MINDFUL BREATHING

Difficulty: CASUAL | Frequency: 1X/DAY | Duration: 5 MINS

WHY YOU SHOULD TRY IT

Stress, anger, and anxiety can impair not only our health but our judgment and skills of attention. One way to help deal with these difficult feelings is 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 may 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

5 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 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, or you can maintain a soft gaze, with your eyes partially closed but not focusing on anything in particular. 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 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, 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. You can notice that this is happening and try to 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 a **short 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. Please find a relaxed, comfortable position. You could be seated on a chair or on the floor on a cushion. Try to 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 invite your body to relax. 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. Do your best to relax any areas of tightness or tension. Breathe.
3. Tune into the rhythm of your breath. You can feel the natural flow of breath—in, out. You don't need to do anything to your breath. Not long, not short, but 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. If you are not able to notice the breath 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.
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. Try to 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, if it is available, please 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.

Americans who completed a 15-minute focused breathing exercise (similar to Mindful Breathing) reported less negative emotion in response to negative images, compared with people who didn't complete the exercise. These results suggest that focused breathing helped improve people's ability to regulate their emotions.

Who Has Tried the Practice?

The participants in the above study were mostly female and Asian or white. Additional research has engaged members of other groups:

- Chinese adults decreased in anxiety, depression, anger, fatigue, and stress biomarkers after five days of 20-minute meditations that included exercises similar to Mindful Breathing and the Body Scan.
- Japanese university students who practiced this exercise and the Body Scan for five to 10 minutes at least once a day for a week ruminated less on anger immediately after the intervention and four weeks later.
- Malaysian palliative caregivers significantly decreased in stress biomarkers after only 20 minutes of Mindful Breathing.

Mindful Breathing is one of the mindfulness 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. Research suggests that MBSR 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

Mindfulness gives us distance from our thoughts and feelings, which can help us tolerate and work through unpleasant feelings rather than becoming overwhelmed by them. Mindful breathing in particular is helpful because it gives us an anchor—our breath—on which we can focus when we find ourselves carried away by a stressful thought. Mindful breathing can also help us 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.