

MINDFUL STRESS MASTERY

Mindfulness is the simple practice of bringing awareness and acceptance to our moment-to-moment experience.

When our awareness is not in the moment, we may be worrying about the future, dwelling on the past, or thinking about the moment in an abstract way. In each of these cases, the mind is not in the same moment, the same "place," as the body. With intention, we can train ourselves to be more fully engaged in the now. In this simple way, we strengthen the body, mind, spirit connection and increase our ability both to enjoy the moment and respond to challenges that may arise.

When we are not accepting the present-moment experience, we are often thinking the moment should be different—either the external circumstances or our internal response, or both. This subtle resistance to the moment is the root of a lot of avoidable stress and strain. Learning to accept the moment as it is, rather than needing it to be different, allows us a wider range of comfort and more perspective for how to affect change when necessary.

THE STRESS PHENOMENON

The term stress has several meanings that overlap and enmesh. By breaking apart the term "stress" we can explore various strategies that help us work with and grow from the stress phenomena.

1. The first definition of stress is "an external force placed upon an object that produces strain or deformation." This is the mechanical or engineering use of the term, but it has relevance for us personally as well. External forces and factors have the potential to change us for better or for worse. Knowing this, we can ask ourselves to look at the external factors in our lives and be both more conscious of their effect upon us and more intentional about how we relate to them.

Identifying Stressors Practice:

- a. List a general external factor that is weighing on you right now: (for example) Work.
- b. Be more specific: The deadline.
- c. Explore a simple strategy that will help you feel less strain: Outline the steps today, 3:00-4:00 p.m.
- d. Go through this process with several stressors until you feel you have some perspective and some doable strategies for relating to them in this moment. You will probably see here that some stressors require action while others benefit from simply being acknowledged and clarified.
- e. Do this regularly to help you focus on which stressors need attention and which simply need recognition.

2. The second definition of stress is an internal physical or feeling state associated with change, challenge, or compromise. When we are having a stress reaction we have immediate, preconscious, physical indications—most noticeably, the heart, pulse, and breath rate increase. The eyes may dilate, the skin may flush or cool, the muscles tense, the senses become more acute, the mouth goes dry. All this happens when, through hormonal signals, the body prepares itself for fight or flight.

This full system reaction can be uncomfortable, yet it is important to understand that it is also a reflection of health and power: The body is displaying its amazing ability to mobilize and stabilize as needed. While we want to be mindful not to over-stimulate the stress response with physical, mental, or emotional demands, we also need to recognize that it is part of our biological and genetic inheritance and cannot be willfully controlled. Our goal in stress management will not be to thwart the stress reaction but to understand it so that we can mindfully respond rather than automatically react. In the words of stress researcher Bruce McEwen, "We have the power to harness the energy stored within us and to channel it in positive ways."

Harnessing the Energy Practice

- a. When you notice you are having a stress reaction, see if you can observe it objectively rather than getting caught up in it or resisting it. Notice your heart, pulse, and breath rate – see if you can ride the fast breath like you would ride a galloping horse. Ground through the feet and allow yourself to be open to the physical changes. Take a literal or metaphoric step back and attempt to refrain from acting out. Once you have your center within what is happening you may be able to calm yourself down and see more clearly what is called for.
- b. Be conscious of five pleasant moments each day. When something feels good or enjoyable allow yourself to experience it fully – breath it in, connect to your body and your senses, allow this pleasant feeling state to sink in. (Think of this as establishing a savings account you can draw from when you are having a stress response in the future.)

3. To look at this aspect of stress more—the internal physical or feeling state associated with change, challenge, or compromise—we also need to speak about various symptoms of chronic stress like tight shoulders, tight jaw, headaches, stomach aches, fatigue, oversensitivity, anxiety, and insomnia. These symptoms can generally be attributed to the accumulation of stress, and in many cases, they are early warning signals of a growing dis-regulation of the stress response system. The powerful system of checks and balances is not functioning optimally and over time, general health may be diminished. While it often seems necessary to ignore general discomfort, stress resilience and hardiness are likely to decline when such obvious symptoms are not addressed and resolved as completely as possible.

Attending to chronic stress signals is an important part of knowing how to regulate and rebalance our own system. Yet we may not know how to do this: We react to our bodies' unpleasant sensations in the same way we react to the external stressors that may have caused them. As soon as we are aware of discomfort we worry about its meaning and duration and look for immediate relief. In the unraveling of the stress phenomena and the development of mindfulness, it is important to attend to the experience of discomfort with objectivity and with the larger intention of seeing what will be truly necessary for release, healing, and rejuvenation to occur.

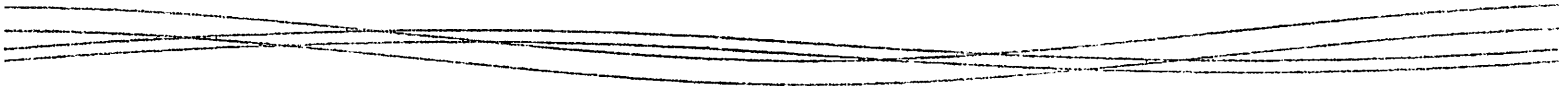
Being with Discomfort Practice

- a. When you are experiencing pain, difficulty, or discomfort physically for some reason, intentionally shift your awareness from the mind to the body. For example, if you are having trouble sleeping see if you can become more aware of your senses: Feel your body in bed, notice what you see in the dark room, notice what you hear around you, notice what you smell, notice the taste in your mouth. See if you can stay with this for several moments. If it helps, follow your breathing as you do this, focusing on the exhale.
- b. Slowing down and breathing consciously often has a profound effect upon pain and discomfort. For example, if you notice a mild headache see if you can use this awareness as a signal to be more in your body: Change your posture, or pull away from your computer, or simply begin to follow and guide your breath. If you can take a formal pause or break for a few moments do that. Whether you take a short walk, or get a drink, or stretch, do it intentionally and with awareness in order to maximize the break's effect on your body.

The strategies offered thus far—identifying stressors, harnessing the energy of the stress reaction, and working with stress symptoms—are stepping stones for regular stress management. We are subtly changing our relationship to stress through mindful awareness. Yet, the patterns that over activate the stress system still operate and can make us feel that we are only holding our ground. In the following section we will explore the next steps for changing our patterns and thus our longer term relationship to stress.

THE POWER OF RELAXATION

As bitterly as we may complain about stress in our lives, many of us unwittingly equate it with productivity, achievement, and success. We get used to the stress state, even addicted to it, and may actually resist letting it go. If we want real, long term, systemic relief from stress it is imperative that we cultivate its opposite, relaxation. Mind/Body research over the last 50 years has conclusively shown us that there are ways to consciously activate the relaxation responses in the body and that this has a positive effect on health. In the words of mind/body medicine pioneer, Herbert Benson, MD, "Repeated activation of the relaxation response can reverse sustained problems in the body and mend the internal wear and tear brought on by stress."



THE STRESS CONTINUUM

Deep Relaxation

- Lower heart rate and lower breath
- Lower blood sugar levels
- Better digestion and assimilation
- Less muscle tension
- More body awareness
- Sense of safety and space
- Creativity/Intuition heightened
- Connection

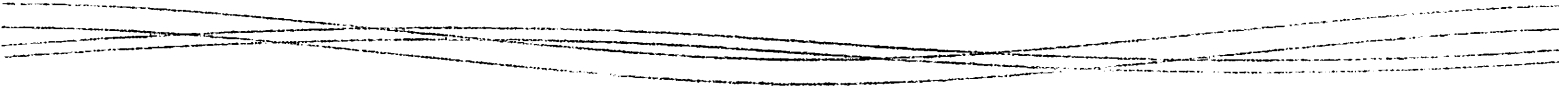
Stress Reaction

- Higher heart rate and faster breath
- Higher blood sugar and faster metabolism
- Digestion and impaired assimilation
- Increased muscle tension numbed senses
- Increased pain tolerance
- Vigilance and sense of danger
- Instinct/compulsivity heightened
- Alienation

Mindfulness training is an especially powerful means to becoming more comfortable with the process of relaxation and more interested in the potential of relaxed states. With intentional practice, we learn about this unfamiliar region of the continuum. We learn to use relaxation to connect us to our innate sources of healing and how to apply our learning to daily life. In essence, we learn how to be present, collected, open, and receptive. We gradually understand and are freed from reactive patterns and begin a conscious journey of empowerment and freedom.

MINDFULNESS MEDITATION PRACTICES & BENEFITS

There are many styles of meditation and various techniques. All are valuable. We will focus primarily on the mindfulness method sometimes referred to as insight or vipassana meditation. The health benefits of this method are well-documented, and it translates easily into practical everyday application. While mindfulness meditation was developed in the Asian tradition of Buddhism, its principles are basic and can easily be understood in the context of mental training and health enhancement. The practice of mindfulness meditation can complement any faith practice.



Mindfulness meditation includes formal techniques practiced in a comfortable sitting or reclining position that help develop awareness, understanding, and acceptance. (Walking meditation and slow movement practices can also be used as formal means to develop mindfulness.) It brings together body and mind in the moment without trying to push away thoughts. There is no attempt to stop the mind from thinking or to empty the mind. Whatever you are experiencing—sensations, thoughts, or feelings—are part of the field of awareness.

Concentration is developed by choosing an immediately present focal point, such as the breath, body sensations, thoughts, or ambient sounds. Whenever you notice that your attention has wandered, gently and without judgment bring it back to the focal point. It's that simple—and that challenging. When attention is stabilized, it is possible to simply let the awareness float freely with no defined focal point.

The benefits of meditation are becoming well documented as mind/body research continues to explore new frontiers in health care. Research shows that continued meditation has direct physical, psychological and lifestyle benefits including but not limited to:

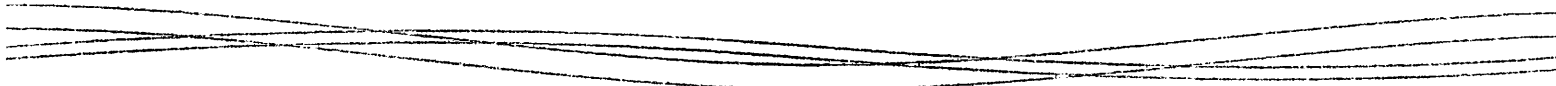
- Lower blood pressure
- Reduction in muscular tension
- Reduced anxiety
- Better self-acceptance
- Greater focus and concentration
- Enhanced creativity and intuition
- Faster recovery from stress events
- Increased awareness of environment and self
- Healthy, natural breathing
- Contribution to reversing heart disease
- Improved sleep and mood
- Reduced physical pain
- Better ability to deal with emotions
- Relief from cravings
- Increased sense of well-being

**Research includes various forms of meditation.*

PRACTICE 1: MINDFUL BREATHING

The intention of mindful breathing is to bring awareness and acceptance to the experience of breathing. This is a fundamental method of bringing our focus to the moment and linking body and mind. Uniting body and mind also helps us gradually affect the nervous system and align our physical reality with the needs of the moment.

Use this practice daily: 5-20 minutes.

- Assume a comfortable posture sitting upright or lying on your back. (You need not sit on the floor: a chair is fine.) Scan your body and adjust your posture until you are aligned
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and as relaxed as possible.

- Close your eyes if it feels comfortable. This allows your nervous system to relax and awareness to be directed inward.
- Begin to feel the basic movement of the breath, the inhalation and the exhalation. It doesn't matter how you are breathing: You are simply becoming more aware of the breath as you find it.
- If the nose is open, breathe through the nose. If it is blocked, breathe however you need to.
- When you notice your mind wandering off, recognize that and wander back to the basic awareness of the breath. This may happen again and again. Simply wander back to the breath each time. Breathe in this moment as it is.
- Feel the expansion as you inhale and the basic feeling of release as you exhale. Focusing on the exhale can help you relax and let go.
- Imagine you are riding the breath as it comes and goes. Feel the movement of the breath in the body. Practice letting go of any effort to breathe a certain way and any thoughts about how to breathe correctly.
- Each breath may be different. Some inhales feel fuller, some exhales more complete. Just notice the breath-by-breath process.
- As you become more comfortable observing your breath, you may notice it changing. You can then begin to guide the breath deeper, feeling the belly expand on the inhale and recede on the exhale. This intentional deep breathing helps continue to stimulate the relaxation responses that you have initiated through your mindful breathing.

PRACTICE 2: MINDFUL RELAXATION

In this practice you lie on your back. Lying down has a positive affect on the posture and blood pressure, which in turn help induce relaxation and calmness of body and mind. While the intention is to cultivate relaxation, sometimes it is hard to stay awake. Please know that this is part of the process and that with practice, you will learn how to be both relaxed and alert. It may be helpful to use a timer so you don't have to worry about time.

Use this practice 3-5 times per week or when needed to prepare for or recover from a stressful situation : 15-30 minutes.

- Lie with the head fairly flat, but comfortable. Legs are bent with feet flush to floor or legs supported under the knee by pillows or a bolster—whatever is comfortable. Adjust and then allow the body to relax into the floor, take several deep breaths, and sigh the breath out

with sound if it feels natural.

- Relax into the breath. Let it flow freely. Observe it flow in and out without effort or strain. Feel the general expansion of the chest on the inhale and the general retraction on the exhale. Receive as you inhale and release as you exhale. At this point allow the breath to flow in and out of the nose. If the nasal passages are blocked, breathe however you need to.
- After a few moments of basic breath awareness begin to focus on the deeper abdominal breath. Guide the breath downward so the abdomen rises on the inhale and falls on the exhale. Relax the abdomen as much as possible and allow the breath to create the movement. It is important not to force or strain, but to simply guide the breath downward.
- As you settle into the relaxation meditation it is not important that you continually breathe deeply. The basic awareness of breath is the key. You will also have an opportunity to notice the body in new ways. Relax the body into the support of the floor as much as possible. Notice that some tensions melt away, some come and go, some persist. Whatever sensations you experience are part of the mindfulness process. You are tuning into to your physical self rather than trying to relax.
- You can continue to let your awareness float freely throughout the body or you can systematically direct the awareness through the body region by region: feet, lower legs, upper legs, pelvis, abdomen/low back, rib cage area, hands/arms/shoulders, neck, head, face.
Let your awareness rest or dwell on each individual area for several breaths. You can either feel the area in general or focus on specific detail—one finger and then the next, for example. Imagine that you breathe into and out of the area or that you are massaging the area with your awareness. Again, the idea is not to try and relax but to simply notice the sensations, thoughts, and feelings that rise and fall.
- You may wander or drift mentally throughout the relaxation practice; simply come back each time to the awareness of your breath and body. Anything you notice about your breath, body, thoughts, or feelings is part of the process. Even anxiousness or frustration about the process is part of the process! Allow yourself to simply be in the moment without expectation: nothing needs to change or be different. Even a small glimpse of this feeling has great benefits for the body and mind.
- The most likely “hazard” with lying down practice is falling asleep. If you go to sleep, it probably means that you are tired and need the rest. When time is up, make the transition gradually by stretching and moving while maintaining awareness of the breath and the sensations you feel as you move.

Gradually make your way up to a sitting position.



Give yourself a moment to adjust to being upright again. Bring consciousness to the way you currently feel.

- As you return to regular activities you may be in a lower gear. This is a productive state. As you find yourself speeding up, use your breath to help you slow back down and reconnect with your inner awareness. This is the best way to monitor and minimize the effects of stress throughout the day.

INTEGRATING MINDFULNESS INTO EVERYDAY LIFE

Formal practices of breathing, relaxing, stretching, and walking are ways to strengthen mindfulness skills behind the scenes. They teach us how to increase the awareness of our inner workings and decrease our reactivity. We then have the possibility of bringing new perspective to whatever we are doing and to the inevitable stressors that come along. With ongoing meditation practice, our ability to respond effectively and creatively to the needs of the moment grows. Like physical fitness and good nutrition, formal mindfulness practice becomes a natural component of wellness and life in balance.

HERE ARE SOME MORE IDEAS TO HELP YOU STAY CENTERED IN THE MIDST OF EVERYDAY LIFE:

1. Pause and tune into your breath at different times during the day. Notice how it is flowing in and out and how your body is feeling. See if you can relax any unnecessary tension and be conscious of the breath for several rounds. Focus on the exhale to help you let go and to help you deepen inhalation. Smile as you breathe in. Release as you breathe out.
2. Practice mono-tasking: Doing just one thing at a time while keeping your mind focused on the moment. Do whatever you're doing—walking, driving, making coffee—more slowly, more intentionally, and with more focused attention. Turn off the radio, hang up the phone, switch off the TV, and see how it feels to be without distraction.
3. Ease your mind by setting priorities and getting simple tasks completed. Procrastination usually consumes more mental and emotional energy than the actual tasks we put off.
4. Organize your life to create time for spontaneity, reflection, and integration. Eliminate unnecessary commitments. Say "no," or if you don't know how, read a book on assertiveness. Allow some transition time between activities so that you have time—if only a moment or two—to consciously "turn" from one to the next.
5. Look for the in-between moments. When you have to wait, try perceiving the time as a break, not a waste. Use stray bits of time to attend to your breathing and physical sensations. Cultivate the ability to drop quickly into a place of awareness and relative ease.

6. Regularly take time to be alone. Close the door. Consciously relax and listen to your heart. Can you feel it beating?

7. When something troubles you, talk it over with someone you trust, or write about it in a journal. Getting concerns out of your head and into the light of day helps put them in perspective.

8. Be in nature whenever possible. Even in the city, awareness of the sky and seasons opens mind and heart. Even limited contact with the natural world lifts the spirit, refreshes, and heals.

9. Find intentional ways to remind yourself and to apply healthful, rather than harmful, qualities to any aspect of your daily life: non-judgment, patience, beginner's mind, trust, non-striving, acceptance, letting go, courage, heart, gentleness, loving-kindness. These are literal antidotes to the critical and closed state that stress generates.

10. Practice smiling and connecting with what brings you joy every day.

RESOURCES

Books

Herbert Benson, MD (2003). *The Breakout Principle*.

— (1996). *Timeless Healing*.

Sylvia Boorstein (1995). *It's Easier Than You Think: The Buddhist Way to Happiness*.

Joseph Goldstein (1993). *Insight Meditation: The Practice of Freedom*.

Bhante H. Gunaratana (1991). *Mindfulness in Plain English*.

Rick Hanson (2009). *The Buddha's Brain*.

Jon Kabat-Zinn (1990). *Full Catastrophe Living: Using the Wisdom of your Body and Mind to Face Stress, Pain, and Illness*.

— (1994). *Wherever You Go There You Are: Mindfulness Meditation in Everyday Life*.

Jack Kornfield (1983). *A Path With Heart: A Guide Through the Perils and Promises of Spiritual Life*.

Thich Nhat Hanh (1991). *Peace is Every Step: The Path of Mindfulness in Everyday Life*.

— (1975). *The Miracle of Mindfulness: A Manual on Meditation*.

Sally Kempton (2011). *Meditation for the Love of It*.

Lawrence LeShan (1974). *How to Meditate: A Guide to Self-Discovery*.



Santorelli Saki (2001). *Heal Thy Self: Meditations on Mindfulness in Medicine*.

Gary Schwartz (2002). *The Power of Full Engagement*.

CDs

Pema Chodron. *Awakening Compassion: Meditation Practice for Difficult Times*.

Thich Nhat Hahn. *The Present Moment*.

Jon Kabat-Zinn. *Full Catastrophe Living*. variety of CD's

Jack Kornfield. *The Inner Art of Meditation*.

MaryGrace Naughton. *Meditations*. (sold in Raindance Pass)

iPhone Apps

Mindfulness Meditation - Guided Vipassana Meditation

Lotus Bud – Mindfulness Bell

Yoga Timer

Other Resources

Sounds True Catalogue. Over 300 Audios and Videos for the Inner life.
800-333-9185 or www.soundstrue.com

DharmaCrafts, The Catalog of Meditation Supplies. 800-794-9862 or
www.dharmacrafts.com

Shambhala Sun: Buddhism, Culture, Meditation, Life. Bi-monthly magazine with information about national meditation events and offerings. 877-786-1950 or www.shambhalasun.com

In-depth Training and Continuing Study

Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction Clinic
(Founded by Jon Kabat-Zinn)
University of Massachusetts Medical School
508-856-2656
www.umassmed.edu/cfm
(Website lists affiliated teachers in the U.S. and abroad.)

Spirit Rock Meditation Center
(Founded by Jack Kornfield)
Woodacre, CA
415-488-0164
www.spiritrock.org

Community of Mindful Living
(Thich Nhat Hanh)
PO Box 7355
Berkeley, CA 94707
801-301-3158
www.iamhome.org

Insight Meditation Society
(Joseph Goldstein/Sharon Salzberg)
Barre, MA
508-355-4378
www.dharma.org

Mind/Body Medical Institute
(President Herbert Benson, MD)
Chestnut Hill, Massachusetts
866-509-0732
www.mbmi.org

Vipassana Support Institute
(Shinzen Young)
866-666-0874
www.shinzen.org

Omega Institute
Rhinebeck, New York
800-944-1001
www.eomega.org

