

Mind Body Practices

Meditation 101

1. Sit cross-legged on a cushion on the floor or in a chair. Keep your back straight and let your shoulders drop. Take a deep breath and close your eyes if you wish.
2. Notice your breath. Don't change your breathing, but focus on the sensation of air moving in and out of your lungs.
3. As thoughts come into your mind and distract you from your breathing, acknowledge those thoughts and then return to focusing on your breathing each time.
4. Don't judge yourself or try to ignore distractions. Your job is simply to notice that your mind has wandered and to bring attention back to your breathing.
5. Start by doing this 10 minutes a day for a week. The more you meditate regularly, the easier it will be to keep your attention where you want it.

Diaphragmatic breathing

Used in yoga, meditation, and tai chi, entails bringing air deeply into your lower and upper lungs. The relaxing and therapeutic form of breathing is also called abdominal breathing and has been shown to lower stress and cortisol to raise melatonin

Relaxation response

Based on meditation, the relaxation response is a counter to the fight-or-flight response, moving the body from a state of physiological arousal (increased heart rate, blood pressure, and stress hormones) to physiological relaxation, which is your ideal normal state. Practicing the relaxation response involves sitting quietly for 10-20 minutes at a time and paying attention to your breath. When the inevitable thoughts arise, practice just letting them go. If you can't make yourself sit still, you can try listening to calming music, also shown to lower cortisol.

Progressive muscle relaxation

A similar technique to the relaxation response, progressive muscle relaxation is when you focus on a single body part and try to relax it. This is a common practice at the end of yoga class, which may be why we feel like we're floating out the door when we get up from the mat to leave.

Mindfulness-based stress reduction

Based on ancient Buddhist concepts, this method reduces stress. It is extremely helpful if you have trouble quieting your mind during meditation. When a thought floats into your consciousness, you simply observe it, label it, and gently let it go, without getting caught up in it or feeling guilty about it. As you become more proficient at this, you become less attached to your thoughts, less reactive.

MBSR promotes awareness of the present moment with a compassionate, nonjudgmental stance, which over time leads to a shift in perception and response. MBSR increases activity in the part of the brain that governs learning and memory, while decreasing activity in the area responsible for worry and fear.

MBSR lowers cortisol, improves sleep, decreases worry, and reduces depression, anxiety, and distress in people with various stress-related health problems. MBSR was shown to reduce stress and abdominal fat in overweight and obese women.

Alternate nostril breathing

This does four things: lowers your pulse, reduces your blood pressure, raises the efficiency of your breathing, and raises your ability to solve problems. Breathing unilaterally through the right nostril activates the sympathetic nervous system and the left hemisphere of the brain. And breathing unilaterally through the left nostril activates the parasympathetic nervous system (the relaxation response) and the right hemisphere of the brain.

The technique involves sitting on the floor and covering one nostril while breathing through the other. Cover your right nostril with your right thumb, and inhale through your left nostril while counting slowly to ten. Then hold your breath for a count of ten. Notice the sensations in your lower lungs and soft belly, particularly as you reach the higher numbers. Sit up straight, but keep your core soft. Move your right ring finger to cover your left nostril, release your thumb to uncover your right nostril, and exhale through your right nostril for a slow count to ten. Then inhale through your right nostril, and hold for a count to ten. Is the movement of air through the right nostril as smooth as it was through the left? Move your thumb back to cover your right nostril and exhale through your left. Repeat for 3 more rounds.

4-7-8 Breathing

The 4 7 8 breathing technique works because when you are stressed out, your breathing becomes very shallow. People who experience long-term, chronic stress are often chronically *under-breathing* and are in a constant state of *mild hypoxia*, or oxygen deprivation. Additionally, under-breathing can lead to a build-up of excess carbon dioxide in your tissues, which contributes to oxidative stress, inflammation and acidification in your body—the foundations for disease.

Exhale completely through your mouth, making a whoosh sound. Close your mouth and inhale quietly through your nose to a mental count of *four*. Hold your breath for a count of *seven*. Exhale completely through your mouth, making a whoosh sound to a count of *eight*.

Yoga

Data suggests that the benefit of yoga arises from not just the physical poses but also from yoga as an integrated philosophical package. Studies have shown that yoga lowers cortisol and blood sugar as well as hypertension.

Soft Belly Breathing

Conscious use of deep breathing overrides the pattern of fast, shallow breathing that characterizes the fight-or-flight stress responses, and it provides more oxygen to support relaxed mental function. Slow, deep breathing also decreases blood pressure and heart rate, improves intestinal function, and lowers the stress hormone cortisol.

Here's how to do it:

1. Sit in a quiet place and close your eyes. Breathe slowly and deeply, in through your nose and out through your mouth. Allow your midsection to be soft as you breathe.
2. As you breathe in, say to yourself “soft”. As you breathe out, say “belly”. This will focus your mind and remind you that you want your belly to be soft and relaxed.
3. When thoughts come, let them come, and then let them go. Gently bring your mind back to the phrase “soft belly.”
4. When you're ready, or when your timer rings, bring your attention back to the room.

Begin by doing this practice for 5 minutes or so, maybe twice a day. If you're too agitated to sit, get up and do some chores or take a walk. Then try it again. You can sit on a park bench, in a library or at church, or at home! Sitting this way will not make the thoughts go away – and trying to force them away will only reinforce their importance – but it will give you some peace and quiet amidst your thoughts, and allow you to get some distance from.