

6 Mindfulness Exercises You Can Try Today

In this busy world of ours, the mind is constantly pulled from pillar to post, scattering our thoughts and emotions and leaving us feeling stressed, highly-strung and at times quite anxious.

Most of us don't have five minutes to sit down and relax, let alone 30 minutes or more for a meditation session.

But it is essential for our wellbeing to take a few minutes each day to cultivate mental spaciousness and achieve a positive mind-body balance.

So if you are a busy bee like me, you can use these simple mindfulness exercises to empty your mind and find some much-needed calm amidst the madness of your hectic day.

I'm going to cover 6 exercises that take very little effort and can be done pretty much anywhere at anytime:

- Mindful breathing
- Mindful observation
- Mindful awareness
- Mindful listening
- Mindful immersion
- Mindful appreciation

Let's get started...

1. Mindful Breathing

This exercise can be done standing up or sitting down, and pretty much anywhere at any time. If you can sit down in the meditation (lotus) position, that's great, if not, no worries.

Either way, all you have to do is be still and focus on your breath for just one minute.

1. Start by breathing in and out slowly. One breath cycle should last for approximately 6 seconds.
2. Breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth, letting your breath flow effortlessly in and out of your body.
3. Let go of your thoughts. Let go of things you have to do later today or pending projects that need your attention. Simply let thoughts rise and fall of their own accord and be at one with your breath.
4. Purposefully watch your breath, focusing your sense of awareness on its pathway as it enters your body and fills you with life.
5. Then watch with your awareness as it works its way up and out of your mouth and its energy dissipates into the world.

If you are someone who thought they'd never be able to meditate, guess what? You are half way there already!

If you enjoyed one minute of this mind-calming exercise, why not try two or three?

2. Mindful Observation

This exercise is simple but incredibly powerful because it helps you notice and appreciate seemingly simple elements of your environment in a more profound way.

The exercise is designed to connect us with the beauty of the natural environment, something that is easily missed when we are rushing around in the car or hopping on and off trains on the way to work.

1. Choose a natural object from within your immediate environment and focus on watching it for a minute or two. This could be a flower or an insect, or even the clouds or the moon.
2. Don't do anything except notice the thing you are looking at. Simply relax into watching for as long as your concentration allows.
3. Look at this object as if you are seeing it for the first time.
4. Visually explore every aspect of its formation, and allow yourself to be consumed by its presence.
5. Allow yourself to connect with its energy and its purpose within the natural world.

3. Mindful Awareness

This exercise is designed to cultivate a heightened awareness and appreciation of simple daily tasks and the results they achieve.

Think of something that happens every day more than once; something you take for granted, like opening a door, for example.

At the very moment you touch the doorknob to open the door, stop for a moment and be mindful of where you are, how you feel in that moment and where the door will lead you.

Similarly, the moment you open your computer to start work, take a moment to appreciate the hands that enable this process and the brain that facilitates your understanding of how to use the computer.

These 'touch point' cues don't have to be physical ones.

For example: Each time you think a negative thought, you might choose to take a moment to stop, label the thought as unhelpful and release the negativity.

Or, perhaps each time you smell food, you take a moment to stop and appreciate how lucky you are to have good food to eat and share with your family and friends.

Choose a touch point that resonates with you today and, instead of going through your daily motions on autopilot, take occasional moments to stop and cultivate purposeful awareness of what you are doing and the blessings these actions brings to your life.

4. Mindful Listening

This exercise is designed to open your ears to sound in a non-judgmental way, and indeed to train your mind to be less swayed by the influence of past experiences and preconception.

So much of what we “feel” is influenced by past experience. For example, we may dislike a song because it reminds of us of a breakup or another period of life when things felt negative.

So the idea of this exercise is to listen to some music from a neutral standpoint, with a present awareness that is unhindered by preconception.

Select a piece of music you have never heard before. You may have something in your own collection that you have never listened to, or you might choose to turn the radio dial until something catches your ear.

1. Close your eyes and put on your headphones.
2. Try not to get drawn into judging the music by its genre, title or artist name before it has begun. Instead, ignore any labels and neutrally allow yourself to get lost in the journey of sound for the duration of the song.
3. Allow yourself to explore every aspect of track. Even if the music isn't to your liking at first, let go of your dislike and give your awareness full permission to climb inside the track and dance among the sound waves.
4. Explore the song by listening to the dynamics of each instrument. Separate each sound in your mind and analyze each one by one.
5. Hone in on the vocals: the sound of the voice, its range and tones. If there is more than one voice, separate them out as you did in step 4.

The idea is to listen intently, to become fully entwined with the composition without preconception or judgment of the genre, artist, lyrics or instrumentation. Don't think, hear.

5. Mindful Immersion

The intention of this exercise is to cultivate contentment in the moment and escape the persistent striving we find ourselves caught up in on a daily basis.

Rather than anxiously wanting to finish an everyday routine task in order to get on with doing something else, take that regular routine and fully experience it like never before.

For example: if you are cleaning your house, pay attention to every detail of the activity.

Rather than treat this as a regular chore, create an entirely new experience by noticing every aspect of your actions:

Feel and become the motion when sweeping the floor, sense the muscles you use when scrubbing the dishes, develop a more efficient way of wiping the windows clean.

The idea is to get creative and discover new experiences within a familiar routine task.

Instead of laboring through and constantly thinking about finishing the task, become aware of every step and fully immerse yourself in the progress. Take the activity beyond a routine by aligning yourself with it physically, mentally and spiritually.

Who knows, you might even enjoy the cleaning for once!

6. Mindful Appreciation

In this last exercise, all you have to do is notice 5 things in your day that usually go unappreciated.

These things can be objects or people; it's up to you. Use a notepad to check off 5 by the end of the day.

The point of this exercise is to simply give thanks and appreciate the seemingly insignificant things in life, the things that support our existence but rarely get a second thought amidst our desire for bigger and better things.

For example: electricity powers your kettle, the postman delivers your mail, your clothes provide you warmth, your nose lets you smell the flowers in the park, your ears let you hear the birds in the tree by the bus stop, but...

- Do you know how these things/processes came to exist, or how they really work?
- Have you ever properly acknowledged how these things benefit your life and the lives of others?
- Have you ever thought about what life might be like without these things?
- Have you ever stopped to notice their finer, more intricate details?
- Have you ever sat down and thought about the relationships between these things and how together they play an interconnected role in the functioning of the earth?

Once you have identified your 5 things, make it your duty to find out everything you can about their creation and purpose to truly appreciate the way in which they support your life.