

BODY SCAN MEDITATION

Difficulty: **MODERATE** | Frequency: **3X/WEEK** | Duration: **5 MINS**

WHY YOU SHOULD TRY IT

This exercise asks you to systematically focus your attention on different parts of your body, from your feet to the muscles in your face. It is designed to help you develop a mindful awareness of your bodily sensations, and to relieve tension when possible. Research suggests that this mindfulness practice can help reduce stress, improve your well-being, and decrease aches and pains.

TIME REQUIRED

5 minutes, three to six days per week. Research suggests that people who practice the body scan for longer reap more benefits from this practice.

HOW TO DO IT

*The body scan can be performed while lying down, sitting, or in other postures. The steps below are a guided meditation designed to be done while sitting. You can listen to audio of this three-minute guided meditation, produced by UCLA's [Mindful Awareness Research Center \(MARC\)](#), in the player; if it doesn't play, you can find it [here](#) or download it from [MARC's website](#).**

Especially for those new to the body scan, we recommend performing this practice with the audio. However, you can also use the script below for guidance for yourself or for leading this practice for others.

1. Begin by bringing your attention to your environment, slowly looking around and noticing that you are safe in this moment.
2. Bring your attention into your body.
3. You can close your eyes if that's comfortable for you or maintain a soft gaze, with your eyes partially closed but not focusing on anything in particular.
4. You can notice your body seated wherever you're seated, feeling the support of the chair or the floor beneath you.
5. Take a few deep, long breaths, within the range of what is comfortable for you.
6. And as you take a deep breath, bring in more oxygen, enlivening the body. And as you exhale, you might experience a sense of relaxing more deeply.
7. You can notice your feet on the floor, notice the sensations of your feet touching the floor. The weight and pressure, vibration, heat.
8. You can notice your legs against the chair, pressure, pulsing, heaviness, lightness.
9. Notice your back against the chair, supporting you. If you are not able to notice sensations in all areas of the body, that is OK. We are more connected to certain areas of the body than others, at different times of the day.
10. Bring your attention into your stomach area. If your stomach is tense or tight, can you allow it to soften? Take a breath.
11. Notice your hands. Are your hands tense or tight? See if you can allow them to soften.
12. Notice your arms. Feel any sensation in your arms. Do your best to allow your shoulders to be soft.
13. Notice your neck and throat. Try to allow them be soft. See if you can invite a sense of relaxation in.

14. Try to soften your jaw. Do your best to allow your face and facial muscles to be soft.
15. Then notice your whole body present. Take one more breath.
16. Be aware of your whole body as best you can. Take a breath. Slowly open up the eyes, without focusing on anything in particular. Allow the head and neck to gently rotate, taking in the space you are in. When you feel ready, you can return to your normal gaze.

* You can also listen to a [45-minute version](#) of the Body Scan that the UC San Diego Center for Mindfulness uses in its trainings in *Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction*.

EVIDENCE IT THAT WORKS

Call, D., Miron, L., & Orcutt, H. (2014). [Effectiveness of brief mindfulness techniques in reducing symptoms of anxiety and stress](#). *Mindfulness*, 5, 658-668.

A group of mostly white female undergraduate students in the Midwestern U.S. practiced an audio-guided Body Scan for three weekly 45-minute sessions and experienced reductions in anxiety and stress. Students who practiced hatha yoga within the same timeframe experienced similar benefits, suggesting that the Body Scan is an accessible alternative to hatha yoga practices.

Dambrun, M., Berniard, A., Didelot, T., Chaulet, M., Droit-Volet, S., Corman, M., Juneau, C., & Martinon, L. M. (2019). [Unified consciousness and the effect of body scan meditation on happiness: alteration of inner-body experience and feeling of harmony as central processes](#). *Mindfulness*, 10, 1530-1544.

French psychology students practiced an audio-guided Body Scan, listened to relaxing music, or listened to an audiobook of a storybook tale for 21 minutes. Students who did the Body Scan increased in happiness, emotional stability, harmoniousness, and feelings of transcendence (unified consciousness). These increases were greater compared to those in students who listened to the relaxing music or audiobook.

Body Scan is one of the practices included in [Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction](#) (MBSR). Developed by Jon Kabat-Zinn and based on [Buddhist teachings](#), MBSR is a six- to 10-week program that teaches various mindfulness techniques through weekly sessions and homework assignments. More information about this program is available in Kabat-Zinn's book *Full Catastrophe Living*.

Who Has Tried the Practice?

Additional studies explore how the Body Scan benefits people outside the U.S.:

- [Terminal cancer patients in Hong Kong](#) improved in overall mental health and reported feeling more peaceful, happy, and calm after 90 minutes of the Body Scan.
- [Japanese people](#) increased in self-compassion and decreased in symptoms of depression and anxiety after an eight-week mindfulness program that included the Body Scan.
- [University students in South Korea](#) experienced reductions in self-criticism and psychological distress, along with improvements in self-reassurance and mental health, after participating in a six-week program that included Body Scan, [Mindful Breathing](#), and the [Loving-Kindness Meditation](#).

Research suggests that MBSR, which includes the Body Scan, benefits the mental health of various groups, including the following:

- People in different cultures and countries, such as bilingual [Latin-American families](#), university students in [China](#), disadvantaged families in [Hong Kong](#), low-income cyclo drivers in [Vietnam](#), males with generalized anxiety disorder in [Iran](#), Indigenous people in the [Republic of Congo](#), and [Aboriginal Australians](#).
- Women around the world, including [pregnant women](#) in China, [rural women](#) in India who experienced still-birth, [at-risk women](#) in Iran, [Muslim women college students](#) in the United Arab Emirates, American [survivors of intimate partner violence](#), and socioeconomically disadvantaged [Black women](#) with post-traumatic stress disorder.

- People with certain diseases, such as New Zealanders with [rheumatoid arthritis](#), male patients with [heart disease](#) in India, patients with [diabetes](#) in South Korea, [cancer](#) patients in Canada, [breast cancer](#) survivors in China, and HIV-positive individuals in [Toronto](#), [San Francisco](#), [Iran](#), and [South Africa](#).

More research is needed to explore whether, and how, the impact of this practice extends to other groups and cultures.

WHY TO TRY IT

Our body can sometimes be a source of pain and negative emotions, whether they are caused by injury or disease, or experiences of discrimination and prejudice. The body scan provides a rare opportunity for us to experience our body as it is, including any difficult feelings that come up, without judging or trying to change it.

It may allow us to notice and release a source of tension we weren't aware of before, such as a hunched back or clenched jaw muscles. Or it may draw our attention to a source of pain and discomfort.

Our feelings of resistance and anger toward pain often only serve to increase that pain, and to increase the distress associated with it. According to research, by noticing the pain we're experiencing, without trying to change it, we may actually feel some relief. Even if the pain doesn't go away, we can take steps to shift our relationship to pain and our relationship to our body in general.

The body scan allows us to work with these types of negative feelings. This practice may also increase our general attunement to our physical needs and sensations, which can in turn help us take better care of our body and make healthier decisions about eating, sleep, and exercise.

SOURCES

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Steven D. Hickman, Psy.D., [UC San Diego Center for Mindfulness](#)

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](#).

