

# A Beginner's Guide to Mindfulness



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## What is *Mindfulness*?



Mindfulness is a type of simple meditation. Through mindfulness meditation, you become aware of and accept the present moment without judgment or interpretation. Mindfulness allows you to focus intensely — through a gentle, nurturing lens — on yourself and what you're thinking, sensing, and feeling around you.

Practicing mindfulness involves breathing methods, guided imagery, and other techniques to relax your body and mind. It can be as simple as being aware of your breath and body, accepting any thoughts of curiosity, compassion, and acceptance. Or you can observe your thoughts and emotions as they come and go before returning your focus to physical sensations such as your feet on the floor or the feeling of air as you breathe.

There are many ways to practice mindfulness. The goal of any mindfulness technique is to experience a state of alert, focused relaxation. You do this by paying attention to thoughts, feelings, and body sensations in your environment while remaining nonjudgmental.

## What Are the Benefits of Mindfulness?

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Mindfulness can be a powerful technique for self-care and self-soothing.

Being mindful requires you to slow down, use your senses, and become present in the moment. Taking a moment to practice mindfulness can help you explore, acknowledge, and regulate your responses to your environment.

In stressful situations, mindfulness can be helpful to understand and regulate your emotions. Mindfulness techniques direct your attention away from negative thinking and toward more meaningful engagement with the world around you.

You can use mindfulness to calm yourself when you feel stressed or anxious or to crowd out negative thoughts. You also can use it to give yourself a mental lift when you are feeling down or depressed. Or you can use it to direct your focus when your thoughts are racing.

Mindfulness can also help you channel good-feeling emotions like joy, happiness, and inner peace. You can practice it to summon positive feelings when you need them. Mindfulness can help you feel better and develop the ability to care for both yourself and others.



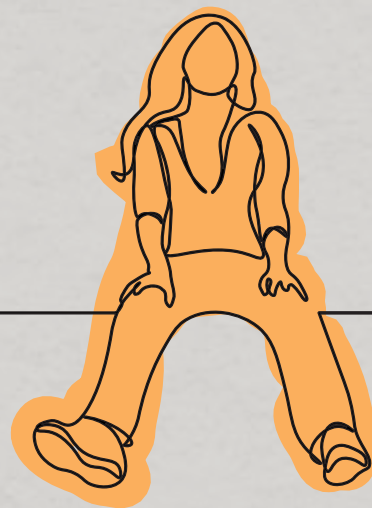
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## Mindfulness Exercises

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There are many techniques you can use to achieve a state of mindfulness. Some are as simple as slowing your breathing to still your thoughts. Others, like transcendental meditation or yoga, involve extra learning or classes with trained instructors.

The best way to begin practicing mindfulness is just to start. Here is an easy, unstructured mindfulness exercise to try.



## Easy 5-step mindfulness exercises

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- 1 Sit in a comfortable position in a quiet, comfortable place.
- 2 Pay attention to the environment around you with all your senses. What do you see, hear, smell, and feel?
- 3 Be present and try to keep your focus on what you're experiencing in the moment.
- 4 Focus on your breathing. If your thoughts stray from that moment, pull them back by focusing on your breath as it comes in and out of your body.
- 5 Accept yourself in the moment and be kind to yourself.

Try to set aside time when you can be in a quiet place without distractions or interruptions. Use this exercise any time you need to center your thoughts or get in touch with your feelings.

In fact, you can practice simple mindfulness exercises anywhere and at any time. Research indicates that engaging your senses outdoors in nature is especially beneficial.

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## Mindful breathing

Take a deep breath into your belly. Hold, then slowly exhale. Congratulations – you've calmed your nervous system.

Mindful breathing is a basic yet powerful mindfulness meditation practice. It can reduce stress, increase alertness, and boost your immune system.

For centuries, yoga practitioners have used breath control to promote concentration and improve vitality. Buddha advocated breath meditation as a way to reach enlightenment.

Science is starting to provide evidence of the benefits of this ancient practice.

### Studies have found that breathing practices can help reduce symptoms associated with:

- Anxiety.
- Insomnia.
- Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).
- Depression.
- Attention deficit disorder (ADD).

### Other benefits of breath meditation can include:

- Lower blood pressure.
- Improved diabetic symptoms.
- Better managed chronic pain.
- Better regulated reaction to stress and fatigue.
- Reduced caregiver burnout.

There are many different types of mindful breathing. The main idea of the technique is to focus your attention on your breath. You focus on your breath's natural rhythm and flow and the way it feels each time you inhale and exhale. Try using a mindful breathing technique the next time you have negative thoughts or need to center yourself. Here are three easy mindful breathing techniques to get you started.

### Belly breathing

1. Sit or lie flat on your back in a comfortable position.
2. Put one hand on your belly, right below your ribs, and the other hand on your chest.
3. Take a slow, deep breath in through your nose, letting your belly rise to push your hand upward.
4. Breathe out slowly through pursed lips as if you were whistling.
5. Repeat three to 10 times.

### 4-7-8 breathing

1. Close your mouth and inhale through your nose to a mental count of 4 seconds.
2. Hold your breath for a count of 7 seconds.
3. Exhale completely through your mouth, making a whooshing sound, to a count of 8 seconds.
4. Inhale again and repeat the cycle for six to eight breaths.

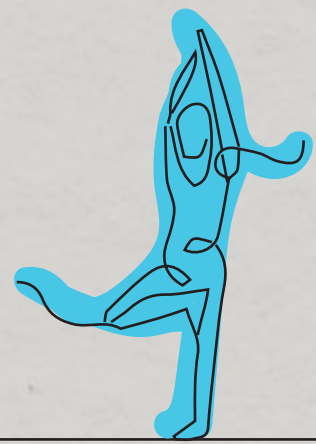
### Coherent breathing

The goal of coherent breathing is to slow your breathing rate to five breaths per minute. It translates into inhaling and exhaling to the count of 6.

If you have never practiced breathing exercises before, work up to this practice slowly. Start by inhaling and exhaling to the count of 3 and work your way up to 6.

Aim to practice one of these breathing techniques at least once each day for several months. Set a reminder on your phone or fitness tracker to slow down, be present in the moment, and breathe.

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## Mindful stretching

Just as you can use your breath as an element of meditation, you can use your body. Mindful stretching is exploring your body and its movements in a slow and deliberate way. More than mere stretching, it is being intimately aware of how your body feels and being in the moment with your movements.

Here are a few basic stretches to begin:

- **Upward stretch** — Like a first morning stretch, raise your arms above your head and lock your fingers together with your palms facing up. Try to elongate your spine until you feel a stretching sensation in your arms and rib cage. Hold for 10 seconds, then move your arms a few inches to one side and stretch your side body and torso. Hold for 10 seconds. Repeat on the other side.
- **Neck/shoulder stretch** — Sit with your legs crossed in a comfortable position. Take a deep breath to relax. Roll your shoulders backward a few times, then roll them forward. Lift them up to your ears, then drop them completely. Roll your shoulders up, back, then down, and hold them down. Tilt your left ear and head toward your left shoulder and hold for about 10 seconds. With your head tilted, raise your right shoulder up, back, and then down, and hold there. Repeat this to stretch the muscles on the left side of the neck. This is a good yoga stretch for increasing health and fitness.
- **Cat/cow** — Use this stretch to reach the muscles of your core and spine. Start by kneeling on the ground on all fours. Keep your arms straight beneath your shoulders. Breathe out slowly as you round your back. Tighten the muscles of your abdomen and bend your neck downward. Then, exhale slowly while creating an arch in your back and looking up at the ceiling. Do several cat/cow stretches.
- **Finish with a symbolic ritual** — Complete your mindful stretching with a symbolic ritual to end everything on an inspiring and uplifting note. You could take a moment to reflect on your day coming up or the day that has passed. You could say a short prayer or meditate on what you are thankful for. Some people like to say an inspirational phrase such as “I alone hold the truth of who I am.”

For a full list of the five best morning and evening stretches, visit [UPMC HealthBeat](#).

Mindful stretching can be a great way to start and/or end your day. Because mindful stretching is about exploration, every session will be a bit different. Keep the following tips in mind when you begin mindful stretching:

- Try using a mirror when stretching so you can observe your body and its movement.
- Move mindfully as you explore different positions. Feel your weight and balance shift as you transition from one pose to another. Use slow and deliberate movements.
- Identify body parts that ache or feel tense. As you stretch and move, listen to your body and its signals and sensations. Take note of specific areas where you are achy, sore, or tense. Be gentle with those areas, giving them extra care and attention.
- Try to combine your mindful stretching with a habit you already do every morning or evening. Then it will be easier to build a new and consistent routine.

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## Daily affirmations

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To add another mental component to your mindful stretching, consider including affirmations or self-talk to your daily routines. Affirmations are positive statements that can help you to challenge and overcome self-sabotaging and negative thoughts. When you combine the power of positive thinking with mindful movement, you begin to internalize these positive thoughts on a deeper level.

By practicing these affirmations, you can create an anchor or strong association between your body and your thoughts. Repeat them often – and believe them – and you may start to see positive changes in your life.

Affirmations can combat negative thoughts and replace them with more positive narratives. To start, all you need to do is pick a phrase and repeat it to yourself. Use affirmations to motivate yourself or boost your self-esteem.

Choose one simple affirmation as you go through your mindfulness routine. Here are a few to try:

- I love and accept myself.
- I am a creative force, and what I do matters.
- I believe in my dreams and in myself.
- I deserve to love and be loved.
- I am worthy just the way I am.
- I am doing my best, and I am proud of myself.
- I am a magnet for good works and positive energy.
- I forgive myself for my past mistakes and others for times they've hurt me.

Hearing internal positive affirmations can help tune out and transform self-criticism and doubt. These positive affirmations can help you internalize good feelings and create the reality you want. They can help attract and create love, beauty, health, and happiness into your life.

## Guided meditation for mindfulness

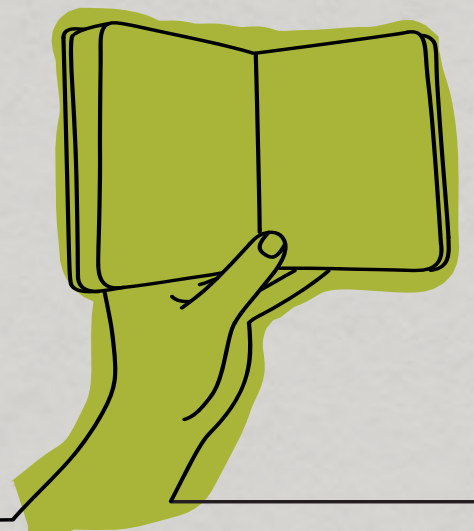
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A trained meditation practitioner often leads guided meditation. It can be in person or through a video chat, a recorded video, or an audio file.

Guided meditation can be a helpful tool for dealing with anxiety or stress. These meditations often use descriptive language, imagination, music, breathing, and other relaxation techniques. These techniques can help you reach mindfulness.

There are many different types of guided meditations. Your preferences may vary depending on your emotions, the time of day, and your meditation goals. To see if guided meditation is right for you, try a few free videos on YouTube or pick up a mindfulness book. You can also find free meditation apps on your smartphone.

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## Mindfulness journaling

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Journaling is a type of meditative writing. It has mindful qualities and is a great practice to add to your daily routine. Instead of blocking out your thoughts, mindful journaling encourages you to write them down.

Mindful journaling can have a multitude of benefits, including:

- Better mental health.
- Lower anxiety and stress levels.
- Improving your mood.

Journaling allows you to organize your thoughts and recognize your fears and concerns. It also gives you the opportunity to practice some positive self-talk. Writing in a journal can help change your outlook on life and allow you to follow and track your personal growth over time.

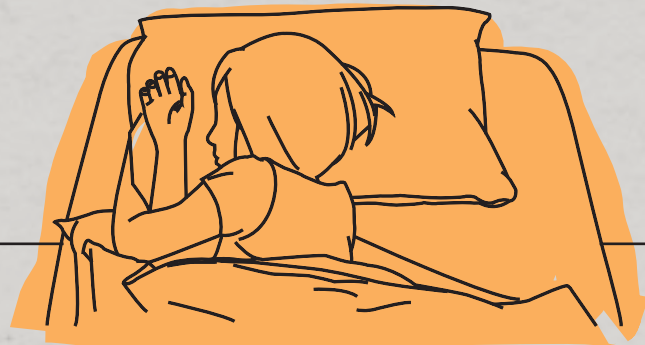
Pick a time of day that works for you to make journaling part of your regular routine. Whether you do it in the morning, after work, or before bedtime, journaling can help you examine what is in your head and your heart. It requires you to ask yourself why you feel a certain way about something, then write it down on paper. After writing down your thoughts, you can then let them go.

You can buy a mindful journal or create one of your own. Here are one week's worth of prompts to get you going on your mindful journaling. Pick one per day, in no particular order. Ask yourself:

- What brings me joy?
- Where is the place that makes me feel happiest, and why?
- What is my greatest fear, and what have I done to conquer it?
- Who is someone I would like to thank that I've never had a chance to and why?
- What are some of my best qualities?
- What is something I would like to change about myself?
- What are three amazing things that happened to me today?

If you combine your journaling with mindfulness exercises, try journaling before and after your exercise sessions. You can see if your mindset or body sensations have changed.

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## Mindfulness for Better Sleep

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Mindfulness can quiet the brain and allow for a deeper sleep. When you're having trouble sleeping, lying there trying to make yourself sleep can make it harder to fall asleep.

Mindfulness can set the stage for better sleep by allowing you to be more aware of your thoughts. It can help you let go of the anxieties associated with those thoughts instead of getting stuck on them.

[According to an analysis by Behavioral Sleep Medicine](#), mindfulness can have a positive impact on insomnia. It also doesn't require medicine.

Here are a few tips for using mindfulness to get a better night's sleep:

- **Meditate daily.** Maintaining a regular, daytime mindfulness meditation practice can help you sleep better and stay asleep longer at night.
- **Practice out of bed.** If you've tried to fall asleep for longer than 20 minutes, try a mindfulness practice — but get out of bed to do it. The point isn't to fall asleep in the middle of your mindfulness practice. The point is to make you ready for sleep when you return to bed.
- **Try not to force it.** When you're having trouble drifting off, try to let go of the struggle. Recognize your worries about being unable to sleep and your noisy mind. Now visualize them floating away. Practicing mindfulness and embracing the present moment can help you sleep.

## Meditation to prepare for sleep

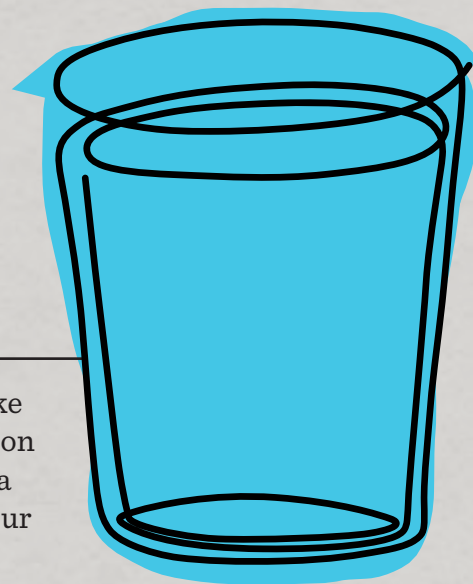
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A body scan meditation is a mental inventory of your physical sensations. You can use it when you get into bed to relax your body for sleep, or on the floor if you can't fall asleep after 20 minutes:

1. Lie on your back with your legs extended and arms at your sides.
2. Focus your attention on each part of your body, starting with your toes.
3. Slowly work your way mentally up your legs and the rest of your body. Be aware of any sensations, tension, thoughts, or emotions associated with each part of your body.
4. If you notice any uncomfortable sensations, focus your attention on them. Breathe into them and feel what happens. Visualize the tension leaving your body through your breath and evaporating into the air. Move on when you feel ready.
5. Continue this practice until you reach the top of your head. Notice how you feel and where you're holding your stress. If there's any tightness, pain, or pressure, continue to breathe into it, releasing the tension as you breathe out.



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## Mindfulness in Daily Life

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There are many ways to incorporate mindfulness into your daily life. Take a few moments to do a quick breathing meditation or body scan meditation whenever you feel stressed. Or do it several times throughout the day as a regular practice. If you are short on time, do an abbreviated version of your normal meditation. The more you meditate, the easier it will become.

Another way to be mindful in everyday life is to take a moment to appreciate and recognize everything you do. Find joy in simple pleasures.

Here are 10 easy, everyday tasks you can do to be kind to yourself:

1. **Drink more water.** Our bodies dehydrate overnight, so start the day with a glass of water at breakfast.
2. **Make your bed every morning.** Start the day with a tidy outlook.
3. **Be kind to yourself.** Treat yourself the way you would treat a good friend.
4. **Enjoy your meals.** Slow down when you eat, taste your food, and experience its flavors and textures.
5. **Organize your things.** Reduce your mental and physical clutter.
6. **Stretch whenever you can.** Stretch out your body whenever you feel the need.
7. **Enjoy a moment offline.** Every so often, turn off your devices.
8. **Take a breather.** Close your eyes and focus on your breathing for at least one minute.
9. **Walk mindfully.** Engage your senses outdoors as much as possible.
10. **Live in the moment.** Try to bring an open, accepting, and discerning attention to what you are doing.

Try to incorporate your mindfulness practice into at least one task every day for about six months. Over time, you may find that mindfulness becomes effortless. Think of your mindfulness practice as a commitment to reconnecting with and nurturing yourself.