

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. Let us walk you through the basics in our new mindful guide on how to meditate.

What is Meditation?

This is a guidebook to the many different styles of meditation, the various benefits of each practice, plus free guided audio practices that help you learn how to meditate.

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 judgment.

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.

Why Learn to Meditate

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 101: The Basics

Try this 3-part guided audio series from Barry Boyce:

How long would you like to meditate? Sometimes we only have time for a quick check-in, sometimes we can dip in a little longer. Meditating every day helps build awareness, fosters resilience, and lowers stress. Try to make meditation a habit by practicing with these short meditations from our Editor-in-Chief Barry Boyce. Find time to sit once a day for one month and see what you notice.

[AUDIO: 1-minute meditation]

[AUDIO: 10-minute meditation]

[AUDIO: 15-minute meditation]

Beyond the Beginning

How to Make Mindfulness a Habit

It's estimated that 95% of our behavior runs on autopilot. That's because neural networks underlie all of our habits, reducing our millions of sensory inputs per second into manageable shortcuts so we can function in this crazy world. These default brain signals are so efficient that they often cause us to relapse into old behaviors before we remember what we meant to do instead.

Mindfulness is the exact opposite of these default processes. It's executive control rather than autopilot, and enables intentional actions, willpower, and decisions. But that takes practice. The more we activate the intentional brain, the stronger it gets. Every time we do something deliberate and new, we stimulate neuroplasticity, activating our

grey matter, which is full of newly sprouted neurons that have not yet been groomed for “autopilot” brain.

But here’s the problem: While our intentional brain knows what is best for us, our autopilot brain causes us to shortcut our way through life. So how can we trigger ourselves to be mindful when we need it most? This is where the notion of “behavior design” comes in. It’s a way to put your intentional brain in the driver’s seat. There are two ways to do that—first, slowing down the autopilot brain by putting obstacles in its way, and second, removing obstacles in the path of the intentional brain, so it can gain control.

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.

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 the phone rings, take a breath before answering.” Each intentional action to shift into mindfulness will strengthen your intentional brain.

More Styles of Mindfulness Meditation

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.

[AUDIO: Body Scan Meditation]

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 the Walking Meditation

Fact: Most of us live pretty sedentary lives, leaving us to build extra-curricular physical activity into our days to counteract all that. Point is: Mindfulness doesn't have to feel like another thing on your to-do list. It can be injected into some of the activities you're already doing. Here's how to integrate a mindful walking practice into your day.

[AUDIO: Walking Meditation]

As you begin, walk at a natural pace. Place your hands wherever comfortable: on your belly, behind your back, or at your sides.

If you find it useful, you can count steps up to 10, and then start back at one again. If you're in a small space, as you reach ten, pause, and with intention, choose a moment to turn around.

With each step, pay attention to the lifting and falling of your foot. Notice movement in your legs and the rest of your body. Notice any shifting of your body from side to side. Whatever else captures your attention, come back to the sensation of walking. Your mind will wander, so without frustration, guide it back again as many times as you need. Particularly outdoors, maintain a larger sense of the environment around you, taking it all in, staying safe and aware.

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.

[AUDIO: A Loving-Kindness Meditation]

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.

How Much Should I Meditate?

Meditation is no more complicated than what we've described above. It is that simple ... and that challenging. It's also powerful and worth it. The key is to commit to sit every day, even if it's for five minutes. Meditation teacher Sharon Salzberg says: "One of my meditation teachers said that the most important moment in your meditation practice is the moment you sit down to do it. Because right then you're saying to yourself that you believe in change, you believe in caring for yourself, and you're making it real. You're not just holding some value like mindfulness or compassion in the abstract, but really making it real."