

Mindfulness: Release the Stress

Assess Your Stress

Most of us have adapted to living with high levels of stress. We are so used to it that we may have trouble recognizing its impact. Think honestly about the stress in your life. Use the cues listed to help you assess your stress level.

How often do notice one or more signs of stress? A sign might be irritability, tension, exhaustion, anxiety, or sadness. It could be physical, such as headaches or indigestion. Or it might be feeling burned out, overwhelmed, or defeated when thinking about responsibilities. It may be a combination of these.

10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1	0
Constantly		Frequently		About half the time			Infrequently			Never

Could mindfulness make a difference? How mindful are you now? Check items that apply to you.

- I am a multi-tasker.
- I often think about something else when someone is talking to me.
- I tend to forget people's names right after hearing them.
- I get stuck in thoughts about the past.
- I have a hard time accepting change.
- I spend a lot of time thinking/worrying about what might happen in the future.
- I feel like my emotions rule me, rather than the other way around.
- I have trouble dealing with emotional distress.
- I am my own worst critic.
- I always have to be doing something.
- I am often distracted and have trouble concentrating.
- I often read, watch TV, or do some other activity while eating.

Mindfulness is a way of experiencing the world that can be valuable to anyone. Learning to be mindful may be especially helpful to you if you checked several of the boxes and feel stressed about the half the time or more.



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Breathe

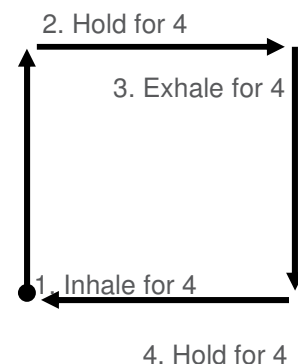
Breathing slowly and rhythmically makes your body feel like it does when you are relaxed. This sends a message to your brain to calm down. Focusing on your breathing can also reduce your sense of stress by clearing your mind of negative thoughts.

Belly breathing

- Find a relaxed, comfortable position. Keep your back straight, but not tight. Put a hand on your belly just below your ribs and the other on your chest.
- Take a slow, deep breath in through your nose, and let your belly push your hand out as the muscles relax. Your chest should not move.
- Hold that breath for a moment, then breathe out through pursed lips as if you were whistling. Straighten the back. Let belly muscles tighten. Feel the hand on your belly go in.
- Take your time with each breath. Try to increase each in and out breath. Notice where you feel your breath in your body – chest, abdomen, nostrils.
- Your mind may wander. That's OK. Just notice the wandering and gently redirect your attention back to your breathing.
- Do this 5 to 10 times.

Square breathing

- Find a comfortable position. Take several slow natural breaths.
- Now close your eyes and picture a square in your mind. Choose one corner to be your starting point.
- Count slowly to four as you inhale through your nose. Picturing your breath moving up one side of the square. You can also trace an outline of a square with your finger.
- Then count slowly to four as you hold your breath and visualize moving across the next side of the square.
- Moving down the next side, count slowly to four while exhaling.
- Then hold without breathing in or out for a count of four on the last side.
- Try to last for the full count, if you feel uncomfortable, reduce the count.
- Repeat 4-5 times.



Breathing meditation

- Relax. Allow the body and mind to settle. Do what helps you become comfortable. Create a stable base for yourself. Gently allow eyes to close.
- Take a few complete, deep breaths, in and out. Then trust the breath to continue on its own.
- Notice where your breath is most obvious in the body. It may be the movement of your belly or chest or a sensation beneath your nostrils.
- As you breathe in, focus on connecting with things as they are.
- As you breathe out, focus on accepting and/or releasing.
- It's OK if your mind wanders. When you become aware (that is a moment of mindfulness!), note what has happened and gently guide your thoughts back to your breath. It's always OK to begin again.
- Continue to focus on your in and out breaths for several minutes.
- Then wiggle your fingers and toes and gently open your eyes. Take your time to adjust. Note your experience. Observe any difference between when you began and now

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Learn More

The following links can help you explore further:

Mindful – Taking Time for What Matters

www.mindful.org

Psychology Today – Mindfulness

www.psychologytoday.com/basics/mindfulness

MindfulNet

www.mindfulnet.org

University of Massachusetts: Center for Mindfulness

www.umassmed.edu/cfm

UCLA Mindful Awareness Research Center

www.marc.ucla.edu

University of Minnesota Center for Spirituality and Healing

www.csh.umn.edu

Note: You may wish to do an online search for Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) or Mindful Meditation to find courses in your area.

Reading material:

Wherever You Go, There You Are: Mindfulness Meditation in Everyday Life

by Jon Kabat-Zinn

Full Catastrophe Living: Using the Wisdom of Your Body and Mind to Face Stress, Pain, and Illness

By Jon Kabat-Zinn

The Miracle of Mindfulness: An Introduction to the Practice of Meditation

by Thích Nhất Hạnh

Mindfulness in Plain English

by Bhante Henepola Gunaratana

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