

A woman with long dark hair, wearing a black sports bra and leggings, is sitting in a meditative lotus position on a stone ledge. She has her hands pressed together in a prayer position (Anjali Mudra) near her face. She is positioned between two large, textured stone columns. The background shows a large, leafy tree against a clear blue sky. The entire image has a blue color overlay.

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MINDFULNESS

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| Mindfulness

What is Mindfulness?

Mindfulness is the basic human ability to be fully present, aware of where we are and what we're doing, and not overly reactive or overwhelmed by what's going on around us.

While mindfulness is something we all naturally possess, it's more readily available to us when we practice on a daily basis.

Whenever you bring awareness to what you're directly experiencing via your senses, or to your state of mind via your thoughts and emotions, you're being mindful. And there's growing research showing that when you train your brain to be mindful, you're actually remodeling the physical structure of your brain.

The Basics of Mindfulness Practice

Mindfulness helps us put some space between ourselves and our reactions, breaking down our conditioned responses. Here's how to tune into mindfulness throughout the day:

- **Set aside some time.** You don't need a meditation cushion or bench, or any sort of special equipment to access your mindfulness skills—but you do need to set aside some time and space.
- **Observe the present moment as it is.** The aim of mindfulness is not to quiet the mind, or attempting to achieve a state of eternal calm. The goal is simple: we're aiming to pay attention to the present moment, without judgment. Easier said than done, we know.
- **Let your judgments roll by.** When we notice judgments arise during our practice, we can make a mental note of them, and let them pass.
- Return to observing the present moment as it is. Our minds often get carried away in thought. That's why mindfulness is the practice of returning, again and again, to the present moment.
- **Be kind to your wandering mind.** Don't judge yourself for whatever thoughts crop up, just practice recognizing when your mind has wandered off, and gently bring it back.
- That's the practice. It's often been said that it's very simple, but it's not necessarily easy. The work is to just keep doing it. Results will accrue.

How to Meditate

This meditation focuses on the breath, not because there is anything special about it, but because the physical sensation of breathing is always there and you can use it as an anchor to the present moment. Throughout the practice you may find yourself caught up in thoughts, emotions, sounds—wherever your mind goes, simply come back again to the next breath. Even if you only come back once, that's okay.

A Simple Meditation Practice

- Find a spot that gives you a stable, solid, comfortable seat.
- Notice what your legs are doing. If on a cushion, cross your legs comfortably in front of you. If on a chair, rest the bottoms of your feet on the floor.
- Straighten your upper body—but don't stiffen. Your spine has natural curvature. Let it be there.
- Notice what your arms are doing. Situate your upper arms parallel to your upper body. Rest the palms of your hands on your legs wherever it feels most natural.
- Soften your gaze. Drop your chin a little and let your gaze fall gently downward. It's not necessary to close your eyes. You can simply let what appears before your eyes be there without focusing on it.



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- Feel your breath. Bring your attention to the physical sensation of breathing: the air moving through your nose or mouth, the rising and falling of your belly, or your chest.
- Notice when your mind wanders from your breath. Inevitably, your attention will leave the breath and wander to other places. Don't worry. There's no need to block or eliminate thinking. When you notice your mind wandering gently return your attention to the breath.
- Be kind about your wandering mind. You may find your mind wandering constantly—that's normal, too. Instead of wrestling with your thoughts, practice observing them without reacting. Just sit and pay attention. As hard as it is to maintain, that's all there is. Come back to your breath over and over again, without judgment or expectation.
- 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.

1. Is there a wrong way to meditate? A right way to meditate?

People think they're messing up when they're meditating because of how busy the mind is. But getting lost in thought, noticing it, and returning to your chosen meditation object— breath, sound, body sensation, or something else—is how it's done. That's about it. If you're doing that, you're doing it right!

2. Are there more formal ways to take up mindfulness practice?

Mindfulness can be practiced solo, anytime, or with like-minded friends. But there are others ways, and many resources, to tap into. Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction, Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy, and other mindfulness-based training are available across North America. We've organized a list of centers here.

Daily guided meditations are also available by a smartphone app, or you can practice in person at a meditation center. Read more about the types of programs currently available.

3. Do I have to practice every day?

No, but being that it's a beneficial practice, you may well find that the more you do it, the more you'll find it beneficial to your life. Read Jack Kornfield's guidelines for developing a daily practice here.

4. How do I find a meditation instructor?

If you want to make mindfulness a part of your life, you'll probably want to consider working with a meditation teacher or instructor. You can even do that online using a video chat format of some kind, but even then the same principles apply. Read our 4 questions to consider when looking for a meditation teacher. Woman practicing yoga poses

5. How do yoga and mindfulness work together?

There are a number of yoga poses that will help you with your mindfulness meditation practice. Here are 10 simple yoga exercises to reduce stress, improve well-being, and get you primed for a sitting meditation session—or anytime.