

Mindfulness meditation how to: exercises and tips

When we're looking to level up our sports skills or striving to beat our last race times, there are physical training exercises to increase stamina and improve our strength and speed. Practicing them regularly will make us better at our sports, our pastimes — and at enjoying life. Similarly, there are many benefits to adding meditation and mindfulness exercises into our daily or weekly routine.

Meditation is, after all, simply an exercise to cultivate mindfulness. The more time we spend sitting with the mind, the more at ease we feel within ourselves. And, as we do weightlifting exercises to develop our biceps or quads, there are meditation exercises we can do throughout the day to strengthen our “mindfulness muscle.” The more awareness we can bring to our day, the greater calm, clarity, and contentment we'll feel. For beginners or anyone fairly new to meditating, guided mindfulness exercises are a good option as they provide instruction, encouragement, and support.

Meditation breathing exercises

To calm your nerves

Maybe you're prepping for a big presentation at work and feeling a little anxious. Or a co-worker is getting under your skin. Try this 1-minute deep breathing exercise to sharpen your cognitive function and reduce symptoms of anxiety:

Sitting comfortably in a chair, take a big, deep breath. As you breathe in, notice how the body expands; as you breathe out, feel the body soften. Gently close the eyes. Rather than the mind leading the breath, allow the breath to lead the mind. Notice the sensation of the breath, and where you feel it in the body. Follow that rising and falling sensation, allowing thoughts to come and go. When you're ready, gently open the eyes.

Before a workout

Warm up your body and mind with this 1-minute meditation exercise.

Sitting down, take a nice deep breath, in through the nose and out through the mouth. Feel the mind in the body more present, more aware, more focused. Notice how the body feels, whether there's a sense of energy or lightness, heaviness or discomfort. (Incorporating mindfulness into your fitness training will put you in good company: U.S. Soccer and Major League Soccer signed partnerships with Headspace to strengthen their athletes' and coaches' mindfulness skills!)

Mindful awareness exercises

In the shower

A daily shower is the perfect time to practice your mindfulness meditation exercises. (The length of your shower is unimportant. Just make sure to leave your phone in another room, so it won't disturb you.)

As you step into the shower, be aware of how the water feels as it hits your head, your back, your arms. Is it hot enough? Too hot? Notice which part of the body you wash first, then switch it up. Habits like showering usually put us on autopilot: we go through the motions while the mind skips off. If your thoughts have wandered, gently bring your attention back to the present. You can apply this mindfulness exercise to just about any daily habit, from pouring yourself a glass of iced tea, to brushing your teeth, to taking a walk.

Before a meal

Whether you're sharing a meal or eating alone, you're probably looking forward to the first bite of whatever is on your plate! Before digging in, take a minute for this one-minute mindful eating exercise.

Pause to bring your attention to the food. Think about where your food has come from, where it was grown, how it was prepared. In our fast-paced lives, we often miss that farm-to-table connection. Engage the physical senses — the sight, the texture, the aroma of the food. Does it take you to a particular place in your mind? As you begin to eat, don't wolf down your meal! Chew it slowly, savoring the complexity of flavors, and each moment.

Visualization exercises

Improve your relationships

Visualization exercises may seem daunting at first, but any difficulties usually have more to do with our approach, our worry that we're not doing it "right," than with the technique itself. Essentially, we're just replacing the breath with a mental image. And when our mind wanders off or we get distracted by a thought or feeling, we gently bring our attention back to that image. So don't overthink it!

This visualization exercise helps create conditions in the mind for happier, healthier relationships.

Start by sitting comfortably, and taking a few deep breaths in through the nose, and out through the mouth. After a few breaths, gently close eyes and allow the breath to return to its natural rhythm. Once you're settled in, scan down the body from head to toe, getting a sense of how the body feels, the underlying mood. Be clear about your intention for doing this exercise, and how by doing it you can potentially improve the lives of those around you. Rest the mind on wherever you feel the rise and fall of the breath most strongly.

Imagine now a pinpoint of light, like a speck of sunlight, in the middle of the body. At the same time, remember a time when you've done something or said something to another person that's really been appreciated. Remember how that person looked, or what they said, and be

reminded of that feeling, which was the result of an act of kindness. As you recall the feeling, that speck of sunlight begins expanding in the body, moving outward in every direction, filling the body with qualities of warmth, light, and spaciousness.

Gently let go of the act of kindness and just be present with that visualization, as if it's happening on its own, and you're just watching it in the mind as it happens — watching the spacious, warm, bright awareness expanding. When it feels like it's reached every part of the body, let go of the image, and just allow the mind rest in that space, and do whatever it wants to do, for about 10 seconds. Then gently bring the attention back to the physical space around you. Open the eyes, pausing to appreciate the feeling.

Feel more balanced

This visualization exercise can help you feel more centered, more grounded, and bring you back to that place when you're feeling overwhelmed. For this one, you'll imagine a steady stream of "liquid sunlight" flowing down from the top of the head with all the qualities you'd imagine summer sunlight to have: warmth, spaciousness, clarity. (Remember, don't overthink it!)

Start by sitting comfortably and taking a few deep breaths, in through the nose and out through the mouth. Gently close the eyes and feel the weight of the body in the chair, settling in to physical senses. Scan down through the body, noticing how the body feels. Is there a sense of balance or imbalance? Are you a little tense or tight? Rest the mind on the feeling of the breath.

As you follow the breath, imagine that stream of warm liquid sunlight above your head flowing down into the body, filling it up almost as if it were a vase, starting at the bottom.

Go at your own pace — whatever feels comfortable. Imagine the sunlight moving up through the legs, past the waist, into the upper part of the body. As the sunlight fills the body, it creates a feeling of comfort, of ease, dissolving any tension, leaving behind a relaxed, balanced quality. It continues up toward the neck, the face, the head. When it gets to the very top of the head, it continues to flow, continuing to replenish both the body and the mind. Just allow the mind to rest in that space, letting it do whatever it wants. Feel a sense of the mind resting in that very spacious, light, warm quality.

Gently bring the attention back to the body, to the weight of the body on the chair, noticing any sounds, bringing the mind back into the space around you. Open the eyes, and take a moment before moving on with your day. Be aware of how you feel right now, and appreciate what it feels like to take a bit of time out for yourself.

The beauty of these mindfulness meditation exercises is that they require very little effort, and you can do them pretty much anytime, and anywhere. And just as with physical fitness, the more you train the mind through practice and exercise to be present, and not reactive, the better you'll be able to meet life's challenges head-on.