

Mindfulness Meditation Basics

Written by Harrison Blum. Guided meditations and more info at movingdharma.org

What is Mindfulness Meditation?

Mindfulness meditation is about making friends with our experience. It's a practice of looking deeply and holding gently—we show up as observers of our own experience, and relax around whatever we find. Our experience is always changing—our mood, our thoughts, how our body feels. That's a part of being alive. In mindfulness practice we train ourselves to be with whatever is happening in an aware and self-loving way. Mindfulness practice is less concerned with *what* we're experiencing than how we're *relating* to what we're experiencing. The practice might help you feel calm or relaxed. Even when it doesn't, it can still be a tool for feeling greater ease amidst challenging thoughts, emotions, and body sensations.

What Mindfulness Meditation Is Not

This practice is not about fighting away our thoughts or getting to some perfect, peaceful place. It's not about getting rid of our thoughts, emotions, or body sensations completely. It's also not about going to some "other place." It *is* about being right here, right now, with things just as they are.

Is This a Religious Practice?

While meditation can sometimes be a part of a religious practice, mindfulness meditation as described here is not religious itself. You can do this meditation whether or not you have a particular religion, and whether or not you believe in God.

Posture

It's good to have a relaxed posture that also supports alertness. Sitting is the most common posture, though you could also meditate while lying down, standing still, or walking. Sitting is a good posture to practice in most of the time, as you can both relax and be alert while sitting. It can help support awareness to sit with your spine relatively straight and upright, as reclining can induce sleepiness. Meditating while standing or walking can be a good choice if you're already feeling sleepy. Your eyes can be closed (unless you're walking!) or softly gazing downward in front of you. You can breathe with your mouth or nose as is more comfortable. You don't need to breathe especially slowly or deeply, just breathe comfortably.

So What Do I Actually Do?

In mindfulness practice we make choices about where to place our attention. These places are sometimes called anchors—places where we anchor our attention. Good anchors to start practicing with can be your body sensations, the feeling of your breath, or sounds.

With **body sensations** as your anchor, you can cycle through feeling touch points, do a body scan, or track the strongest sensation. Touch points are places your body is in contact with its surroundings or itself. If you're sitting in a chair, these could be the sensations of 1) your feet on the ground, 2) your weight being held by the seat of the chair, 3) your back against the back of the chair, and 4) your hands resting on each other or on your legs/lap. A body scan means you move your attention step by step through your body. You could start with your head and end with your feet. Tracking the strongest sensation means you check out the overall sensation of your body, and notice if you feel one part more strongly than the rest. This strongest sensation may stay in the same place, or it may move around. There's no need to keep it in one place. Follow the strongest sensation wherever it goes.

With **the breath** as your anchor, place your attention wherever you can most easily feel your breathing. This might be your stomach rising and falling, or the sensation of your breath passing across your lips or nostrils. Mindfulness of breathing can be a simple and powerful way to practice. Feel the beginning, middle, and end of each in breath, and the beginning, middle, and end of each out breath. There's no need to breathe any certain way. Just notice what's already happening.

With **sound** as your anchor, simply notice the flow of sounds as you hear them. There's nothing you need to do to hear the sounds, and nothing you need to do about them. Just let them happen.

Heart Practice

In the same way that we can use the practice to bring curiosity and acceptance to our body sensations, breath, and hearing, we can also attend with gentle observation to our heart space. We might also call this our emotions, or simply what it feels like to be you right now. Begin by noticing if there's any clear emotion, feeling, or mood present. For this practice, we're not trying to change how we feel, or to judge how we feel. We're just seeing what's there, and offering gentle acceptance toward what we find. Self-acceptance can be tough, so try not to get down on yourself if it's hard to accept how you feel. A second step of this heart practice can be offering ourselves simple well-wishes. Common ones include: "May I be happy. May I be healthy. May I be peaceful. May I be safe." It can work well for you to check out what *you* feel is most needed, and then make up a few phrases or wishes that fit. You might choose one word to welcome (like ease or peace) and one word to let go of (like anxiety or stress), and then say the first word to yourself as you breath in and the second as you breath out.

What to do About Thinking

Our minds are pretty good at thinking. It's likely that even if you're trying to follow your body sensations or breath, there will still be thoughts coming and going in your mind. If you notice yourself beginning to put energy into thinking or get lost in thinking (remembering, planning, visualizing, imagining, etc.), just make a gentle invitation to yourself to put your attention back on your anchor. This is a lot of the work of mindfulness meditation—noticing what's going on in your mind, giving accepting permission to whatever you find, and returning your attention to the present moment with your anchor.

Safety

At times certain parts of the body, the way our breathing feels, or thoughts and emotions we might be having may feel scary or unsafe. Others might bring up anger, or other difficult emotions. There is no need to push yourself to feel these places during meditation. For example, if a certain part of your body feels unsafe, or triggering, you could skip it during a body scan. You know your limits. While it can be helpful to work on building acceptance amidst some degree of discomfort, there is no need to trigger, scare, or anger yourself.

Regular Practice

It can be useful to set up a regular daily mindfulness practice. It's often helpful to choose a regular time of day and place to meditate. You might start with 5-10 minutes at first, and then maybe build up to 20-30 minutes. The greatest difference is between 0 and 5 minutes, meaning the difference between doing no practice or some practice can be more significant than the difference between doing some practice and more practice. Doing a little bit counts!

When trying this on your own, see what works for you. See what feels needed. You might spend the whole time with the anchor of your breath, or your body, or sounds, or heart practice. Or you might begin with body awareness, move to the breath, and finish with a few phrases of heart practice. Whatever you choose, it's good to spend at least a few minutes at a time with each anchor. This is a practice of training loving attention, so we don't want to be jumping around too much with our anchors on purpose. The mind jumps around enough on its own!

It can also be helpful to create little routines for yourself. That might be taking a deep breath at the beginning or end of a session, or saying a certain affirmation to yourself at the beginning or end.

Mindfulness Amidst Daily Life

The point of meditating isn't to become good at meditation. The point is to experience more happiness and peace amidst whatever is happening in your life. While it's a great foundation to meditate regularly, it's also important to bring these skills into your everyday life. Whether there's nothing much going on, or you're in the middle of a challenging situation, you can always check in with the sensation of touch points, or do a quick body scan, or feel your breath, or notice changing sounds, or send yourself a positive wish. Bringing mindfulness into a challenging situation can expand what's happening. You might still feel angry or sad or afraid, but you also might feel your breathing, or your feet on the ground. Mindfulness can create a bridge to the present moment, so that a hard emotion is not the only thing going on.