



## Meditation and Mindfulness Tips

There is plenty of scientific data that champions the health benefits of meditation and mindfulness. We have all seen depictions in popular culture and on social media about what meditation is supposed to look like: stillness, closed eyes, quiet mind, transcendence. However, some people have a difficult time with what is traditionally thought of as meditation—it can be really challenging to sit, to be still, to go inward, and to connect with the mystical energy we anticipate being able to witness that can transport us to another plane. This is only one type of meditation, though, and there are lots of other ways to develop a practice. Even as a beginner, anyone can show up in a practice of mindfulness and awareness that can be a steppingstone to more formal meditation. Here are a few practices that can help you get started:

- **Focus on your breath.** Part of what keeps us from feeling fully present is that we are often stuck in our heads for long periods of time. The demands of our jobs, the challenges we face in our personal lives, and the constantly changing political landscape of our own country and the rest of the world all keep us occupied: there is a lot to think about, and we often feel more at ease if we are in a place of focused rational thought, sitting in linear thinking and problem-solving. Unfortunately, we can get stuck there, ruminating on things over which we have little, if any, control. Getting back into your body can be as easy as focusing on your breath.
  1. **Pay attention to your breath without changing it.** Is it deep? Is it shallow? Are you breathing through your nose or mouth? Both? What part of your body is expanding as you take in breath? Can you sense the temperature difference between your inhalation and your exhalation?
  2. **Begin to deepen your breath.** If possible, exhale more slowly than you inhale. If it helps, count while inhaling and exhaling or say to yourself, “I am inhaling...I am exhaling.” These practices can help to quiet the inevitable chatter in your mind.
  3. When you feel more present, **release control over your breath.** Notice how your breath has changed from the beginning of your practice.
- **Candle gazing,** or looking at anything with a relaxed gaze, can be a helpful way to disengage the mind and focus on something outside of yourself, particularly if you are having a difficult time sitting still and focusing inward. Some people prefer to meditate with their eyes open, which is fine, but it’s very easy to get distracted by what is going on around you. Instead, finding a fixed object, or something that is gently moving in a way that is not super predictable (like a kaleidoscope-style video loop or a flame) can distract your mind enough that it will be able to focus without getting lost in your thoughts.
- **Mindful eating.** Many of us enjoy watching television or scrolling on our phones while we eat. These distractions keep us from being present with what we are eating. This can mean, at minimum, we are not really tasting and enjoying our food. At most, it can mean that we are not paying attention to how much we are eating, whether we are even hungry in the first place, and, if so, when we are no longer hungry. When eating, try these mindful eating steps:

1. **No screens or other distractions.** Sit in a place where you can focus on your food. Look at it, smell it, and be present with it before you start eating.
  2. **Eat slowly and chew thoroughly.** Focus on what your food tastes like, what the texture and mouthfeel are. Chew each bite a minimum of 30 times—count if you need to. This not only allows you to enjoy your food more; it improves digestion because it gives your saliva time to do its job in the digestive process before you swallow your food, which makes your food easier for your stomach to digest.
  3. **Stop eating when you're full** or no longer enjoying your food. You will notice this a lot sooner if you are paying attention while you eat!
- **Mindful movement.** If you have trouble simply sitting and being still, you may find that mindful movement works better for you. You don't have to be still to be present and mindful, and moving meditations can be a powerful way to be more grounded in your body. Try these methods:
    - **Take a walk outside,** going slowly, focusing on all of your senses: What do you see? What do you smell? What do you hear? What do you taste? What do you feel? Simply notice.
    - **Find a labyrinth.** There are labyrinths all over the world that are free to the public, and they can offer an opportunity for moving presence. Enter and walk slowly, deliberately, taking one step per breath, either stepping forward on the inhalation or the exhalation, or both. Whatever feels good. Moving slowly will allow you to be more present, but whatever speed feels good is fine—you can always work your way up to moving slower. While you walk, focus on your senses (using the prompts above) or chant a mantra or affirmation in your head or aloud. Visit [labyrinthlocator.org](http://labyrinthlocator.org) to find labyrinths anywhere in the world—a great resource to use if you're on vacation as well!
    - Listen to a **guided moving meditation** on a meditation app or YouTube. They will guide you so you know what to do—this is super helpful if you are not sure of where to begin.
    - Try **progressive muscle relaxation** by tensing, holding, then releasing different parts of your body.
  - **Yoga Nidra**, or “yogic sleep,” is a wonderful way to be present by bringing your awareness to various parts of it. You can find a guided version in a meditation app or on YouTube—that way you are not responsible for doing the guiding. If you have trouble falling asleep, this can be a great support with that, but it is not necessarily intended to be a sleep practice. The goal is for your body to relax deeply while your mind detaches from thinking and simply focuses on what your body feels like. You can also do a body scan on your own, sweeping your focus around your body and noticing what different parts feel like.
  - **Guided meditations** on meditations apps, like **Insight Timer** (my favorite) or **Calm**, or on YouTube are great ways to distract your mind and help you focus on being present. It can be really helpful to have someone narrating what you are supposed to be doing, seeing, or focusing on—this is especially useful if you are having a hard time sitting still without any outside support.
  - **Simply putting away your screens** can have a huge impact on your ability to be present in your body—if you are paying attention to what is happening on a screen, you are in your head and not in your body. Put them down, look at the world around you, listen to the feelings in your body, and be present.