

## **Problems with Meditation: Different Viewpoints**

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**“... I began hearing voices,” she says. “I heard profound messages. The other people thought it was a sign of enlightenment. Some people at the temple told me that I had ‘contacted a spiritual guide.’ During my normal awake hours, I found myself feeling spacey sometimes.”**

**Unconvinced that aural hallucinations were a sign from God, Long quit meditating. The voices stopped.**

**Long’s experience isn’t unique. Researchers have known for 30 years that meditating can have adverse health effects on some people, inducing psychological and physical problems ranging from muscle spasms to hallucinations. But around the Bay Area, eyes seem closed to the data.**

**“A lot of people do experience negative side effects,” says Dr. Maggie Phillips, the director of the California Institute of Clinical Hypnosis and a licensed psychologist in Oakland who teaches workshops to colleagues around the world on the proper applications of relaxation therapies. “I’ve had people that went to these five- to eight-day-long retreats, and they were practically basket cases when they came out the other end. And they’re told, “You just have to be more patient.’ A lot of spiritual teachers don’t know how to look at the internal dynamics and how they interact with types of relaxation and meditation.”**

**Just as some people are allergic to penicillin, some people react badly to meditation. Billed as a “one size fits all” technique for self-improvement and even healing, meditation is packaged in a hundred different ways. Mantra meditators chant a phrase with numbing repetition. Others practice walking meditation, or empty-mind**

**meditation, sweeping the mind clean of thought. The harmful effects aren't limited to one specific technique or even long retreats.**

**Those effects can include facial tics, insomnia, spacing out, and even psychotic breakdowns. Dr. Margaret Singer, clinical psychologist emeritus at Berkeley, with research partner Dr. Janja Lalich, collected case histories from 70 clients seeking treatment for problems that began during meditation practice. Their research presents several examples of these symptoms and notes that prior to meditating, none of the patients had individual or family histories of mental disorders:**

**- A 36-year-old business executive now lives off welfare as a result of the relentless anxiety attacks and blackouts he suffered after taking up meditation. "Everything gets in through my senses," he told Singer.**

**- A young woman watched rooms fill with orange fog when she "spaced out" at random moments.**

**- A 26-year-old man was overwhelmed by rage and sexual urges whenever he went out in public, driving him to stay home to avoid these episodes.**

**Singer and Lalich point out that most people never have problems with meditation. The danger for those who do is that many instructors call the problems a welcome sign of enlightenment, as in Long's case, or proof of the student's insincere effort. In either situation, teachers encourage the student to meditate longer. One former mantra meditator, who did not want his name used, called it "being strangled by concepts." After increasingly frequent panic attacks, he abandoned mantra meditation in favor of informal, unstructured contemplation and a Paxil prescription.**

**The tricks played by the meditating mind are based in physiology. Over the past year Dr. Andrew Newberg of the University of**

**Pennsylvania scanned the brains of eight longtime practitioners of Buddhist meditation, snapping images of blood flow within the brain while they were meditating and comparing them with images taken when they were not. The scans tracked increased blood flow to the frontal lobe — used for concentration and focusing — during meditation. But blood flow to the parietal lobe, which calculates the boundaries of your body in relation to its environment — “You are not the chair, you are sitting on the chair, the chair is on the floor” — decreased. Other parts of the brain also activate during meditation — the limbic system, which is the heart of emotion and memory, and core areas that control heart rate, blood pressure, and arousal.**

**These results support what other researchers have discovered about the side effects meditation can cause. Dr. Michael Persinger, a psychologist at Laurentian University in Canada, found in 1993 that meditation induces epilepsy-like brain seizures in some people. His study of 1,081 students showed that the 221 meditators among them had a higher rate of hallucinating floating spots of light, hearing voices, and even feeling the floor shake. Other studies reported that meditators complained of feeling emotionally dead and seeing the environment as unreal, two-dimensional, amorphous. Those results aren’t surprising if meditation reduces blood flow to the parietal lobe. In longtime meditators, unreality can strike spontaneously. Singer describes it as “involuntary meditation.” One of her patients took anti-seizure medication for 25 years after quitting meditative practice to regain control of his mind.**

**Other side effects fall under the paradoxical umbrella of “relaxation-induced anxiety,” or RIA. Instead of relaxing during meditation, RIA sufferers feel distressed. Psychologists at Virginia Commonwealth University monitored 30 chronically anxious people during guided meditation. Seventeen percent indicated that their anxiety got worse. A previous study led by Dr. Frederick Heide at Pennsylvania State University reported that the same happened to**

**54 percent of the subjects. Symptoms of RIA include panic attacks, sweating, a pounding heart, spasms, odd tingling sensations, and bursts of uncontrollable laughter or tears. RIA can also aggravate conditions, such as schizophrenia, depression, asthma, and bleeding ulcers, that were previously stable.**

**What physiological changes explain RIA? During meditation, the brain releases serotonin. People with mild depression might enjoy the increased levels of serotonin because the neurotransmitter can ease their mood. Drugs like Prozac mimic this effect. However, too much serotonin can cause all of the symptoms of RIA, according to Dr. Solomon Snyder, head of Neuroscience at Johns Hopkins University. In some cases of schizophrenia, an excess of serotonin coupled with meditation can drop-kick someone into psychosis.**

**Excerpted from: <http://www.openbuddha.com/2002/09/06/the-dangers-of-meditation/>**

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**... negative effects can take the form of lingering dissociation after meditation, or after coming home from a residence course. You may have trouble getting out of that "spacey" condition. In fact, as you increase your TM dosage and frequency you may reach a stage where you *never* get out of the "spacey" state at all, i.e. you may experience *chronic* dissociation. Chronic dissociation is the most dangerous effect of TM, and can become very *very* serious....**

**It was *very* common for people to acquire major tics of large muscle groups, most commonly in the form of very noticeable head jerks. I'm talking about sudden jerks of the head to right or left of about 45 degrees. In addition there were people with major emotional problems. Mahesh had to establish "heavy unstressing clinics." At**

**attempt was made to help people at these clinics by application of physical therapies including body massage and foot massage....**

**“Heavy unstressing” and the psychological casualties are a result of deliberately inducing chronic dissociation via excessive TM practice, which can also result in an extreme degree of suggestibility. This extreme suggestibility, combined with heavy exposure to advanced TM esoteric indoctrination, can in turn lead to induced psychosis ....**

**From: <http://www.suggestibility.org/surprise.php>**

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**Intensive meditation can make TMers seem lifeless or flat, their personalities crushed and buried, devoid of emotion. In some cases, the meditator may go into involuntary meditation, which could be devastating if driving a car or at many kinds of jobs. Stanford psychologist Leon S. Otis (who believed many people could benefit from the 20-minute relaxation) concluded that his data raise serious doubts about the innocuous nature of TM. In fact, they suggest that TM may be hazardous to the mental health of a sizable proportion of the people who take up TM. (Adverse Effects of Transcendental Meditation, Update: A Quarterly Journal of New Religious Movements, 9, 37-50 [1985]).**

**Maharishi has taught devotees that a TMer is healthfully "unstressing" when symptoms of distress accompany his meditation. Ex-TMers have sued TM, alleging severe harms. TM has generally settled out of court, including cases in Washington, D.C.**

**From: [http://cultmediation.com/bardin\\_david\\_meditation.asp](http://cultmediation.com/bardin_david_meditation.asp)**

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**Normalization or “unstressing.” A psychological mechanism for potential adverse effects that the author proposes is stated as**

**follows: “The mental variable relates to the possible release of repressed material during the meditation period,” p. 207. This raises the issue of normalization of physiological abnormalities in the system, often referred to as “unstressing.” In the terminology of Maharishi and Transcendental Meditation teachers, undue pressure of experience on either the mind (e.g., a psychological trauma or psychological stressors) or the body (e.g., a physical trauma or physical stressors) results in structural and biochemical abnormalities in the body—“stress” in the body. To repair and normalize these abnormalities, the body has innumerable self-repair mechanisms, which range from the self-repair systems of DNA on the molecular level to the homeostatic feedback loops on the systems level, such as the various sensors in arteries, set points, and feedback loops that attempt to restore blood pressure to normal levels.**

**Normalization or “unstressing” is a regular part of life, whether one is practicing any meditation technique or not. Sleep and dreaming are two major mechanisms for normalization. During waking activity, the physiological resources of the body are geared for interacting with the environment via dominance of the sympathetic nervous system (SNS). During rest and sleep, the SNS gives way to a dominance of the parasympathetic system (PNS), which functions to restore or normalize the body. During sleep we “unstress” physical fatigue, etc. During dreams we “unstress” the physical stresses associated with mental pressures of various kinds, and the activity in the nervous system that is associated with normalization gives rise to the illusory dream world.**

**Other common normal, natural techniques for unstressing include the following: vacations, from small ones like a trip to the office water cooler, to longer ones like a month vacation; naps; relaxed reading; walking; playing music; painting and drawing; sports of all kinds; “goofing off”; or just kicking back in any way whatsoever.**

**Recreation is re-creation of the body and mind. All of these activities, or non activities, allow the physiology to ease off from its goal-directed behavior, or to go into alternative activities, which relax the overused processes and allow their self-repair mechanisms to come into play to restore the systems to whatever extent these mechanisms can. Even ruminating, talking to oneself, discussing, arguing, psychotherapy, etc., are forms of unstressing in that they are attempts to normalize and resolve psychic and emotional stresses. In a word, in this context, life is a constant process of unstressing or normalizing stresses that block one's path as one evolves towards one's goals.**

**What the Transcendental Meditation technique adds to all this is that it produces a unique state of restful alertness, which sets the optimal conditions for normalizing stresses that other types of rest and recreation do not. The evidence that this is true is the broad scope of positive benefits shown by the research in all kinds of populations.**

**From:**

**<http://www.truthabouttm.org/truth/IndividualEffects/DoesTMDoAnyHarm/index.cfm>**

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**[Transcendental] Meditators who have decided to quit meditation and begin to experience these symptoms frequently jump to the conclusion that they are now “unstressing.” They may see these mild problems as proof that meditation “works” and they are now suffering because they are re-entering a state of ignorance. Very likely, they will re-begin the practice with renewed conviction.**

**Not all meditators experience these problems. And the good news is that those who do usually only experience them for a week or two.**

**My guess is that TMers become mildly addicted to increased endorphin levels — or some other naturally occurring hormonal**

change. Fortunately, it's an addiction that is relatively easy to overcome.

From: <http://www.knappfamilycounseling.com/trance.html>

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Maharishi Mahesh Yogi called "unstressing," the nervous system's purging itself of blockages caused by our past actions....

I'd had a first-hand experience of ... unstressing, and it cleared away my war trauma. I haven't had a flashback in all the years since then, but I've had many experiences of the blissful unity that came afterwards.

From: <http://theuncarvedblog.com/2010/06/10/radical-peace-people-refusing-war-by-william-t-hathaway/>

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... to my knowledge, no TM critic has ever created a concise, one-page summation of what's wrong with TM.

Well, here's my stab at doing just that.

To be clear, I believe most people who meditate are pleased with their practice. I consider meditation [one of Nature's miracles](#). But having worked with over 2,000 cult members, I know a significant minority report serious side-effects.

Most symptoms below come from anecdotal reports in my counseling practice. There is some documentation of side-effects in the ["German Study"](#) — although the "snowball" methodology and small sample size essentially renders those findings anecdotal, as well. ("Snowball samples" have come far since the 1980s. [Professor Doug Heckathorn](#) has increased their statistical validity.) But a randomized study by [Otis](#) found as many as 70% of TMers suffered



from psychological problems — and the longer they meditated, the more likely they were to experience side-effects. And [Persinger](#) asks if Transcendental Meditation may be responsible for inducing epileptic-like signs....

No one experiences every symptom listed below. In fact, I'm not clear how many TM practitioners experience any. But I've dealt with hundreds of sufferers myself — and compared notes with other critics. It's clear to me a significant percent experience at least one negative side-effect.

If Transcendental Meditation were a drug, it would have long ago been yanked from the shelves.

### [Possible Physical Side-Effects](#)

- uncontrollable fatigue, sleeping during the day
- insomnia and hypersomnia
- [withdrawal-like symptoms](#) when stopping or missing meditation
- [sleep paralysis](#) (often understood as one form of "[witnessing sleep](#)")
- [night-time hallucinations](#) (hypnagogic and hypnopompic hallucinations, often understood as "visions")
- possibly [narcolepsy](#) (See Persinger's research, referenced [here](#))
- eating disorders, including anorexia, binge eating, morbid obesity
- stomach and bowel complaints
- chronic neck and back pain (especially among "Yogic Flyers")
- chronic headaches
- difficulty with the menstrual cycle
- involuntary body movements (twitching, spasms, head shaking, etc. in, and out, of meditation)
- serious health effects, including death, when TMers turn to Maharishi Ayurveda and ignore traditional medical treatment.

## Possible Emotional Side-Effects:

- anxiety or fear
- obsessive ideas
- pathological guilt
- dissociation (trancing out, spacing out, staring into space, forgetting what one is doing, losing a space of time, feeling as if one is not real, inability to remember events or periods in one's life, feeling separate from one's body or mind)
- pseudo-identity (possessing both cult and non-cult personalities, similar to multiple personality disorder)
- unusual difficulty remembering names or words, frequently forgetting in mid-sentence what one is saying, being aware that others are speaking but not understanding what they are saying
- suicidal ideation, gestures, or successful attempts
- "nervous breakdowns" (lay term for depression or other mental illness that results in inability to function normally — or hospitalization)
- identity confusion: rapid changes in core beliefs such as spirituality, sexuality, personal interests; inability to settle on a career; unstable interpersonal relations
- psychosis (most likely an already-present tendency to this disease is triggered by excessive meditation)
- depression
- unusual avoidance of difficult people, situations, memories — frequently resorting to meditation or sleep to deal with them
- derivative narcissism
- delusional thinking
- auditory and visual hallucinations
- divorce, frequently multiple (frequently attributed to rapid spiritual growth and "outgrowing" one's partner)

## Possible Cognitive Side-Effects:

- **significant difficulty with memory and/or concentration**
- **incessant jumping from one thought or action to another, constant activity without accomplishing a goal, distractibility**

### **Possible Social Side-Effects:**

- **significantly decreased job or educational performance**
- **difficulty obtaining or maintaining a job, jumping from job to job**
- **relocating frequently, to the detriment of the individual**

### **Possible Spiritual Side-Effects:**

- **conflict with birth religion (Judaism/Christianity/Islam: puja, use of graven images, mantras are names of Hindu gods, yagyas to Hindu deities; Buddhism: conflict with tenets such as anatta or no-self)**
- **spiritual confusion**
- **replacing birth religion with TM/Hinduism or other spiritual practices**

**From: <http://www.knappfamilycounseling.com/tmdangers.html>**

**(Excerpts from an Article by John M. Knapp)**

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**Research indicates that the brain neurotransmitter, serotonin (5-HT), is increased from TM practice.[1] This is good news and bad news.**

**The good news is that those people who are experiencing abnormally low levels of serotonin may temporarily benefit from the increase. Chronically low levels of serotonin are associated with some forms of anxiety and depression, and have been successfully**

**treated with a group of SSRI drugs designed to raise serotonin levels.[2]**

**The bad news is that too much serotonin has been shown to have a range of negative, sometimes devastating, effects.**

**The condition of elevated serotonin levels is referred to as "serotonin syndrome" or "hyperserotonemia." A significant number of negative TM side effects correspond to the negative effects of serotonin syndrome.[3]**

**Here are some of the reported negative effects of TM:**

- **Muscle twitches and convulsions**
- **Headaches**
- **Stomach and bowel complaints**
- **Fatigue**
- **Insomnia and other sleep disorders**
- **Inability to focus -- feeling "spacey"**
- **Anxiety and panic attacks**
- **Depression**
- **Dissociation and depersonalization**
- **Nervous breakdown and suicidal ideation**

**Below are excerpts from two different publications, citing symptoms of elevated levels of serotonin:**

**BOOK: Snyder, Solomon Halbert. Drugs and the Brain. W H Freeman & Co, 1996.**

**The author is chair of Neuroscience at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, Maryland and one of the top three most cited scientists in the life science. Excerpt:**

**"...serious long-term adverse physical and psychiatric side effects produced by elevated levels of serotonin ...reported after effects: withdrawal, memory loss, sleep disorders, panic and anxiety attacks (adrenalin rushes), impaired concentration, bi-polar, diabetes, MS symptoms, mania, chronic fatigue, severe rebound depression, symptoms of Cushings Syndrome - moon face, looking or feeling pregnant, inability to handle stress, mood swings, etc. ...depression, manic-depression, panic, anxiety, OCD, psychosis, schizophrenia, etc."**

**ARTICLE: "The Serotonin Syndrome". American Journal of Psychiatry. June 1991.**

**"The symptoms of the serotonin syndrome are: euphoria, drowsiness, sustained rapid eye movement, overreaction of the reflexes, rapid muscle contraction and relaxation in the ankle causing abnormal movements of the foot, clumsiness, restlessness, feeling drunk and dizzy, muscle contraction and relaxation in the jaw, sweating, intoxication, muscle twitching, rigidity, high body temperature, mental status changes were frequent..."**

**If the stimulated increase in serotonin, produced by TM, is compared with the serotonin increase produced by SSRI (Selective Serotonin Reuptake Inhibitor) drugs, these are the effects which may be seen:**

**"Unfortunately, SSRIs also affect other serotonin receptors, which account for their unwanted side effects. Stimulating the serotonin receptor called 5HT2 could lead to agitation, akathisia (motor restlessness), anxiety, panic attacks, insomnia, sexual dysfunction. Stimulating the serotonin receptor called 5HT3 could lead to nausea, gastrointestinal distress, diarrhea, and headache." [4]**

**This evidence suggests that TM practice(s) may be implicated in hyperserotonemia.**

**Notes to Text:**

**[1] Reference: Serotonin, noradrenaline, dopamine metabolites in transcendental meditation-technique. Bujatti M, Riederer P J: Neural Transm 1976; 39(3):257-67**

**[2] Reference: Schloss P. Williams, DC, Biochemistry Department, University of Dublin, Trinity College, Ireland**

**Reference: Lopez JF, Vazquez DM, Chalmers DT, Watson SJ, Department of Psychiatry, University of Michigan Medical Center**

**Reference: Major Depression and the Neurotransmitter Serotonin,  
S. Anderton**

**[3] Reported negative effects appear to intensify with increased time spent in TM practice(s). See Research Demonstrating Harmful Effects From TM and Personal Stories.**

**[4] Reference: Psychopharmacology of Antidepressants by Stephen M. Stahl, M.D., Martin Dunitz, Ltd., London, UK, 1997.**

**From: [http://www.behind-the-tm-facade.org/transcendental\\_meditation-tmresearch-serotonin.htm](http://www.behind-the-tm-facade.org/transcendental_meditation-tmresearch-serotonin.htm)**