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BEGINNER GUIDE TO Meditation



FROM THE EDITORS OF
mindful

Welcome to mindful

Did you know Mindful is a nonprofit? We are dedicated to inspiring and guiding anyone who wants to explore mindfulness to enjoy better health, more caring relationships, and a more compassionate society.

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How to Meditate

When we meditate, we inject far-reaching and long-lasting benefits into our lives: We lower our stress levels, we get to know our pain, we connect better, we improve our focus, and we're kinder to ourselves.

How do you learn to meditate? In mindfulness meditation, we're learning how to pay attention to the breath as it goes in and out, and notice when the mind wanders from this task. This practice of returning to the breath builds the muscles of attention and mindfulness.

When we pay attention to our breath, we are learning how to return to, and remain in, the present moment—to anchor ourselves in the here and now on purpose, without judgement.

The idea behind mindfulness seems simple—the practice takes patience. Indeed, renowned meditation teacher Sharon Salzberg recounts that her first experience with meditation showed her how quickly the mind gets caught up in other tasks. “I thought, okay, what will it be, like, 800 breaths before my mind starts to wander? And to my absolute amazement, it was one breath, and I'd be gone,” says Salzberg.

While meditation isn't a cure-all, it can certainly provide some much-needed space in your life. Sometimes, that's all we need to make better choices for ourselves, our families, and our communities. And the most important tools you can bring with you to your meditation practice are a little patience, some kindness for yourself, and a comfortable place to sit.

A BASIC MEDITATION FOR BEGINNERS

The first thing to clarify: What we're doing here is aiming for mindfulness, not some process that magically wipes your mind clear of the countless and endless thoughts that erupt and ping constantly in our brains. We're just practicing bringing our attention to our breath, and then back to the breath when we notice our attention has wandered.

1. Get comfortable and prepare to sit still for a few minutes.

After you stop reading this, you're going to simply focus on your own natural inhaling and exhaling of breath.

2. Focus on your breath. Where do you feel your breath most? In your belly? In your nose? Try to keep your attention on your inhale and exhale.

3. Follow your breath for two minutes. You can use the breath ball—inhaling as the ball expands, exhaling when the ball contracts.

Welcome back. What happened? How long was it before your mind wandered away from your breath? Did notice how busy your mind was even without your consciously directing it to think about anything in particular? Did you notice yourself getting caught up in thoughts before you came back to reading this? We often have little narratives running in our minds that we didn't choose to put there, like: "Why DOES my boss want to meet with me tomorrow?" "I should have gone to the gym yesterday." "I've got to pay some bills" or (the classic) "I don't have time to sit still, I've got stuff to do."

If you experienced these sorts of distractions (and we all do), you've made an important discovery: simply put, that's the opposite of mindfulness. It's when we live in our heads, on automatic pilot, letting our thoughts go here and there, exploring, say, the future or the past, and essentially, not being present in the moment. But that's where most of us live most of the time—and pretty uncomfortably, if we're being honest, right? But it doesn't have to be that way.

We “practice” mindfulness so we can learn how to recognize when our minds are doing their normal everyday acrobatics, and maybe take a pause from that for just a little while so we can choose what we'd like to focus on. In a nutshell, meditation helps us have a much healthier relationship with ourselves (and, by extension, with others).

READ MORE ABOUT MEDITATION

An illustration featuring a stylized human brain in shades of blue and purple. The brain is surrounded by large, colorful leaves in shades of pink, purple, and yellow. A small figure of a person with dark hair, wearing a yellow shirt, is shown in a meditative pose (sitting cross-legged) in front of the brain. Dotted lines connect the person to the brain and the leaves, suggesting a connection between the mind, nature, and meditation.

A One-Minute Meditation to Focus Your Mind

This guided meditation is meant to be done in the middle of the day, wherever you may be. **By Barry Boyce**

In mindfulness practice, you'll often hear the term "natural awareness." By "natural awareness" we mean the awareness that just comes with being a human being. It's free from judging and characterizing—it's just noticing and sensing the world. It's done when you open your eyes, you see something, or you hear something, or you touch something. So, the simplest awareness that just comes as part of the equipment of being alive, without a lot of filters around it or judgments. You can trust that it's always there.

AN AWARENESS PRACTICE YOU CAN DO ANYWHERE



LISTEN NOW

This is a short practice intended for doing in the middle of the day, wherever you are out in the world, for settling. It's done with eyes open. So let's begin.

- 1. Settle into your seat.** Begin by taking a seat, or if necessary, standing. The important thing is to feel where your body is touching the seat and touching the ground.
- 2. Scan the body.** Sense where your bottom is touching the seat. Sit up straight or stand straight but not stiff. Make sure your feet are completely touching the ground, connecting you to the earth. Your eyes are open, so take in the surroundings of where you are. Lower your gaze slightly.
- 3. Connect with the breath.** Pay light attention to your breath as it goes out.
- 4. Follow the out-breath.** At the end of the out-breath, let there be a gap while the in-breath is happening. And in that gap you have natural awareness: it's there already, you don't have to create it. So, follow the breath out, and out, and out. As thoughts arise, treat them as you would anything else you encounter: Notice it, and use that noticing to bring you back to the out-breath and ride it out. Out, and out, and out.



BARRY BOYCE

Barry Boyce is Editor-in-Chief of Mindful and Mindful.org. He is also author of *The Mindfulness Revolution: Leading Psychologists, Scientists, Artists, and Meditation Teachers on the Power of Mindfulness in Daily Life*. Email Barry Boyce: barry@mindful.org



A 5-Minute Gratitude Practice: Savor the Moment by Tapping into Your Senses

This 5-minute mindfulness practice cultivates gratitude for life's small delights as you move through the senses. **By Elaine Smookler**

Waking up this morning, I glanced at my cell phone and noticed the weather app ominously predicting many days of snow and icy temperatures ahead. Brrr! I could feel the chill of dark thoughts starting to gather. I could feel my body creak with cold and aging.

Life's challenges were seemingly everywhere. And yet...I was smiling. I was cheerful. I was grateful. What? Was I crazy?

I made a general goal to cultivate more resilience around the ups and downs of life, so I made a point of tuning my awareness toward the appreciation of life's small delights. I was curious about what I would discover if I focused intentionally on the things that I appreciated. This morning, as I let wakefulness peel the dark back, I could smell my neighbor's coffee brewing. The snow outside gently buffered the

sounds of the world. I could sense my husband's warm weight in the bed. I took a long moment to enjoy the muted winter light edging in around the slats of the window blinds.

There was nothing particularly special going on, but I noticed that being grateful for little things was already lifting my dark thoughts. Difficulties were still present, but awareness of my gratitude was shifting my view, letting me see that everything was not dark and cold—in fact, many sights and sounds were quite lovely.

Would you like to join me in cultivating a bit of gratitude together?

MINDFULNESS PRACTICE: CULTIVATE GRATITUDE THROUGH THE SENSES



LISTEN NOW

1. Use the breath to anchor yourself in the present moment.

Our minds are always so easily pulled to busyness. Bring particular attention to feeling the breath, or something in the body, as you bring your shoulders down and orient your attention toward gratitude.

2. Next, bring to mind a sight you are grateful for. Move through your senses, and find one thing to start with that you appreciate that comes to you from the world of sight, if you have this available. It could be a color...a shadow...a shape...a movement. Remember, it will never be like this again. What do you see right now, and can you feel grateful that you get to see this, whatever it is?

3. Now, shift to a scent you appreciate. As you continue to work with your senses, now take time to tune in with appreciation to an aroma. What do you notice? What about that glorious or interesting or subtle smell is making you smile? It could be gratitude for something familiar: a scent that brings comfort,

upliftment; or maybe it's something you've never smelled before, and it just piques your curiosity, ignites you, enlivens you.

4. **Moving on, tune into any sounds around you.** Allowing the world of smell to gently recede into the background, on an in-breath, shift your attention to your ears and the world of sound. Maybe notice what it feels like to really listen. How many sounds can you notice, and can you feel grateful that you're able to experience sound, if you are? What can you notice about these sounds—far away? close? Perhaps you could play a piece of music that brings you joy, and have gratitude that it's so available? Or maybe it's the sound of children laughing, the sound of loved ones breathing, the sound of the beating of your own heart.
5. **The world of touch and texture beckons us next.** We find so much to be grateful for in touch! If there's someone near who you can hug or who can hug you, notice how this makes you feel filled with gratitude for the joy of human contact. Or perhaps you have a beautiful pet that you can stroke and cuddle, or some lovely material with a texture that feels warm to the touch, soft, evocative. Let your senses ignite your gratitude! There's so much to be appreciative of.
6. **Shift to noticing and appreciating objects around you.** Now take a moment to look around: Look down, look up, and from side to side. Appreciate how much effort must have gone into anything at all you own or use. Someone conceived of the need and many people worked on the details of the design. Much care even went into the packaging to deliver your item to you safely. What do you feel when you let yourself be grateful that all that talent went into making your life a little easier?
7. **As you end this practice, carry this attitude of gratitude with you.** One last little grateful tip: Why not offer your thanks to each person who does anything at all for you today? Even if it is their job to help you? When you're grateful, when you let your heart

open up and be filled with appreciation, notice how being grateful makes you feel.

- 8. Close with gratitude.** I'm so grateful that you tuned in to this gratitude practice, and I appreciate your time, your effort, and your energy to be present, awake, and alive to your precious life. Have a beautiful day.

This mindfulness practice provides additional information to an article titled, "Thanks for This," which appeared in the April 2018 issue of Mindful magazine. Subscribe to the digital issue of Mindful to get immediate access to the April issue.



ELAINE SMOOKLER

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Healthy Mind, Healthy Life

Discover practical ways to find calm in times of stress,
let go of your inner critic, and reconnect with your best self.



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