

# 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?**

**Why Learn to Meditate?**

**How to Meditate**

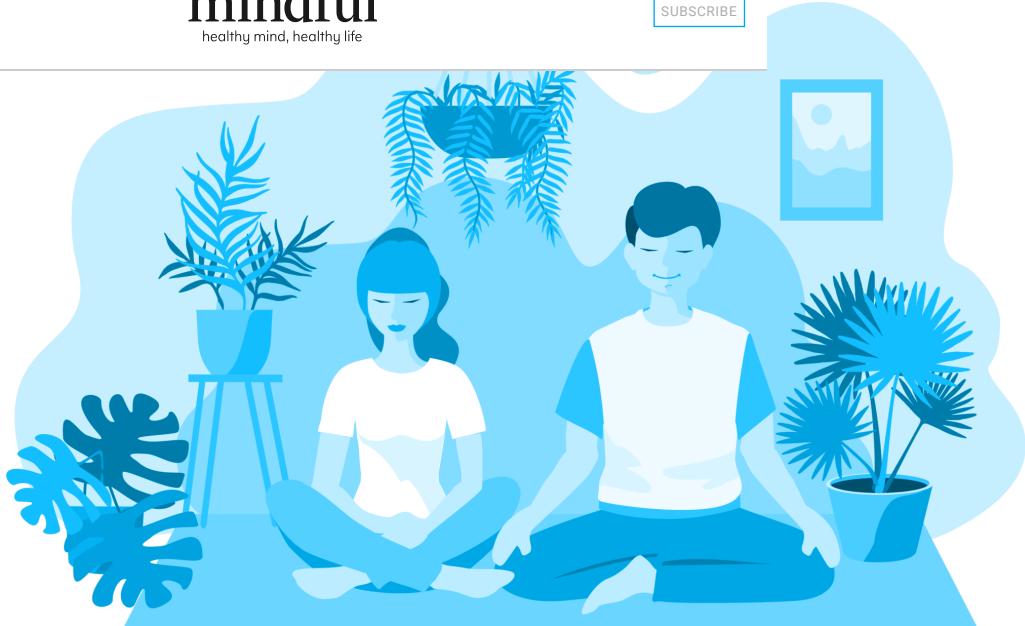
**Basic Meditations**

**Beyond the Beginning**



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We welcome you to our Mindful guide to meditation, which includes a variety of styles of meditation, information about the benefits of each practice, and free guided audio practices that help you learn how to meditate and incorporate meditation into your daily life. Keep reading to learn more about the basics of this transformative practice that enables us to find more joy in daily living.



## What is Meditation?

A brief explanation of the practice.

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.



## Meditation for Beginners

Get 5 days of practices to start you on your journey with mindfulness.



## Why Learn How to Meditate?

**A selection of benefits that are associated with learning how to meditate.**

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.

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. Understanding your pain
2. Lower your stress
3. Connect better
4. Improve focus
5. Reduce brain chatter



## 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?

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 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. 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

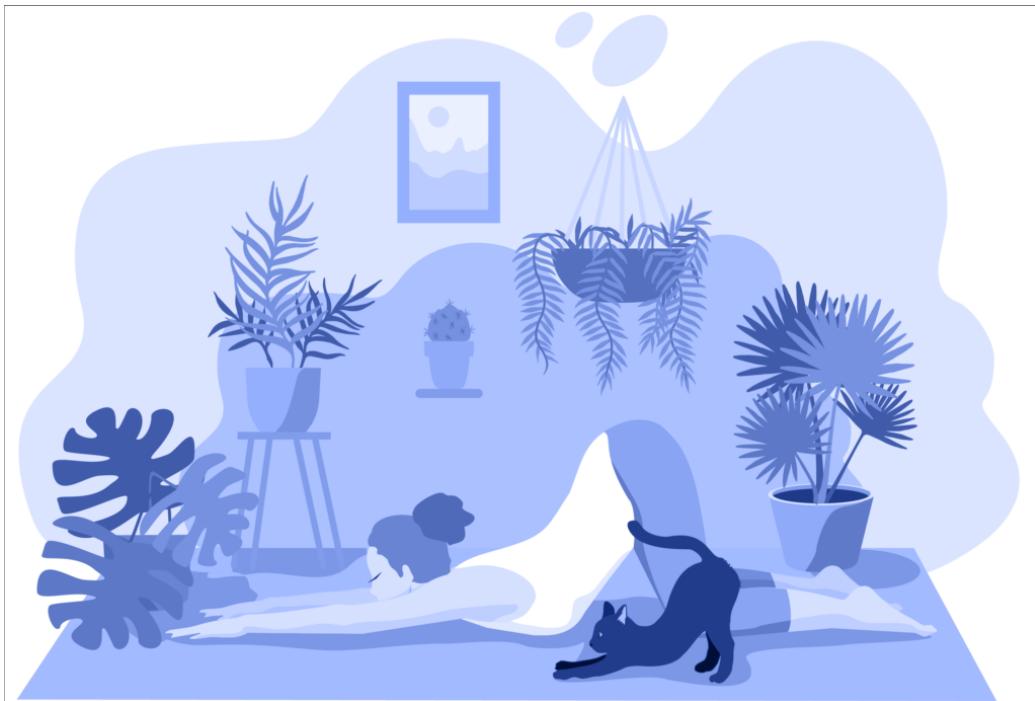
It's estimated that 95% of our behavior runs on autopilot. That's because neural networks underlie all of our habits, reducing our millions of sensory inputs per second into manageable shortcuts so we can function in this crazy world. These default brain signals are so efficient that they often cause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



## Some Basic Meditations

**These are some meditation practices to get you going.**

### 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.

- **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 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.

relationship with ourselves (and, by extension, with others).

## 3 Guided Meditations for Beginners

Guided meditations are an excellent tool for beginners, as they provide a focal point and gentle instruction to help you connect and let go of self-judgment.

Try this 3-part guided audio series from Mindful Editor-in-Chief 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 lower stress. Try to make meditation a habit by practicing with these short meditations from our [founding editor Barry Boyce](#). Find time to sit once a day for one month and see what you notice.



### 1-Minute Meditation

2:36

A short practice for settling the mind, intended for doing in the middle of the day, wherever you are out in the world.



### 10-Minute Meditation

10:28

A longer practice that explores meditation posture, breathing techniques, and working with thoughts and emotions as they surface during mindfulness practice.



### 15-Minute Meditation

15:54

A practice that explores sitting in formal meditation for longer periods of time.

## 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.



25:41

A brief body awareness practice for tuning in to sensations, head-to-toe.

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.



### Walking Meditation

8:58

A mindful movement practice for bringing awareness to what we feel with each step.

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.



## Meditation

17:49

Explore this practice to extend compassion to yourself, those around you, and the larger world.

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

1. **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.
2. **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.
3. **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.
4. **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.
5. **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.
6. **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.

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## Beyond the Beginning

What to know and where to go when you've started.

### 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.

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.

## More Guided Meditation Practices



### The RAIN Meditation with Tara Brach

11:42

A practice for difficult emotions, RAIN is an acronym for Recognition of what is going on; Acceptance of the experience, just as it is; Interest in what is happening; and Nurture with loving presence.



### A Mindfulness Practice to Foster Forgiveness

11:13

Explore this practice to let go of the tendency to add to our suffering during challenging situations.

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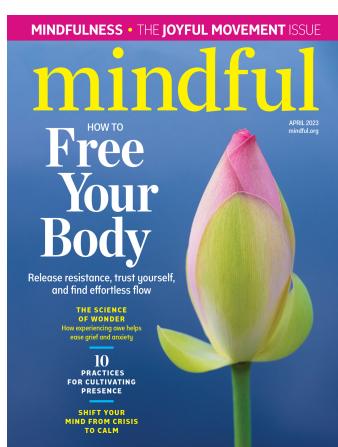
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