

your guide to **meditation**

From the editors of
mindful



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Hit Pause and Get Going

Over the past 24 hours, I've watched 16 episodes of two different TV shows on Netflix. Oh, and I've meditated for 20 minutes.

This isn't my usual routine. It's Sunday evening following a particularly strenuous week of missed deadlines, rude financial awakenings, and 3 a.m. wake-up calls from a rogue fire alarm. So I retreated to fictional melodramas to escape the "real" ones my mind had concocted.

Twenty-four sorry hours later, I emerged from my TV coma to the same shallow breathing and frantic worrying that punctuated my thoughts before I grabbed the popcorn and hit the power button on my remote. I may have tuned myself out—choosing to treat my thoughts and emotions like villains worse than those on the screen—but that didn't make my feelings or fixations go away. We can't avoid life. But with meditation, we can start to notice habitual ways of thinking that pigeonhole much of our experience.

So, as my weekend waned, I sat on my living room floor, set a timer, and spent some quality time with my mind. I didn't embark on a week-long retreat, or even meditate for an hour, but I spent enough time with my mind to see that my thoughts and mental storylines, however pesky and unrelenting, are no more solid than primetime villains, and no more worthy of fear, dread, or resistance. With practice, and the kind of guidance and insight offered in the following pages, we can hone our innate ability to let go of our inner dialogues and simply be available—what happens from there, well, that's living. ●

Claire Ciel Zimmerman is the associate editor of *Mindful*.



What Is Mindfulness?

When people talk about mindfulness, what do they really mean? Here's our definition.

Mindfulness. It's a pretty straightforward word. It suggests that the mind is fully attending to what's happening, to what you're doing, to the space you're moving through. That might seem trivial, except for the annoying fact that we so often veer from the matter at hand. Our mind takes flight, we lose touch with our body, and pretty soon we're engrossed in obsessive thoughts about something that just happened or fretting about the future. And that makes us anxious.

Yet no matter how far we drift away, mindfulness is right there to snap us back to where we are and what we're doing and feeling.

If you want to know what mindfulness is, it's best to try it for a while. Since it's hard to nail down in words, you will find slight variations in the meaning in books, websites, audio, and video. Here's an all-purpose definition that treats mindfulness as a quality that every human being already possesses, rather than something we have to conjure up:

Mindfulness is the basic human ability to be fully present, aware of where we are and what we're doing, and not overly reactive or overwhelmed by what's going on around us.

While mindfulness is innate, it can be cultivated through proven techniques, particularly seated, walking, standing, and moving meditation (it's also possible lying down but often leads to sleep); short pauses we insert into everyday life; and merging meditation practice with other activities, such as yoga or sports.

When we meditate it doesn't help to fixate on the benefits, but rather to just do the practice, and yet there are benefits or no one would do it. When we're mindful, we reduce stress, enhance performance, gain insight and awareness through observing our own mind, and increase our attention to others' well-being.

Mindfulness meditation gives us a time in our lives when we can suspend judgment and unleash our natural curiosity about the mind, approaching our experience with warmth and kindness—to ourselves and others. ●



Major Myths About Mindfulness—Debunked

Some of the popular images and ideas surrounding mindfulness are just plain wrong. When you sit down and do it for yourself, you may find things are different from what they seemed. You'll probably be pleasantly surprised.

1. It's about stopping thoughts

Whenever there's a newspaper story about meditation, they trot out a piece of art that depicts a person in flowing clothes with a blissful smile that suggests they've emptied out their brain and replaced it with cotton candy.

Meditation does not involve ending the thought process. It isn't about trying to achieve a particular state of mind. It is simply taking the time to become familiar with how your thought process actually works, since you have the best vantage point to view what's going on in your own mind. Once you see that, you don't stop thoughts, but they might not control you quite so much.

2. It's only for laid-back people

People who are energetic and hard-charging should steer clear of meditation and leave it to the folks who would rather traipse barefoot through a mountain meadow for the rest of their lives. If you're aggressive and thrive on action, meditation will just drive you crazy.

Here we go again—another complete misconception. Everyone, no matter what their lifestyle is, needs time to recharge and regroup and reflect. Mindfulness practice is one of the best ways to give your mind a true rest—and emerge refreshed to take on new challenges.

3. It's an escape from reality

Meditation is nothing more than another way to avoid the hard facts of life.

Nothing could be further from the truth. Far from being an escape, mindfulness takes you right into the heart of reality, where you get to see how your thoughts shape your perceptions of what you experience, how the activities in your mind cause yourself and others pain and suffering, and what motivates you to do what you do. It's not an escape, or even a vacation. It's a journey

within, which helps you see reality better—to more readily distinguish what’s real from what you fabricate.

4. You lose your edge

“I’ve got responsibilities. There’s no way I can sit around contemplating my navel. It will just make me too soft.”

The myth here is that meditation involves a day-dreamy fuzzy state of mind, sort of like sleeping while you’re still awake. Nope. Practicing mindfulness isn’t about zoning out. It’s about zoning in. You train yourself to pay closer attention than you might normally be used to, and this kind of focus rubs off on the rest of your life. It can actually help you to get into “the zone” and stay there longer.

5. It’s selfish

Mindfulness is a “me generation” thing. It’s all about getting some “me time.”

It’s true that meditation practice, even when you do it in a group, is time alone, but it’s not selfish. The relaxation and focus that comes with mindfulness practice can help you to listen better, pay more attention to the needs of others, and be present with your loved ones with less distraction. Your own mindfulness can be a gift to others in your life. ●



How to Meditate

Starting a meditation practice couldn't be simpler. In its most basic form, all you need is a comfortable seat, a conscious mind, and to be alive. Follow these steps and get to know yourself better.

Find a good spot in your home or apartment, ideally where there isn't too much clutter and you can find some quiet. Leave the lights on or sit in natural light. You can even sit outside if you like, but choose a place with little distraction.

At the outset, it helps to set an amount of time you're going to "practice" for. Otherwise, you may obsess about deciding when to stop. If you're just beginning, it can help to choose a short time, such as five or 10 minutes. Eventually you can build up to twice as long, then maybe up to 45 minutes or an hour. Use a kitchen timer or the timer on your phone. Many people do a session in the morning and in the evening, or one or the other. If you feel your life is busy and you have little time, doing some is better than doing none. When you get a little space and time, you can do a bit more.

Take good posture (see page 10 for instructions) in a chair or on some kind of cushion on the floor. It could be a blanket and a pillow, although there are many good cushions available that will last you a lifetime of practice. You may sit in a chair with your feet on the floor, loosely cross-legged, in lotus posture, kneeling—all are fine. Just make sure you are stable and erect. If the constraints of your body prevent you from sitting erect, find a position you can stay in for a while.

When your posture is established, feel your breath—or some say "follow" it—as it goes out and as it goes in. (Some versions of the practice put more emphasis on the outbreath, and for the inbreath you simply leave a spacious pause.) Inevitably, your attention will leave the breath and wander to other places. When you get around to noticing this—in a few seconds, a minute, five minutes—return your attention to the breath. Don't bother judging yourself or obsessing over the content of the thoughts. Come back. You go away, you come back. That's the practice. It's often been said that it's very simple, but it's not necessarily easy. The work is to just keep doing it. Results will accrue. ●

PHOTOGRAPH BY JOSHUA SIMPSON



Posture

6 Steps to Being Upright and at Ease

1

Take your **SEAT**. Whatever you're sitting on—a chair, a meditation cushion, a park bench—find a spot that gives you a stable, solid seat; don't perch or hang back.

2

If on a cushion on the floor, cross your **LEGS** comfortably in front of you. (If you already do some kind of seated yoga posture, go ahead.) If on a chair, it's good if the bottoms of your feet are touching the floor.

3

Straighten—but don't stiffen—your **UPPER BODY**. The spine has natural curvature. Let it be there. Your head and shoulders can comfortably rest on top of your vertebrae.

4

Place your upper arms parallel to your upper body. Then let your **HANDS** drop onto the tops of your legs. With your upper arms at your sides, your hands will land in the right spot. Too far forward will make you hunch. Too far back will make you stiff. You're tuning the strings of your body—not too tight and not too loose. And it may not be as scary as you think.

5

Drop your chin a little and let your **GAZE** fall gently downward. You may let your eyelids lower. If you feel the need, you may lower them completely, but it's not necessary to close your eyes when meditating. You can simply let what appears before your eyes be there without focusing on it.

6

Be there for a few moments. **SETTLE**. Now you can follow the next breath that comes out. You've started off on the right foot—and hands and arms and everything else. ●

Don't Psych Yourself Out

5 Common Excuses Not to Meditate

Face your worries and justifications head on—they might not be as concrete as you think.

- 1 Sounds Boring!** Sure, but it also happens to be a big relief to have some time when you're not obligated to be somebody or do something.
- 2 I Can't Sit Still** It's just fine to fidget. Meditation is a process that develops over time. No one starts out sitting like a rock statue.
- 3 I Don't Have Time** Time crunches are stressing us all out these days. But taking a pause from the rush-rush-rush may just help you use your time better.
- 4 I'm Scared to Be Alone** You're not alone in that. Our culture has devalued taking time for solitude. It hasn't always been that way. And it's not as scary as you think.
- 5 My Mind Is Too Fast** So, let it go fast. If you sit there awhile, it will slow down...and speed up again. You don't need to try to find an ideal rate for your mind. ●

See for Yourself

5 Reasons to Try it Anyway

Why you should suspend your judgments and give meditation a chance.

- 1 Understand Your Pain** Mental pain and anxiety are a background noise that can underlie much of what we do. Here's a chance to see firsthand what's causing it.
- 2 Lower Stress** There's lots of evidence these days that excess stress causes lots of illnesses and makes other illnesses worse. Mindfulness decreases stress.
- 3 Connect Better** Ever find yourself staring blankly at a friend, lover, child, and you've no idea what they're saying? Mindfulness helps you give them your full attention.
- 4 Improve Focus** It can be frustrating to have our mind stray off what we're doing and be pulled in six directions. Meditation hones our innate ability to focus.
- 5 Reduce Brain Chatter** The nattering, chattering voice in our head seems never to leave us alone. Isn't it time we gave it a little break? ●



You're Already Here

Meditation doesn't require a special set of skills. It works so well, **Sharon Salzberg** says, because it enhances what we already have: concentration, mindfulness, and compassion.

The most common response I hear these days when I tell someone I teach meditation is “I’m so stressed out. I could really use some of that.” I am also amused to hear fairly often “My friend should really meet you!” I’m happy to see that meditation is known more and more as something that could be directly helpful in our day-to-day lives. Anywhere stress plays a role in our problems, meditation can have a potential role in its relief.

Meditation practice need not be tied to any belief system. The only necessary belief is not a dogmatic one, but one that says each of us has the capacity to understand ourselves more fully, and to care more deeply both for ourselves and for others. Its methods work to free us of habitual reactions that cause us great unhappiness, such as harsh self-judgment, and to develop wisdom and love. Meditation gives anybody who pursues it an opportunity to look within for a sense of abundance, depth, and connection to life.

Rather than an ornate, arcane set of instructions, basic meditation consists of practical tools to help deepen concentration, mindfulness, and compassion.

1. concentration

Concentration steadies and focuses our attention so that we can let go of unhealthy inner distractions—regrets about the past, worries about the future, addictions—and keep from being seduced by outer ones. Distraction wastes our energy; concentration restores it.

We often experience our attention scattering to the four winds. We sit down to think something through or work through a dilemma, and before we know it, we’re gone. We’re lost in thoughts of the past, often about something we now regret: “I should have said that more skillfully.” “I should have been less timid and spoken up.” “I should have been wiser and shut up.” We aren’t thinking things through to find a means to make amends. We’re just lost.

Or our distractedness propels us into anxiety-filled projections about the future. Imagine you are sitting in an airplane at one of the New York City airports. Suddenly you start thinking, “Oh no, I think this plane might leave late. I’m sure it will be late. Now I’m going to miss my connection. What will that mean? That means I’m going to arrive in Portland, Oregon, after midnight. There won’t be any cabs! What’s going to happen to me?” It’s as though Portland were famous for having people vanish if they land after midnight!

Concentration is the art of gathering all that energy, that stormy, scattered attention, and settling, centering.

Without concentration, our minds spin off into the future in a way that isn’t like skillful planning but more like exhausting rumination. When I see my own mind beginning that arc of anxiety, I have a saying I use to help restore me to balance: “Something will happen.” There will be a bus. I’ll spend the night in the airport. Something will happen. I can’t figure it all out right now.

Concentration is the art of gathering all of that energy, that stormy, scattered attention, and settling, centering. Someone came up to talk to me recently when I was teaching, protesting my use of the word *concentration*. He said it reminded him of repression, as though he were squeezing his attention onto something, resisting and resenting anything else that came up to pull his attention away. I asked him if steadying or settling would be good replacements, and he happily accepted them. That’s what concentration actually means. It’s not a forced, tense, strained effort. It’s letting things settle on what is at hand.

2. mindfulness

Mindfulness refines our attention so that we can connect more fully and directly with whatever life brings. So many times our perception of what is happening is distorted by bias, habits, fears, or desires. Mindfulness helps us see through these and be much more aware of what actually is.

Imagine you're on your way to a party when you run into a friend who mentions an earlier meeting he had with your new colleague. He says, "That person is so boring!" Once at the party, who do you find yourself stuck talking to but that new colleague! Because of your friend's comment (not even your own perception), you end up not really listening carefully to them or looking fully at them. More likely you are thinking about the next 15 emails you need to send or fretting as you gaze about the room and see so many people you'd rather be talking to. Everything this person is saying increases your ire and frustration.

But if you realize what's going on, it might be that you drop the filter of your friend's comment and determine to find out for yourself, from your own direct experience, what you think of your new colleague. You listen, you observe, you are open-minded, interested. By the end of the evening you might decide, "I concur. I find that person really boring." But perhaps not; life also provides many surprises. What's important is that we're not merely guided by what we've been told, by the beliefs of others, by dogma or prejudice or assumption. Instead, we shape our impression with as clear and open a perception as possible.

Mindfulness does not depend on what is happening, but is about how we relate to what is happening. That's why we say that mindfulness can go anywhere. We can be mindful of joy and sorrow, pleasure and pain, beautiful music and a screech. Mindfulness doesn't mean these all flatten out and become one big blob, without distinction or intensity or flavor or texture. Rather, it means

that old habitual ways of relating—perhaps holding on fiercely to pleasure, so that, ironically, we are actually enjoying it less; or resenting and pushing away pain, so that, sadly, we suffer a lot more; or numbing out, disconnecting from ordinary, not very exciting experiences, so that we’re half in a dream a lot of the time. All these self-defeating, limiting reactions don’t have to be there.

We can easily misunderstand mindfulness and think of it as passive, complacent, even a bit dull. I was teaching somewhere recently and began the formal meditation instruction, as I often do, with the suggestion to simply sit in a relaxed way and listen to the sounds in the room. Someone raised his hand right away and asked, “If I hear the sound of the smoke alarm, should I just sit here ‘mindfully,’ knowing I’m hearing the smoke alarm go off, or should I get up and leave?” I responded, “I’d ‘mindfully’ get up and leave!”

I understood his question. When we hear phrases commonly used to describe mindfulness, like “just be with what is,” “accept the present moment,” “don’t get lost in judgment,” it can sound pretty inert. But the actual experience of mindfulness is of vibrant, alive, open space where creative responses to situations have room to arise, precisely because we’re not stuck in the well-worn grooves of the same old habitual reactions. In mindfulness, we don’t lose discernment and intelligence. These qualities, in fact, become more acute as stale preconceptions and automatic, rigid responses no longer rule the day.

3. compassion

Compassion opens our attention and makes it more inclusive, transforming the way we view ourselves and the world. Instead of being so caught up in the construct of self and other and us and them that we tend to see the world through, we see things much more in terms of connection to all. This fundamental transformation from alienation begins with more kindness to ourselves.

Even in techniques that don't particularly emphasize kindness or compassion, these qualities are inevitably being developed in meditation. If we go back and look at the foundational exercise I described, developing concentration, we find that it is often done by choosing an object such as the feeling of the in and out breath, then settling our attention on it. What we discover in the beginning, sometimes to our shock, is that it usually isn't 800 breaths before our minds wander. More commonly, it is one breath, maybe two or three, then we are lost. Maybe very lost in a fantasy or memory.

Then comes the moment we realize we've been distracted. Our common response would be to feel that we've failed, to rail against ourselves. What we practice, though, is letting go gently rather than harshly and returning to the breath or our object of concentration with kindness and compassion for ourselves. Thus, those qualities of compassion and kindness deepen even if we don't give voice to those words.

And what we do for ourselves, we can also begin to do toward others. A few years ago I was on my way to Tucson, but my plans were challenged when I found myself in an airplane sitting on a runway for four and a half hours at La Guardia Airport. Looking back on it, I sometimes refer jokingly to those hours as "the breakdown of civilization." It was hot, and it grew hotter. After a point, people starting yelling, "Let me off this plane!" The pilot resorted to getting on the PA system and saying sternly, "No one is getting off this plane."

I wasn't feeling all that chipper myself. I couldn't get in touch with the people in Tucson who were supposed to pick me up at the airport, and I was concerned about them. I had an apartment to go to in New York City and kept thinking, to no avail, "I can just go back there and try again tomorrow." I was hot. I felt pummeled by the people shouting around me.

Then I recalled an image that a good friend of mine, Bob Thurman, author of *Infinite Life: Seven Virtues for Living Well*, often uses to describe the flow of kindness and compassion that comes from seeing the world more truthfully. He says, "Imagine you are on the New York City subway, and these Martians

come and zap the subway car so that those of you in the car are going to be together...forever.” What do we do? If someone is hungry, we feed them. If someone is freaking out, we try to calm them down. We might not like everybody or approve of them, but we are going to be together forever. So we need to respond with the wisdom of how interrelated our lives are—and will remain.

Sitting on that airplane, I recalled my friend’s story. I looked around the cabin and thought, “Maybe these are my people.” I saw my worldview shift from “me” and “them” to “we.” The claustrophobia eased.

In terms of meditative understanding (in contrast to our usual way of thinking, which might regard these qualities as gifts we can do nothing to cultivate or as immediate emotional reactions we enjoy but can’t stabilize), kindness and compassion are indeed skills we develop. Not in the sense of forcing ourselves to feel, or even worse, pretend to feel, an emotion that is not there. Instead, if we learn to pay attention in a different, more open way—seeing the good within ourselves instead of fixating on what we don’t like, noticing those we usually ignore or look right through, letting go of categories and assumptions when we relate to others—we are creating the conditions for kindness and compassion to flow.

We practice meditation in the end not to become great meditators but to have a different life. As we deepen the skills of concentration, mindfulness, and compassion, we find we have less stress, more fulfillment, more insight, and vastly more happiness. We transform our lives. ●

Sharon Salzberg has been practicing meditation for 40 years and teaching the practice for nearly as long. Her most recent book is *Real Happiness at Work*.

PHOTOGRAPH © ISTOCK.COM/NIKADA

S.T.O.P. Stress in Its Tracks

By Elisha Goldstein



Two-thirds of Americans say they need help for stress. But stress itself is not the problem. It's how we relate to stress.

The stress response is critical to our survival. It can save our lives or enable a firefighter to carry a 300-pound man down 20 flights of stairs. Of course, most of us don't encounter a life-or-death threat all that often. We usually experience stress reactions in response to thoughts, emotions, or physical sensations. If we're actively worried about whether we can put food on the table or get the perfect exam score, presto: the stress reaction activates. And if the bodily systems involved in stress don't slow down and normalize, the effects can be severe. Over time, we can succumb to, among other things, high blood pressure, muscle tension, anxiety, insomnia, gastro-digestive complaints, and a suppressed immune system.

Creating space in the day to stop, come down from the worried mind, and get back into the present moment has been shown to be enormously helpful in mitigating the negative effects of our stress response. When we drop into the present, we're more likely to gain perspective and see that we have the power to regulate our response to pressure.

Here's a short practice you can weave into your day to step into that space between stimulus and response.

S

Stop what you're doing; put things down for a minute.

T

Take a few deep breaths. If you'd like to extend this, you can take a minute to breathe normally and naturally and follow your breath coming in and out of your nose. You can even say to yourself "in" as you're breathing in and "out" as you're breathing out if that helps with concentration.

O

Observe your experience just as it is—including thoughts, feelings, and emotions. You can reflect about what is on your mind and also notice that **thoughts** are not facts, and they are not permanent. Notice any **emotions** present and how they're being expressed in the body. Research shows that just naming your emotions can turn the volume down on the fear circuit in the brain and have a calming effect. Then notice your **body**. Are you standing or sitting? How is your posture? Any aches or pains?

P

Proceed with something that will support you in the moment: talk to a friend, rub your shoulders, have a cup of tea.

Treat this whole exercise as an experiment: Get curious about where there are opportunities in the day for you to just STOP—waking up in the morning, taking a shower, before eating a meal, at a stop light, before sitting down at work and checking email.

You can even use your smartphone's message indicator as a reminder to STOP, cultivating more mindfulness with technology.

What would it be like in the days, weeks, and months ahead if you started stopping more often? ●

Elisha Goldstein, Ph.D., is a clinical psychologist and the author of *The Now Effect* and coauthor of *A Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction Workbook*.

ILLUSTRATION © DOLLARPHOTOCLUB/VIVAT



Embodying Mindfulness

Meditation can help you work with more than just your mind. Reconnect with your body using this simple 7-step practice.

When was the last time you noticed how your body was feeling? Not just when you have a headache or you're tired or you have heartburn after that spicy taco you ate for lunch. But just noticing how your body is feeling right now, while you're sitting or standing or lying down. How about noticing how your body feels while you're sitting in an important meeting or walking down the street or playing with your children?

In our busy, high-tech, low-touch lives, it's easy to operate detached from our own bodies. They too easily become vessels we feed, water, and rest so they can continue to cart around our brains. We don't pay attention to the information our bodies are sending us or the effect that forces such as stress are having—until real health problems set in.

Let's take a small and simple step in the direction of paying our body the attention it is due. Consider spending just a few minutes—every day, if you can—to notice your own physicality. Not to judge your body or worry about it or push it harder at the gym, but to *be* in it.

Here's an easy body-scan practice to try. It will tune you in to your body and anchor you to where you are right now. It will heighten your senses and help you achieve greater levels of relaxation. You can do it sitting in a chair or on the floor, lying down, or standing.

(continued on next page)

Susan Bauer-Wu, Ph.D., is the director of the Compassionate Care Initiative at the University of Virginia School of Nursing and the author of *Leaves Falling Gently: Living Fully with Serious & Life-Limiting Illness through Mindfulness, Compassion & Connectedness*.

1

Settle into a comfortable position, so you feel supported and relaxed.

2

Close your eyes if you wish or leave them open with a soft gaze, not focusing on anything in particular.

3

Rest for a few moments, paying attention to the natural rhythm of your breathing.

4

Once your body and mind are settled, bring awareness to your body as a whole. Be aware of your body resting and being supported by the chair, mattress, or floor.

5

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.

6

For each part of the body, linger for a few moments and notice the different sensations as you focus.

7

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. ●