A meditation session affects our physiology in subtle but obvious ways. After a ten-minute meditation almost anyone should be able to say, "Yes, my muscles have relaxed, I am breathing more easily and my mind is less agitated." It follows that it could have more far-reaching benefits as well.

Personally, I see the results of meditation every working day. Since 1987, I have run the Perth Meditation Centre in Western Australia. I have taught around 15,000 people to meditate, most of whom have attended at least one course of seven weeks duration. I have seen this unspectacular activity lead to huge improvements in physical and mental health. It can transform people in ways that any psychologist or physician would envy.

Many doctors and psychologists understand how a patient's state of mind affects his or her health, but they have to be cautious about recommending meditation as a treatment. There are many charlatans in the alternative health field, selling hope and placebos to sick people.

However, meditation itself has passed the test. There are now decades of substantial scientific research on meditation. We know that it helps with certain common ailments, and makes the body and mind function better in measurable ways. Many doctors realize that this can be enough to markedly improve a patient's health. About a quarter of my students are now referred to me by medical practitioners.

Although the connection between body and mind is self-evident, it is difficult to scientifically investigate. Psychologists evaluate mental states and scientists measure biological functions but there is no lingua franca between them. The units of measurement and methodologies used in these two disciplines are so different it is all but impossible to connect them.

We know, for example, that fear and anger (which are the province of psychology) activate the sympathetic nervous system (the province of medicine). We can measure the chemistry involved in exquisite detail, but how on earth do you measure fear or anger? Or even scientifically define the difference between them?

Managing one's health is complicated. There is rarely a single cause to any illness. The body operates as an interlocking network of multiple functions. Staying healthy is not a matter of knocking out individual illnesses when they arise. It is more about paying attention to an array of small details on a daily basis and thereby slowing the rate of aging, or "wear and tear" in the body.

While meditation can produce dramatic turnarounds in illness, it is even more valuable as a preventive measure. Meditation can help us maintain optimum function and delay the inevitable effects of aging. It helps us keep our blood pressure under control before it leads to a stroke. By sleeping better, we have more energy and our immune system is more efficient. We breathe better, manage pain better and digest food better. Meditation helps us manage our health intelligently before the damage becomes irreparable.

There are now decades of substantial scientific research on meditation. It helps with certain common ailments, and makes the body and mind function better in measurable ways.

Meditation is easy to do. It has clear physical results that you can see if you look for them. The medical evidence clearly shows how relaxation is essential for the healthy functioning of the body. Whether you are sick, or want to maintain your health, or simply want to enjoy life more, you will find that meditation is worth looking into.

Our bodies are extremely good at maintaining balance, so why do we still get sick? There are some causes that are largely beyond our control. The ravages of age or severe outer stressors such as war or starvation will wear us down, no matter what we do.

In theory, we could pace ourselves well and be in a balanced state all day long—eating, working, exercising and resting well. If we kept this going all our lives, there is a good chance we would live to a hale and hearty old age.

But, being conscious animals, we frequently ignore the signs of stress and overrule the intelligence of our bodies. We get overexcited and push ourselves to the limits. We eat and drink and work too much and eventually lose all concept of a balanced life. And though we often grind to a halt out of exhaustion, we usually don't let ourselves fully
recover before plunging back into the fray.

We can also be mildly stressed for years at a time. To be 10% more stressed than you need to be can make you just as prone to middle-aged illness as extreme stress. Because mild continual stress is so common, we often take it as being “normal,” and don’t realize how insidious it is.

Many people are ill because they look for purely physical solutions to their health. In many ways, the more specific the medical intervention, the less it contributes to total health, and vice versa. If you take pills for high blood pressure, they are unlikely to improve your insomnia or indigestion or chronic pain. So you need to take pills for each of those, and maybe some antidepressants as well.

However, if you meditate to lower your blood pressure, the effect is less direct but can have wider benefits. Your hypertension improves but you also have less abdominal gas, you sleep better and your pain bothers you less. Meditation is less precise in effect than a diuretic, but it goes one step further back to a more fundamental cause: our over-active anxious minds.

Perhaps the best foundation for health and long life is to be profoundly content or happy, and there aren’t any simple recipes for this. For most of us, a balanced and harmonious life usually requires decades of trial-and-error and a high degree of self-awareness. Fortunately, we don’t have to get everything right all at once. The meditation tradition is very clear in that you start right where you are. You just do what you can in the moment, rather than trying to plan the perfect life.}

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Trained in the Buddhist traditions of Burma and Tibet, Eric Harrison has practiced meditation for more than 30 years. He has worked closely with doctors and patients to develop appropriate meditation programs for particular ailments. He lives in Perth, Australia.

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