

MINDFUL BREATHING

Difficulty: **CASUAL** | Frequency: **1X/DAY** | Duration: **15 MINS**



WHY YOU SHOULD TRY IT

Stress, anger, and anxiety can impair not only our health but our judgment and skills of attention. Fortunately, research suggests an effective way to deal with these difficult feelings: the practice of “mindfulness,” the ability to pay careful attention to what you’re thinking, feeling, and sensing in the present moment without judging those thoughts and feelings as good or bad. Countless studies link mindfulness to better health, lower anxiety, and greater resilience to stress.

But how do you cultivate mindfulness? A basic method is to focus your attention on your own breathing—a practice called, quite simply, “mindful breathing.” After setting aside time to practice mindful breathing, you should find it easier to focus attention on your breath in your daily life—an important skill to help you deal with stress, anxiety, and negative emotions, cool yourself down when your temper flares, and sharpen your skills of concentration.

TIME REQUIRED

15 minutes daily for at least a week (though evidence suggests that mindfulness increases the more you practice it).

HOW TO DO IT

The most basic way to do mindful breathing is simply to focus your attention on your breath, the inhale and exhale. You can do this while standing, but ideally you’ll be sitting or even lying in a comfortable position. Your eyes may be open or closed, but you may find it easier to maintain your focus if you close your eyes. It can help to set aside a designated time for this exercise, but it can also help to practice it when you’re feeling particularly stressed or anxious. Experts believe a regular practice of mindful breathing can make it easier to do it in difficult situations.

Sometimes, especially when trying to calm yourself in a stressful moment, it might help to start by taking an exaggerated breath: a deep inhale through your nostrils (3 seconds), hold your breath (2 seconds), and a long exhale through your mouth (4 seconds). Otherwise, simply observe each breath without trying to adjust it; it may help to focus on the rise and fall of your chest or the sensation through your nostrils. As you do so, you may find that your mind wanders, distracted by thoughts or bodily sensations. That’s OK. Just notice that this is happening and gently bring your attention back to your breath.

To provide even more structure, and help you lead this practice for others, below are steps for **ashort guided meditation**. You can listen to audio of this guided meditation, produced by UCLA’s [Mindful Awareness Research Center \(MARC\)](#), in the player below; if it doesn’t play, you can find it [here](#) or download it from [MARC’s website](#).

1. Find a relaxed, comfortable position. You could be seated on a chair or on the floor on a cushion. Keep your back upright, but not too tight. Hands resting wherever they’re comfortable. Tongue on the roof of your mouth or wherever it’s comfortable.
2. Notice and relax your body. Try to notice the shape of your body, its weight. Let yourself relax and become curious about your body seated here—the sensations it experiences, the touch, the connection with the floor or the chair. Relax any areas of tightness or tension. Just breathe.
3. Tune into your breath. Feel the natural flow of breath—in, out. You don’t need to do anything to your breath. Not long, not short,

- just natural. Notice where you feel your breath in your body. It might be in your abdomen. It may be in your chest or throat or in your nostrils. See if you can feel the sensations of breath, one breath at a time. When one breath ends, the next breath begins.
4. Now as you do this, you might notice that your mind may start to wander. You may start thinking about other things. If this happens, it is not a problem. It's very natural. Just notice that your mind has wandered. You can say "thinking" or "wandering" in your head softly. And then gently redirect your attention right back to the breathing.
 5. Stay here for five to seven minutes. Notice your breath, in silence. From time to time, you'll get lost in thought, then return to your breath.
 6. After a few minutes, once again notice your body, your whole body, seated here. Let yourself relax even more deeply and then offer yourself some appreciation for doing this practice today.

EVIDENCE IT THAT WORKS

Arch, J. J., & Craske, M. G. (2006). [Mechanisms of mindfulness: Emotion regulation following a focused breathing induction](#) *Behaviour Research and Therapy*, 44(12), 1849-1858.

Participants who completed a 15-minute focused breathing exercise (similar to the mindful breathing exercise described above) reported less negative emotion in response to a series of slides that displayed negative images, compared with people who didn't complete the exercise. These results suggest that the focused breathing exercise helps to improve participants' ability to regulate their emotions.

WHY IT WORKS

Mindfulness gives people distance from their thoughts and feelings, which can help them tolerate and work through unpleasant feelings rather than becoming overwhelmed by them. Mindful breathing in particular is helpful because it gives people an anchor—their breath—on which they can focus when they find themselves carried away by a stressful thought. Mindful breathing also helps people stay "present" in the moment, rather than being distracted by regrets in the past or worries about the future.

SOURCES

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This practice is part of [Greater Good in Action](#), a clearinghouse of the best research-tested methods for increasing happiness, resilience, kindness, and connection, created by the [Greater Good Science Center](#) at UC Berkeley and [HopeLab](#).

