## **How to Meditate**

##### **Meditation is something everyone can do, here’s how.**

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 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 focus your attention, your mind wanders, you bring it back, and you try to do it as kindly as possible (as many times as you need to).

#### 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.”  
  
Recent research from neuroscientist Amishi Jha discovered that [12 minutes of meditation, 5 days a week](https://www.mindful.org/find-your-focus-own-your-attention-in-12-minutes-a-day/" \t "https://www.mindful.org/how-to-meditate/_blank)can protect and strengthen your ability to pay attention.

#### 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](https://www.mindful.org/aimless-wandering-mindfulness-practice-video/" \t "https://www.mindful.org/how-to-meditate/_blank). But all of these practices have one thing in common: We notice that our minds ARE running the show a lot of the time. It’s true. We think thoughts, typically, and then we act. But here are some helpful strategies to change that up:

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

### Frequently Asked Questions About Mindfulness Meditation, Answered

When you’re learning how to meditate, 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. Breath 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.