



healthywoman FROM BOTTOM LINE

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Tamara Eberlein, Editor



The Power of a Personal Mantra

When a friend extolled the virtues of meditation, I confessed that I cannot keep my mind and body still long enough to reap the benefits. She said, "You need a mantra. It will make all the difference."

To find out whether and why that might be true, I called mind-body expert and clinical psychotherapist Ronald A. Alexander, PhD, author of *Wise Mind, Open Mind: Finding Purpose & Meaning in Times of Crisis, Loss & Change*. He told me that the concept of a mantra (which means *sacred message* in Sanskrit) was developed thousands of years ago by yogis to enhance meditation and promote enlightenment.

How does that translate to today's frenetic world? "Consistent users report that mantras can change your state of mind, mood, thought processes and even physiology," Dr. Alexander said. Research shows that mantras may help you calm down... reduce stress... moderate emotional responses... focus attention... set priorities... sleep more soundly... and improve overall quality of life.

In my yoga class, we often chant the classic mantra *Om*. Dr. Alexander noted several other simple sounds that can bring stillness to the mind, including *Ra...*

Ma... and *Sa*. Or you can select a phrase that has personal relevance and use this unique mantra during meditation, he suggested.

Modern twist: According to Dr. Alexander, today's mantras often meld principles of Eastern meditation, such as Buddhist mindfulness (being fully aware of the present moment, without judgment), with contemporary Western psychotherapy techniques that aim to replace unwholesome self-criticisms with positive thoughts. The idea is to choose a mantra that is meaningful to you... gently dispels sorrows about the past and worries about the future... and/or reinforces a desirable emotional state, such as tranquility, acceptance or mental clarity.

Developing your mantra repertoire: First, consider the specific change you desire. For instance, suppose an inner voice keeps telling you that you're unworthy, incompetent or unlovable. *To find a mantra that can redirect your thoughts...*

- Identify the unwholesome self-judgment and challenge its validity. Ask yourself, *Is it really true that I am unworthy?* Chances are that the answer is no.
- Determine the healing opposite of unworthiness, and turn that into a mantra. For instance, "I am worthy."
- Compose two additional mantras expressing the same idea, such as "I deserve to be happy" and "I am learning to value myself." Dr. Alexander explained that we often struggle with deep negative thoughts, beliefs and feelings... so it helps to have a repertoire of three mantras that instill and reinforce a more wholesome core message.
- Choose a particular place in your body (such as your heart, forehead or belly) in which to "ground" your affirmation by placing your hand on that spot or imagining your breath going there as you repeat your mantra. This physical action helps you focus on the positive resources that exist in your physical body, Dr. Alexander explained.

Sample mantras: Depending on your situation and goals, select mantras that have significance for you, such as, "The healing bright light resides within me"... "I am at peace now"... "I am strong"... "Love surrounds me"... "I relax and breathe"... "I attract healthy relationships"... "Today is my day"... "Success is mine"... "My creativity is flowing."

When to use your mantra: Meditate by repeating one of your chosen mantras, silently or aloud, for at least five minutes three times daily; when you wake up in the morning... at mid-afternoon, when biorhythms naturally produce a energy lag... and at sunset or just before bed. *Alternative:* Meditate for a minimum of 20 minutes once or twice daily, using part of this time to focus on your mantra.

Also repeat your mantra whenever you feel stressed or sad or otherwise struggle as you go about your day. It will help you identify the uncomfortable emotion... acknowledge it for a moment... and then release it as you embrace a more positive and joyful feeling.

Source: Ronald A. Alexander, PhD, is a clinical psychotherapist and executive director of the OpenMind Training Institute in Santa Monica, California. He has lectured at the David Geffen School of Medicine at the University of California, Los Angeles, is the author of *Wise Mind, Open Mind: Finding Purpose & Meaning in Times of Crisis, Loss & Change* (New Harbinger) and created the audio CD *Mindful Meditations for Creative Transformation*. www.RonaldAlexander.com

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Tamara Eberlein, the editor of *HealthyWoman from Bottom Line*, has been a health journalist for nearly three decades. An award-winning author or coauthor of four books, she is committed to helping other women in midlife and beyond live healthy, fulfilling lives. Her latest book is the updated, third edition of *When You' re Expecting Twins, Triplets, or Quads* (HarperCollins). She is also the "chief health adviser" to her husband of 26 years and three college-age children.

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