

# **Practicing mindfulness meditation**

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Mindfulness is both a form of meditation and a way of living. It is all about being more aware and as such it is also about learning to pay attention but in a restful way. A good 'starting dose' for those who are new to mindfulness is to practice initially for 5 minutes twice daily. Before breakfast and dinner are good times because after food is a low-point for the metabolism and sleep can predominate more easily then. The duration of practice can be built up to 10, then 15, 20 and even up to 30 minutes or longer if required depending on one's time availability, motivation, needs and commitment.

Longer practices of meditation might be compared to 'full stops' punctuating our day. Regular short mindful pauses of 30 seconds to 2 minutes might be compared to 'commas'. These commas during the day can help to reinforce our ability to be mindful for the whole of the day including when we are not meditating. Even pausing only for long enough to take a couple of deep breaths can help break the build-up of tension and mental activity throughout the day. In fact, any activity done mindfully is really a form of meditation.

It is helpful, wherever possible, to have a quiet place to practice without interruption. This is not to say that mindfulness cannot be practiced anywhere, any time – indeed, it is important for the practice to be as 'portable' as possible whether the environment is active and noisy or not. We can, for example, pause while waiting at red lights (eyes open preferably), or before a meal, or between a meeting and getting back to work. If interruptions do occur then it helps not to be concerned, but rather just deal with them mindfully and then, if possible, go back to the practice. When sitting down to practice it helps to have a clock within easy view can help to reduce anxiety about time.

## **1. Position**

The sitting position is generally preferred as one is less unlikely to go to sleep in an upright position. In sitting for meditation it is best if the back and neck are straight and balanced, requiring a minimum of effort or tension to maintain the position. Lying down can also be useful particularly if deep physical relaxation is the main aim of the practice, or if the body is extremely tired, in pain or ill. The ease of going to sleep while lying down however may not always be desirable unless it is late at night. Having settled into the preferred position, it would be usual to let the eyes gently close.

From here one can move on to practice mindfulness using the sense of touch focused on the body or breath, or one can use another sense such as the hearing. One can also practice using a combination of these. The important thing about the body and the senses is that they are always in the present moment so they help to bring the mind into the present moment. Contact with any of the senses will automatically draw the attention away from the mental distractions which otherwise monopolise our attention.

## **2. The body scan**

Initially, be conscious of the whole body and let it settle. Now, progressively become aware of each individual part of the body starting with the feet and then moving to the legs, stomach, back, hands, arms, shoulders, neck and face. Take your time with each part. The object of this practice is to let the attention *rest* with each part, simply

noticing what is happening there, what sensations are taking place, moment-by-moment. Practice cultivating an attitude of impartial awareness, that is, not having to judge the experiences as good or bad, right or wrong. Simply practice being at peace with our moment-by-moment experience just as it is, even if it is uncomfortable. It is our reactivity to emotional and physical discomfort which amplifies it. There is no need to change your experience from one state to another or to 'make something happen'. Observing the mind judge, criticize or become distracted, for example, are simply mental experiences to observe non-judgmentally as they come and go. As often as the attention wanders from an awareness of the body simply notice where the attention has gone and *gently* bring it back to an awareness of the body. It is not a problem that thoughts come in or the mind becomes distracted. They become a problem only if we view them as a problem.

### **3. Breathing**

The attention can be rested with breath as it passes in and out of the body. The point of focus could be right where the air enters and leaves through the nose, or it could be where the stomach rises and falls with the breath. Again, no force is required and in mindfulness there is no need to try and regulate the breathing; let the body do that for you. Again, if distracting thoughts and feelings come to our awareness, carrying the attention away with them, just be aware of them but let them come and go by themselves. There is no need to 'battle' with them or 'get rid' of them. There is no need even to try and stop these thoughts coming into mind, nor to try and force them out. Trying to force thoughts and feelings out just feeds them with attention, makes them stronger, and increases their impact. We are simply practicing being less preoccupied about them or reactive to them. They will settle by themselves and all the more quickly if we learn not to get involved in them.

### **4. Listening**

When using the listening, the practice of restful attentiveness is similar to the body scan and breathing. Here we are simply practicing being conscious of the sounds in the environment whether they are close or far away. As we listen we let the sounds come and go and in the process also let any thoughts about the sounds – or anything else for that matter – come and go. Keep gently bringing the attention back to the present when it wanders. Mindfulness teaches us that most of the time we are listening to mental chatter so the value of the listening is that the attention is not being used to feed the usual mental commentary. It is this commentary which is so full of habitual and unconscious rumination and worries.

### **5. Finishing**

After practicing for the allotted time gently come back to an awareness of the whole body and then slowly allow the eyes to open. After remaining settled for a few moments, move into the activities of the day which need your attention. The mindfulness practice is not finished when you get out of the chair: it has just begun! Move back into your day-to-day life with the intention of doing it mindfully.