

Mindful Meditation 101

Objective

To quiet your mind and body through practicing formal and informal mindful meditation.

You Should Know

Mindfulness means noticing what is happening right here and now, without judgment and with acceptance. You might want to add some simple meditation practices to your toolbox.

When some people hear the word *meditation*, they worry that they have to subscribe to a certain religious or spiritual belief, or fold themselves into a pretzel and chant. Not so. In recent years, experts like Jon Kabat-Zinn, internationally known teacher and creator of the Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction program; psychologist Tara Brach; meditation masters Thich Nhat Hanh and Sharon Salzberg; and author Dan Harris have brought ancient Buddhist traditions into the Western culture and made the techniques and practices easily available to people from all walks of life.

As mentioned earlier, studies show that even a few minutes of quieting the mind and body on a regular basis can reap big benefits—less depression, less anxiety, lower blood pressure—and improvements in memory and attention. You are training your brain to default to a more relaxed state. That happens only with regular practice. Just as we wouldn't expect a marathon runner to be able to run a race without training, don't expect that you'll immediately reap the benefits of meditation. Slow and steady. One step at a time.

You might want to search for meditation, mindfulness, or guided visualization recordings on YouTube. Sometimes you might want one with music, sometimes without. Sometimes a woman's voice will be calming, sometimes a man's. Explore, experiment, find what works best for you.

There are two categories of mindfulness meditation practices: formal and informal. *Formal practice* requires setting aside a specific time each day or twice a day to be mindful, and it can be done either sitting or walking. *Informal practice* refers to paying mindful, nonjudgmental attention while doing certain routine daily activities such as taking a shower, washing the dishes, making the bed, driving, making lunch, going for a walk, and so on. Start by choosing one daily activity at a time so you don't get overwhelmed, but there is no such thing as too much mindfulness!

What to Do

In this exercise, you'll start with the formal practice of sitting meditation. Sitting meditation requires setting aside a specific time each day or twice a day, or as often as you can, to sit quietly with your eyes closed (or open, gazing steadily downward, if you prefer). Experts often recommend twenty minutes per day, but if that doesn't work for you, try ten. Or five. Or even start with three. You can always build up over time, just like marathon runners in training.

For your sitting meditation, find a time when you can eliminate all distractions and unplug from the world. It might be at home or at work; it might be in your car in a parking lot or at your local library. To start, you might choose to repeat a mantra: that is, a word of your choice, such as "peace," "calm," "one," "love," or something that you can use as your anchor when your mind wanders—which it inevitably will.

Don't worry and don't judge. Just watch the thoughts floating past you, like clouds in the sky. *The mindful moment comes when you notice your mind wandering.* Simply bring your attention back to your anchor. You can also use your breath as an anchor, or any of the mindful self-compassion phrases you have developed. By regularly practicing sitting still and simply noticing the flow of thoughts and sensations without judgment and with acceptance, you'll get better at noticing when you are not mindful. Again, that "waking up" moment is a moment of mindfulness, pulling you out of your trance and into the present moment.

For your informal mindfulness practice, pick one of the activities mentioned above (taking a shower, washing the dishes, making the bed, driving, making lunch, or going for a walk) and see what it is like to pay full attention to what is happening right here and now. In the shower, do you feel the water on your body? Is it warm enough? Too warm? Do you feel the soap or the shampoo—can you be present throughout the shower? If your mind wanders (for example, to reviewing your to-do list), bring it back to the sensory experience of being in the shower.

This week, try to schedule at least three or four formal sitting meditation sessions, and one or two informal practices. During each activity, practice being mindful, that is, noticing how your body feels; noticing your breath; noticing any sensory experiences such as what you see, hear, smell, or touch. Write down your experiences and your responses.

Date	Formal practice	Informal practice	Response
<i>Example: Monday</i>	<i>Sat for 10 mins. on my couch after work, no phone or TV! Focused on breath</i>	<i>Paid attention while brushing teeth</i>	<i>Got fidgety but stuck with it, noticed the fidgetiness, tried not to judge; tasted the minty toothpaste</i>

Reflections on This Exercise

How helpful was this exercise? _____
 (1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

Is there anything in particular you learned from this exercise?
