

# 8 Mindfulness Exercises You Can Practice Every Day

By Gia Mora • Aug 6, 2019 : 9-11 minutes : 12/5/2018

The stress of modern life can take its toll on our brains and our bodies. Luckily, there's an antidote — the ancient art of mindfulness.

Mindfulness, also called mindfulness meditation, can help reduce stress and improve your overall quality of life. This article will guide you through several mindfulness exercises, techniques, and activities you can begin practicing today.

## Mindfulness for Beginners

Wanna feel better but don't quite know where to start? Read this section for the basics on mindfulness-based stress relief.

### What is mindfulness?

Mindfulness, in plain English, is nonjudgmental awareness of the present moment. It's the process of calmly focusing your attention while passively acknowledging your thoughts, emotions, and physical sensations.

Yoga teacher [Ari Kanamori](#) further expands this mindfulness definition: "To me, it is the practice of harnessing the power of awareness with deep presence. What do I feel? How does it feel? Where do I feel it? Who am I?"

### Benefits of mindfulness

As mindfulness has become more popular in the Western world, research conducted over the last 30 years suggests a [remarkable range of benefits](#) including:

- Reduced anxiety (including sleep, eating, panic, and phobic disorders)
- Enhanced cognitive function (processing speed, memory, focus, and empathy)
- Greater levels of self-control and self-esteem
- Decreased levels of chronic pain
- Improved immune function
- Enhanced cardiovascular function
- Reduced asthma symptoms
- Improvements in hormonal disorders

A [2010 meta-analysis](#) concluded that mindfulness-based stress relief can help improve your mood and reduce your anxiety. Moreover, the review notes that results were “robust,” effective “across a relatively wide range of severity,” suggesting it can be beneficial to practitioners experiencing severe depression or just having a bad day.

## How to practice mindfulness

Mindfulness is a quality we all possess, and it can be strengthened through mindfulness training. That training begins by cultivating stillness and silence, two precious commodities in our chaotic world. Here’s how to start.

- **Settle down.** Vedic meditation teacher [Andrew Barrett](#) suggests sitting cross-legged on the floor or a cushion, but if you’re more comfortable on your back or in a chair, that’s fine, too.
- **Listen for your breath.** Instead of listening to the chatter in your head, listen closely for the sound of your breath passing through your nostrils and into your lungs. Same goes for your exhales.
- **Know that thoughts will come.** And that’s completely normal. “Use your intention to be in the moment,” Barrett says, and return to your exercise. It’s mindfulness that allows you to acknowledge those thoughts, without judgement, and to continue practicing.

## 8 Mindfulness Exercises, Activities, and Techniques



Some of what you’re about to do may make you feel silly. And that’s OK! Like any new skill, mindfulness technique takes time to learn and become proficient at executing.

### 1. Observation

Did you know you’re practicing mindfulness every time you observe the world around you? Let’s try a more formal observation exercise.

- **Select an object.** It can be anything — a raisin, a postcard, a candle.

- **Focus your gaze.** Your visual focus (or *drishti* in Sanskrit) leads this exercise. “Start with dropping in, free of any expectation or desired outcome,” says Kanamori.
- **Describe your object.** What color, size, shape, and texture is it? Concentrate on the descriptive nature of the object — not your feelings or judgments about it.

Or try what therapist [Kristen Baird-Goldman](#), LMFT, recommends to her clients: Brush your teeth with your nondominant hand. By practicing mindfulness during a routine activity, “we can self-narrate the process rather than spending that time being in the past or the future,” she says.

## 2. Body inventory

A body scan is a fantastic way to focus attention and bring a diagnostic presence to your self-awareness.

- **Begin in a comfortable position.** Seated or lying down is fine.
- **Start from the bottom up.** “Direct your body awareness methodically,” Kanamori says, “starting with your toes.”
- **Visualize a warm, white glow.** Allow that glow to spotlight each body part as you move upward. Continue letting that glow warm your legs, your pelvis, your torso and arms, all the way up through the crown of your head.
- **Explore the sensations.** As your focus travels up your body, take note of the feelings and thoughts that arise.

## 3. Deep breathing

Long, deep breaths (known in yoga as [pranayama](#)) can activate the relaxation response by [shutting down the “fight-or-flight” instinct](#) in your brain and increasing activity in the “rest-and-digest” parasympathetic nervous system.

- **Find stillness.** You can snag a deep breath just about anywhere. Take a moment to pause and stop moving.
- **Rest your lips together.** Let your teeth separate, relax your jaw, and allow your tongue to sit heavy in your mouth.
- **Inhale fully and slowly through the nostrils.** Baird-Goldman suggests imagining a balloon filling inside your belly. Pause at the top for one second.
- **Exhale fully and slowly through the nostrils.** Continue breathing in and out as if the air enters your lungs through your ears. Pause at the top for one second.

## 4. Self-awareness through others

Not all mindfulness has to come in the form of a time dedicated just to meditation — you can practice mindfulness every time you meet eyes with someone.

“I think Avatar had it right!” laughs Kanamori. He suggests greeting every person you encounter with the mantra, “I see you.” This acknowledgement primes all of your

interactions for positivity and ease because it places your awareness outside of yourself.

Group activities — like choirs, dance classes, and yoga — are another excellent way to celebrate your connectedness to all life in the universe. We learn a lot about ourselves when we are vulnerable enough to be ourselves around others, Kanamori says.

## 5. Deliberate posture

“We spend so much time sitting at desks that we’ve become disconnected from our bodies,” remarks Baird-Goldman. Reclaim your physical health and reduce stress with a deliberate-posture tradition like [yoga](#), [qi gong](#), or [tai chi](#).

The benefits of these millennia-old exercises are supported by current research about the influence [our posture](#) has on our physical and mental health. As an added benefit, deliberate postures generally include the first four exercises listed above.

## 6. Self-care

When you brush your teeth (bonus points for using your nondominant hand!), you’re practicing a small but crucial component of self-care. Kanamori agrees: “It is not mindful to wish for everyone to feel peace and connect to love if we don’t include ourselves in ‘everyone.’” Contrary to selfishness, self-care allows us to better care not only for ourselves but for each other as well.

## 7. Gratitude

It’s challenging to stay mindful in the age of social media, where comparison and superficiality reign supreme. Combat those anxieties by cultivating gratitude. A [2017 study](#) found that practicing gratitude improved participants’ emotion regulation and self-motivation.

Go the extra step and “gift yourself a mindfulness journal,” suggests Baird-Goldman. Not only can you record your experience on your mindfulness journey, you can make a habit of writing down exactly what you’re grateful for.

## 8. Meditation

“The best way to cultivate the moment is through meditation,” says Barrett. What *is* [meditation](#)? It’s... mindfulness. Everything you’ve read here is a form of meditation, even though it doesn’t necessarily look like it. For a more traditional experience, follow these steps.

- **Find a comfortable seat.** Traditionally, meditators sit cross-legged on the ground or on a cushion, but you can meditate anywhere, anytime — at your desk, on an airplane, or even on the couch.

- **Set a timer.** Vedic meditation practices call for two 20-minute sessions daily, but shorter practices can reap excellent benefits as well. Begin with five-minute sessions and build up, if that feels appropriate. If you're completely new to mindfulness meditation, consider using a [guided meditation](#) to keep you focused and keep track of time.
- **Close your eyes.** When the visual world disappears, you have an opportunity to look within yourself.
- **Begin breathing deeply.** This triggers the relaxation response in the brain, and that softening often coincides with a flood of thoughts. As your body relaxes, let the thoughts pass — free of judgement — and refocus on the feeling and sound of your breath.
- **Use a mantra to focus the mind.** Some forms of meditation use a *mantra*, or chant, to laser-focus the mind. This can be a traditional Sanskrit phrase like, “Om shanti shanti” (“Om, peace, peace”), or it can be something more personal to you like, “I am loved.” Repeat your mantra as you continue to breathe, allowing thoughts to flow by you like water in a river.

With sustained practice, meditation can [significantly reduce the stress hormone cortisol](#), and new [neuroscience research](#) is even able to see the benefits of meditation in the brain.

“When we have a practice that connects us to our real selves,” says Barrett, “we connect regularly with the happiness inside us.” That happiness manifests itself, quite literally, in [physical and emotional health](#).

Congratulations! You're now well on your way to mindful living. And always remember: I see you.