

## Mindfulness practices

to keep you living life in the present

Often when I talk about meditation with people, their eyes sort of glaze over... like I'm suggesting they do "ONE MORE THING" in an already too busy day. There are many ways to put a calming, destressing practice like meditation into your life. And who of us don't need a bit of calm, peaceful loss of stress?

Mindfulness is a simple practice of setting your attention on this moment, assessing and accepting all this is right now. That might sound a bit overwhelming, but I think of it this way.

- In this moment is your life.
- This moment is the only one you can live.
- You can't relive that moment from yesterday.
- You can't live the event you're worrying about that may or may not be coming.
- You can only savor life in the now.
- You can only take action in this moment.

And if you aren't present and aware in this moment... it's gone. We miss too many of our precious life moments by rehashing old stuff or worrying about what's to come. And while we're occupying our brain with the replaying and worrying, we totally miss out on the now.

Take a moment with me... take a deep breath, pause, then let it go. Relax. In this moment, right now... you are fine. Likely you're clothed as you want to be, you have shelter, food... you are okay. You may have some challenges going on with your body or life but at this very moment, you're sitting here reading encouraging words and You Are Fine! Learn to enjoy your okay-ed-ness and don't waste this moment worrying about "what if I'm not okay" in the future. You are fine right now, relax. Breathe.

So, choose to live this moment. Mindfulness practices are tools that help you get into this moment. These practices give you little ways to look at things we do every day differently. What follows is my list of 30-something ideas to bring mindfulness into your life. This is not your to-do list. It's just a list of ideas to try. One or more might appeal. If you adopt even one of them, you will begin creating a habit of experiencing mindfulness on a regular basis. Remember, in this moment, you're fine. So get into this moment of your life as often as possible.

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**Eating meditation-** Like many things in our day, eating is often a rushed event, shoveling nourishment in while thinking about 50 things that need done after eating. In eating meditation, you've got several choices. You can try focusing on your meal with friends or family. Or you can make it a special solo time, perhaps with just a tiny special snack. Either way, the practice goes like this.

Look at your meal. Appreciate the colors, the textures, the variety of differences. Smell the odors coming from your plate. Even if you're snacking on a lowly raisin, pick that little gem up and have a whiff. Take a moment to imagine the journey your food has been on to reach you. Was it grown locally, or has it traveled from another part of the planet. Imagine how many people were involved in the process of growing, nurturing, picking the food and getting it to you. Then take a few grateful moments, realizing that it's this food that allows you to live, to keep your body strong and healthy. Then it's time to taste... but just a small bite at first. Allow just a tiny bit to roll around on your tongue, perhaps even noticing which part of your tongue picks up the flavor. Continue eating but notice how a bite of vegetable might taste after a bit of bread. Again, realize that whoever prepared this meal for you, and yes, perhaps it is you, has given you a lovely gift. Bon appetit!

**Walking meditation-** Take a walk... it's good for body and soul. Maybe take your doggie pal along with you. To work on mindfulness, set an intention for your walk. Think of things you're grateful for. Or notice how many different shapes of leaves or colors of green you see. Listen to all the bird songs or other sounds that surround you. Notice people who might walk past you and make kind eye contact with them and SMILE!!

**Slow Walking meditation-** Slow walking is a different sort of walk. This walk isn't going to cover a lot of ground and can even be completed indoors. I have done this in meditation groups and we all walk around in a circle. The focus is to walk Very Slowly. Notice which muscles tense first to begin taking a step. Do your arms move first or your legs? What part of the foot makes contact with the ground first? How does it feel when your entire foot rests on the floor? Is there a slight pause at any point while you walk or are you in continuous motion? The slower you walk, the more there is to notice. And if you're walking in a circle, with a group, your pace is set by that person in front of you. Let them have some space and enjoy yours.



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**Chanting meditation-** Chanting is an ancient practice that can be performed just as the ancients did or with some updates. The practice is intended to give you a phrase to repeat, often silently to yourself but sometimes out loud. This is to keep the mind busy doing something in this moment. But only part of the brain is really occupied with this simple repetition. The busy brain is chanting but you can also find some stillness inside to explore. This higher self, wiser self is part of you that often is ignored. In time you might realize you have forgotten to chant but as you plumb the depths of your own mind and heart, you remain solidly in this moment. People use different phrases to chant. If you need some ideas, you might start with "Peace... peace... peace..." or "I'm okay... It's okay... we're okay..."

**Speaking and listening-** We talk and listen all day but often without mindful attention. Sit with a partner, perhaps over a meal or a cup of tea and practice mindful conversation. Take time, relax. Listen with your whole attention to what the other is saying. Once they've completed their statement, take a moment to digest what was said before even beginning to think about what you might now choose to say. Initially limited each participant to one sentence at a time will help you learn to relax thru the pauses in the conversation. We often speak just to fill in the silences. Stay mindful of your discussion partner and what they are truly sharing with you in this moment.

**Showering or washing your hands-** Water is my favorite cleanser, there to wash away whatever I wish to release. You can use this concept while washing your hands or taking a shower, pausing to appreciate the warm water, the soap bubbles, the feeling of the flow across your skin. Release anything emotionally that you might be ready to send on down the drain along with the dirt. If you bathe small children, you might share this idea of appreciating bath time, relaxing them into the warmth of the water as a time to be quiet and enjoy the senses in the moment.

**Journaling-** I'm not sure everyone really understands how writing can put you so clearly in the moment. It works for me whether typing on a keyboard or writing something out long hand. You might choose to journal about the day's activities, accomplishments or challenges. You might rather write poetry. You might write a letter to someone far away or someone not even on this plane anymore. But as you might, staying mindful of the moment, sometimes you will be surprised to see the words that appear on the page. These words often come from that wiser, higher part of you and can bring you truth, direction and encouragement that might be needed in the moment.

**Pondering someone else's pain and think of 1 thing you can do to help-** Our world can sometimes get very focused on me, me, me! "I'm so busy. I'm overwhelmed. I'm not appreciated." Etc. It's often helpful to think of someone you know or someone in the news who you know is struggling. Imagine how they're feeling, how their life is affected by their challenges. Then think of one thing you are willing to do to help them. If it's someone you know, you might call or send a card. If the person isn't at hand, take a moment to imagine or visualize them rising over the challenge, healing or being freed from the problem. Spending these moments bearing someone else's pain often makes our own, familiar challenges seem much more manageable in this moment.

**Sounds abound-** When I sit with a meditation group, sometimes we are distracted by noises that "interrupt" our stillness. In this practice, we learn to embrace the sounds around us. Pause and hear what is going on around you. Noises inside like the heating system coming on, the refrigerator running but remind us of the gratitude we might have for the comforts of home. A plane flying overhead brings a pause to wish those people well who are venturing out or headed home. Sounds aren't an interruption but perhaps a different sort of call to your attention to focus back on this moment.

**Check in with an old friend-** We get too busy most of the time. A wonderful way to take a small break is to find a way to check in with a friend. Writing a note, making a call, even just sending a short but sweet text provides that small break to put your attention in this moment for the good of you and your friend.

**Make friendly eye contact while walking, shopping, etc.-** You might take a walk a lunchtime. Do you focus on the ground in front of you, hustling along to "get this walk over with?" You could choose to enjoy your walk, taking in what is going on around you. Notice the faces passing by, some happy, some not. Some are making eye contact with you, so smile. Maybe you could smile and wish them well, even if they're not looking. Spread that love around and enjoy the moment.

**Breathing practices,** then add blowing bubbles. Basic meditation and mindfulness practices always start with the breath. Keeping our focus on breathing in, then breathing out is intended to keep your mind on this moment. What if you breathed in light and joy, then breathed out something you want to release? That works. But imagine blowing out what you don't want thru a bubble wand dripping with soap. Watch your old, unwanted stuff become a beautiful bubble and float away. And if you don't have bubbles... this works quite nicely in your imagination also.

**Breathing together as a group-** When leading meditation, I try to stay conscious of not putting people in an uncomfortable position of having to set their rate of breathing to match mine. People breathe at different rates so I usually encourage them to breathe at their normal pace. But sometimes as we've been sitting together awhile and everyone is relaxed and nicely oxygenated, I encourage us to breathe together as is comfortable, breathing in the light or positive energy of the group then breathing out our love to the world.

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**Set an intention for the day when you wake up-** Then recall it whenever you feel like you're not living in the moment. Maybe write it on a note and tape somewhere you'll notice it throughout the day. I've used the refrigerator, the car dashboard and my computer screen as handy locations for these reminders.

**Create new patterns-** You could try a series of "If this, then that" messages to create easy reminders to shift into slow brain. For instance, you might come up with, "If office door, then deep breath," as a way to shift into mindfulness as you are about to start your workday. Or, "If phone rings, take a breath before answering." Each intentional action to shift into mindfulness will strengthen your slow brain.

**Driving yourself calm-** Avoid road rage by focusing on mindfulness if you're stuck in heavy traffic. Deep breath. Relax. The situation is not in your control. Notice all the other drivers. You're all together in this. Likely it's no one's fault. Imagine that the tie up might be due to an accident. Visualize no one being hurt, send them light and love. Scan your body for tension and release as you can- rolling neck, lifting shoulders, shoulders forward, shoulders back.

**Explore your inner critic-** many of us have one. IT might be a voice from your past or perhaps just one of those aspects that pops up when you're particularly nervous, busy, or behind. Recall and write down some of your critics favorite phrases. Of course, we don't believe these statements but write them down as you can. Give your critic a name (even if it's a real person, perhaps base it on some particularly irritating personality trait and not their real name.) Now think deeply about your goodness. Every inhale you breath in light and become brighter and brighter. And with each breath your critic fades or shrinks. The key to having an inner critic is to get to know him or her, then to disempower them. They may always be with you but when they're teeny and you are bright and filled with goodness, they are much easier to dismiss. This same practice might work well with worry or anxiety. The key is to be the observer, watching the critic or the worrier etc.

**Starting your mindful day-** Getting into the habit of being present and mindful as your day begins can start you off in a calm and peaceful way. Wake up and stretch. Stick a toe out from under the covers. Scan your body for tensions and relax them away... but don't fall back asleep. Get up and shower being mindful of washing away any worries or debris left over from the day before. Access the cleansing of the water, refreshing and clear, like your view of this new day. Make coffee or tea. Before you put the coffee in, breath in the aroma and think about fond memories you may have of this smell. Open a window or the front door. Savor the fresh air and listen for sounds, scan the horizon or notice the beautiful sunrise. Plan one treat for yourself today... I'm wearing my favorite scarf. I'll take the time to have lunch with a friend. I'll take a walk today at lunchtime.

**Gratitude practice-** I like to pick a time of day that might be a bit tough for me. I had a job once that wasn't satisfying at all. When I pulled in the parking lot, I sat in the car for a few minutes and made a mental gratitude list of all the good things this job brought me.

**Taking a stretch break-** Our bodies are made to move so try to build a habit of being aware of how your body is feeling, especially while at work. Shoulders tense? Then roll them a bit. Back tight? Stretch it out a bit. Depending on your work situation, these can be small motions (stretching out your fingers, then curling them into fists, then stretch out again) or larger (stand up and reach for the ceiling, maybe bend over and reach for your toes. )

**Red is for relax-** Stop sign or stop light practice- Often when we're driving we get into a habitual habit of rushing. Stop signs can become a "suggestion to stop" and a red light might immediately cause us to tense. Try this practice of using every stop sign or red light as a reminder to stop, pause, breathe and relax. Repeat as long as you're stuck at the light.

**Watching an uncomfortable emotion-** Meditation helps us to learn to become the observer of our minds. This same idea of separation can apply to difficult emotions. Imagine you start worrying. Rather than viewing yourself as the victim of the worry, allowing it to sweep you away, perhaps you might notice the worry, just like you'd notice any thought. "Ah, there's that worry again. Gosh, she's persistent. She's almost always wrong too." Then take a deep breathe and release the worry, or anxiety or bad memory as best you can.

**Body scan-** If you find yourself day dreaming or worrying or ... try using a body scan to bring your attention back to this moment. Breathe in and notice your feet. Are they relaxed or tense. Curl your toes then stretch them out. On your next inhale, repeat with your ankles, then calves, then knees, thighs and etc.

**Mindful gazing-** look out a window. Without any judgement, just note what you see. People walking by, how are they dressed, do they walk like their feet hurt, or like they're feeling cold. Notice the colors of the cars, or the color of the leaves, flowers. Notice the clouds in the sky, the sun glinting off a roof.

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**How am I feeling-** Using the same mental observer position we've discussed, take a moment and check in with how you are feeling. Sometimes we get into habits about our feelings, especially those of being too busy or rushed. Taking a moment to check in with yourself might allow you to say to yourself, "Yes, I'm very busy but I've accomplished quite a bit so far today." "Yes, it's going to be a busy day but if I stay focused, I'm sure I can make a real difference in that to do list." Now you're observer and encourager.

**Senses exercise-** We did a listening exercise before but let's take it further. Think about 5 things you can see or maybe 5 colors you see. Think about 5 sounds you can hear. Think of 5 things you feel or can touch- the floor, your chair, the keyboard etc. See if you can find 5 different smells. Depending where you're at, go for 5 tastes too if you wish to.

**1 minute breathing practice-** Even at work, you can take 60 seconds to focus just on your breathing. Set a timer on your watch or computer but don't watch it. Just breathe for what you think is 1 full minute, then check the clock to see how close you might have been.

**Pick up a leaf-** Hiking or walking down the street, often there are leaves on the ground. Pick one up and really observe it. Feel it, sniff it, hold it up to the light. Is it dry or still nicely bendy. Imagine how many leaves just like this one each tree grows. And that tree does that monumental task without even worrying once.

**Listen to music-** When you have time, put on some music you enjoy and something that relaxes you. Really pay attention to the music as one song plays. If your mind wanders, gently draw it back to the music. Notice the different instruments or sounds and how they compliment and support each other. Notice how the rhythms might change, how loudness and softness vary. If there is a vocalist, notice the words but also how they are enhanced by the singer.

**Mindful motion-** Take a run or walk- Trying to stay mindful for a long walk or run might not be relaxing. So set off and once you feel warmed up, become mindful of the sensation of motion. How the air feels as it moves over your body. How your feet touch the ground. Sounds of your breathing. Movement of your hair or clothing as you move.

**Peacemaker-** There's so much bad news today that you might feel overwhelmed. I'm not recommending listening to the news but we are all aware of situations in our world today that are filled with strife. These issues could involve family members or world powers. But pick an issue that worries you and sit quietly, shining the light of peace over it. You are an observer, again, watching things calm down, anger flowing away, people beginning to look at one another with new eyes, realizing they are more alike than different. Picture them reaching out to one another to shake hands or embrace. Rest in the peace you have created for a few minutes.

**Meeting-** a wonderful mindfulness habit is to always be in the moment when you shake hands, are introduced to or hug someone. No one likes an absent minded meeting. Be there with your eyes, your mind and your heart and the person you are meeting will be feeling a real and warm connection

**Bug's eye view-** when you're outside, an insect is generally regarded as a pest. But remember being a child and watching those interesting bug people? Take a few moments and ponder the world from their point of view. Imagine they're trying to do just what you are doing: feeding a family, having safe shelter, being part of a community. Can you imagine what you look like from their teeny point of view?

**Foot meditation-** Do you take your shoes off at the end of the day? Rather than just kicking them off as you come in the door, take a few minutes. Sit down, take your shoes off, rub your feet and remember all the places they took you today. Thank you my feet for our many travels.

**Absolutely nothing-** Can you just sit and be still for 5 minutes. Not formal meditation... just sit and be still for a few minutes. We get so wrapped up in accomplishing things that it's refreshing to just be and see where our thoughts go, if anywhere.

**My un-nap-** Often in the mid afternoon, I get a bit overwhelmed. I have a list of things I must accomplish but just can't see the way clear to the next step. I work at home, so can walk into the bedroom and lie down for a few minutes, clear my mind and just ask my higher self, "what's next?" Then I breathe. If you don't work at home, I suppose you could do the same thing while walking to the restroom for a few minutes of "rest."



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