling genuinely well-rested.

Sattva



Sattva includes free guided meditations or music, a heart rate monitor, a timer that helps you measure your sessions, and a questionnaire to help you rate your state of mind before and after each session. The background to the app is a garish bright purple colour that feels more appropriate for a nightclub or jumping castle than a meditation app.

Sattva distinguishes itself from other applications by doubling down on measuring your progress and comparing it against other people.

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“Feed” and “statistics” features that encourage people to compete against each other are very prominent, and you can win virtual trophies for completing certain challenges. Some people might find this motivating, but for me meditation is a personal activity. Sharing progress, winning awards and judging myself against other people has little appeal in that context. In fact it seems to contradict the sense of calm and “inner focus” that meditation is supposed to be all about.

Calm

What Calm excels at is providing a pleasant space to meditate in. Upon opening it, you're welcomed with a lovely alpine lake scene and bird noises, which provide an ongoing backdrop to the app's use. There are also over twenty other options available including beaches, meadows, pouring rain and a flickering fireplace, all accompanied by matching sound effects or some light natural music. Personally, I found



the sounds and images a bit distracting when I was trying to do a guided meditation. Closed eyes and silence would have allowed for deeper relaxation. However they did help promote a positive frame of mind, and I imagine they would be well-suited to blocking out environments that are otherwise too chaotic to meditate comfortably in, for example while commuting.

In terms of the lessons, “Calm” feels like a kind but slightly absent-minded professor. It lacks the direction and sense of progression of some other apps, generally offering suggestions and small tasks instead of a prescribed program. It does have a “7 days to calm” introductory

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course which is solid if a little disconnected, and there is a variety of themed guided meditations as well. Overall, the guided content is reasonable, but I felt there was an underlying blandness to it, as though the narrator was just going through the motions. The narrator also sounded hurried at times and some of her instructions were a bit vague or nonsensical.

Buddhify



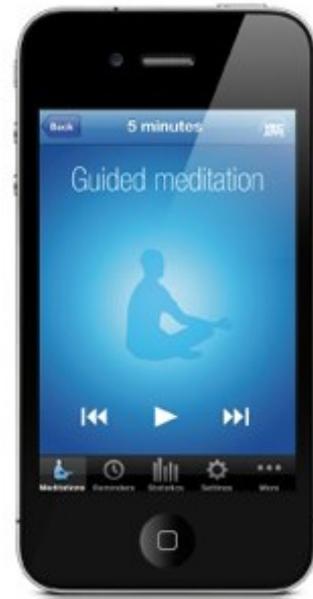
Rather than taking a generic approach, Buddhify divides guided meditations into context-specific recordings tailored to certain situations or moods. For example, there are meditations concerning waking up in the morning, cooking, doing chores, going for a walk, browsing the internet and feeling stressed. There are over eighty tracks to choose from and they are quite diverse, so it's possible to find one that's at least loosely appropriate for most situations. This means guided meditations on Buddhify feel more varied than other apps, and more

applicable to daily life. Rather than meditating to remove yourself from a situation, you use the situation as part of the meditation, and vice-versa. I also liked how instead of just giving instructions Buddhify often outlines the purpose of those instructions. For example it explains why breathing is a popular meditation technique and touches on the benefits of mindfulness. On the negative side, a few of the instructions were somewhat cryptic and Buddhify lacks the tutorial elements of other apps so it might be more suitable for slightly more advanced users.

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The Mindfulness App

The Mindfulness App is one of the most accessible meditation apps. It is simple to navigate and features shorter guided meditations that are easier to complete and less daunting to begin. As with Headspace and Calm, there's an introductory course to get you started. Overall, what sets the Mindfulness App apart from its counterparts is its customisability. Users can choose how long they want to meditate for, whether they would prefer to be guided or unguided, when they wish to be



reminded to meditate and whether they want to hear a forest, beach, rain, stream, waves or silence in the background. The narrator sounds animated and varied in her delivery. I found the content interesting, relatively diverse and endearingly optimistic.

Which one is best for me?

Which meditation app is best depends on your individual priorities. Headspace is best for beginners, Sattva would suit people who are motivated by competition, Calm provides peaceful background sounds and images, Buddhify is tailored to specific situations, and the Mindfulness App is simple and customisable. Since most of the apps are free to try, it wouldn't hurt to give them a go and see which you prefer.

Thanks to Daniel Stephen for this review



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