

ANGEL'S FRIENDLY COACHING

A Basic Meditation for Beginners

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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.

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. 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. Follow your breath for two minutes. Take a deep inhale, expanding your belly, and then exhale slowly, elongating the out-breath as your belly contracts. Welcome back. What happened? How long was it before your mind wandered away from your breath? Did you notice how busy your mind was even without 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).

When we meditate, we inject far-reaching and long-lasting benefits into our lives. And bonus: you don't need any extra gear or an expensive membership.

Here are five reasons to meditate:

- 1: Understand your pain**
- 2: Lower your stress**
- 3: Connect better**
- 4: Improve focus**
- 5: Reduce brain chatter**

How to Meditate

Meditation is simpler (and harder) than most people think. Read these steps, make sure you're somewhere where you can relax into this process, set a timer, and give it a shot:

1 - Take a seat

Find a place to sit that feels calm and quiet to you.

2 - Set a time limit

If you're just beginning, it can help to choose a short time, such as five or 10 minutes.

3 - Notice your body

You can sit in a chair with your feet on the floor, you can sit loosely cross-legged, you can kneel—all are fine. Just make sure you are stable and in a position you can stay in for a while.

4 - Feel your breath

Follow the sensation of your breath as it goes in and as it goes out.

5 - Notice when your mind has wandered

Inevitably, your attention will leave the breath and wander to other places. When you get around to noticing that your mind has wandered—in a few seconds, a minute, five minutes—simply return your attention to the breath.

6 - Be kind to your wandering mind

Don't judge yourself or obsess over the content of the thoughts you find yourself lost in. Just come back.

7 - Close with kindness

When you're ready, gently lift your gaze (if your eyes are closed, open them). Take a moment and notice any sounds in the environment. Notice how your body feels right now. Notice your thoughts and emotions.

That's it! That's the practice. You go away, you come back, and you try to do it as kindly as possible.

Meditation Tips and Techniques:

We've gone over the basic breath meditation so far, but there are other mindfulness techniques that use different focal points than the breath to anchor our attention—external objects like a sound in the room, or something broader, such as noticing spontaneous things that come into your awareness during an aimless wandering practice.

Shifting the balance to give your intentional brain more power takes some work, though. Here are some ways to get started.

Put meditation reminders around you. If you intend to do some yoga or to meditate, put your yoga mat or your meditation cushion in the middle of your floor so you can't miss it as you walk by.

Meditation Tips and Techniques:

Refresh your reminders regularly. Say you decide to use sticky notes to remind yourself of a new intention. That might work for about a week, but then your autopilot brain and old habits take over again. Try writing new notes to yourself; add variety or make them funny. That way they'll stick with you longer.

Create new patterns. You could try a series of "If this, then that" messages to create easy reminders to shift into the intentional brain. For instance, you might come up with, "If office door, then deep breath," as a way to shift into mindfulness as you are about to start your workday. Or, "If phone rings, take a breath before answering." Each intentional action to shift into mindfulness will strengthen your intentional brain.

Once you have explored a basic seated meditation practice, you might want to consider other forms of meditation including walking and lying down. Whereas the previous meditations used the breath as a focal point for practice, these meditations below focus on different parts of the body.

Introduction to the Body Scan Meditation

Try this: feel your feet on the ground right now. In your shoes or without, it doesn't matter. Then track or scan over your whole body, bit by bit—slowly—all the way up to the crown of your head. The point of this practice is to check in with your whole body: Fingertips to shoulders, butt to big toe. Only rules are: No judging, no wondering, no worrying (all activities your mind may want to do); just check in with the physical feeling of being in your body. Aches and pains are fine. You don't have to do anything about anything here. You're just noticing.

Begin to focus your attention on different parts of your body. You can spotlight one particular area or go through a sequence like this: toes, feet (sole, heel, top of foot), through the legs, pelvis, abdomen, lower back, upper back, chest shoulders, arms down to the fingers, shoulders, neck, different parts of the face, and head. For each part of the body, linger for a few moments and notice the different sensations as you focus.

The moment you notice that your mind has wandered, return your attention to the part of the body you last remember.

If you fall asleep during this body-scan practice, that's okay. When you realize you've been nodding off, take a deep breath to help you reawaken and perhaps reposition your body (which will also help wake it up). When you're ready, return your attention to the part of the body you last remember focusing on.

Introduction to Loving-Kindness Meditation

You cannot will yourself into particular feelings toward yourself or anyone else. Rather, you can practice reminding yourself that you deserve happiness and ease and that the same goes for your child, your family, your friends, your neighbors, and everyone else in the world.

This loving-kindness practice involves silently repeating phrases that offer good qualities to oneself and to others.

You can start by taking delight in your own goodness—calling to mind things you have done out of good-heartedness, and rejoicing in those memories to celebrate the potential for goodness we all share.

Silently recite phrases that reflect what we wish most deeply for ourselves in an enduring way. Traditional phrases are:

- **May I live in safety.**
- **May I have mental happiness (peace, joy).**
- **May I have physical happiness (health, freedom from pain).**
- **May I live with ease.**

Repeat the phrases with enough space and silence between so they fall into a rhythm that is pleasing to you. Direct your attention to one phrase at a time. Each time you notice your attention has wandered, be kind to yourself and let go of the distraction. Come back to repeating the phrases without judging or disparaging yourself.

After some time, visualize yourself in the center of a circle composed of those who have been kind to you, or have inspired you because of their love. Perhaps you've met them, or read about them; perhaps they live now, or have existed historically or even mythically. That is the circle. As you visualize yourself in the center of it, experience yourself as the recipient of their love and attention. Keep gently repeating the phrases of loving-kindness for yourself.

To close the session, let go of the visualization, and simply keep repeating the phrases for a few more minutes. Each time you do so, you are transforming your old, hurtful relationship to yourself, and are moving forward, sustained by the force of kindness.

Common Questions About Mindfulness Meditation Answered

When you're new to meditation, it's natural for questions to pop up often. These answers may ease your mind.

1 - If I have an itch, can I scratch it?

Yes—however, first try scratching it with your mind before using your fingers.

2 - Should I breathe fast or slow or in between?

Only worry if you've stopped breathing. Otherwise, you're doing fine. Breathe in whatever way feels comfortable to you.

3 - Should my eyes be open or closed?

No hard-and-fast rules. Try both. If open, not too wide, and with a soft, slightly downward gaze, not focusing on anything in particular. If closed, not too hard, and not imagining anything in particular in your mind's eye.

4 - Is it possible I'm someone who just CANNOT meditate?

When you find yourself asking that question, your meditation has officially begun. Everyone wonders that. Notice it. Escort your attention back to your object of focus (the breath). When you're lost and questioning again, come back to the breathe again. That's the practice. There's no limit to the number of times you can be distracted and come back to the breath. Meditating is not a race to perfection—it's returning again and again to the breath.

5 - Is it better to practice in a group or by myself?

Both are great! It's enormously supportive to meditate with others. And, practicing on your own builds discipline.

6 - What's the best time of day to meditate?

Whatever works. Consider your circumstances: children, pets, work. Experiment. But watch out. If you always choose the most convenient time, it will usually be tomorrow.

7 - What if I get sexually (and physically) aroused by thoughts in my head?

No big deal. Meditation stokes the imagination. In time, every thought and sensation will pop up (so to speak). And come back. Same old story. Release the thought, bring awareness and receptivity to body sensations, bring attention back to your chosen object (the breath, in this case). Repeat.

8 - Do you have any tips on integrating pets into meditation practice?

While meditating, we don't have to fight off distractions like a knight slaying dragons. If your dog or cat comes into the room and barks and meows and brushes up against you or settles down on a part of your cushion, no big deal. Let it be. What works less well is to interrupt your session to relate to them. If that's what's going to happen, try to find a way to avoid their interrupting your practice.