



Start a New Mindful Meditation Practice in Under a Month

If you're working to improve your health, better manage stress, or be more positive, adding a mindful meditation practice to your daily routine is a great way to accomplish those goals.

"There are so many benefits to meditation. Things like better cognitive function, lower heart and respiratory rate, lower blood pressure, less response to stress, less reactivity to negative situations, better sleep, enhanced sports and work performance and general overall well-being," says Dr. Kathy Gruver, PhD, LMT, natural health practitioner and author of *Conquer your Stress*. "Though everyone can benefit in some way, it's definitely helpful for people who are experiencing high stress (which can affect our immune system), who are Type A or overworked. Meditation is also great at lowering the perception of pain so people who are dealing with chronic illness or things like cancer treatment can benefit."

A 2015 study published in the *Journal of Neuroscience* also supports the claim that mindfulness meditation was more successful in reducing pain than morphine.

(Those led through a guided meditation experienced a 27 percent reduction in pain intensity, and had emotional pain reduced by 44 percent.)

Even those who aren't experiencing physical pain or mental health issues like stress can gain psychological benefits from incorporating the practice into their routine. "Meditation can help to align our perspective with the reality in front of us," says Alanna Zabel, registered yoga instructor specializing in mind/body patterning. "The mind is very complex, and when we are overloaded with work or in a depressing slump, we sometimes project situations that are not realistic. Regular practice of meditation helps to keep us in better balance of each moment of our lives. Typically, one should feel less reactive, calmer, have greater focus, increased efficiency in work and [are] more accepting in their relationships."

Not sure where to start? Incorporating meditation into your life can feel overwhelming if you're new to the practice. Follow these expert tips to help make meditation a seamless part of your daily routine.

1. Start with mindfulness

“Mindfulness is simply going about an activity with curiosity and focus, using all of your senses and remaining in the present moment,” says Dr. Gruver. You can apply mindfulness to any activity, even something as simple as folding laundry. Really feel the warmth coming off of the clothing fresh out of the dryer. Smell the fabric softener. Feel the different textures of each shirt, sock and pair of pants. Observe your hands, the clothes and the neatly folded stack growing higher.

“Observing all of these things, using all of your senses, brings you into the present moment and is a meditative practice. If you find yourself wandering from your task or letting other thoughts intrude, just acknowledge that you were thinking and return to your activity. This [type of thought] helps train us to respond rather than react,” says Dr. Gruver.

2. Then move on to mini meditation

Think of it as a gateway to full-blown meditative practice. “The mini meditation is so simple to learn and you can do it anytime, anywhere. Even myself, a very Type-A, physically active person can do it,” says Dr. Gruver. She instructs people to concentrate on their breath, and the rise and fall of their chest. On the inhale think, “I am.” And on your exhale think, “at peace.” Repeat with every inhale and exhale. If you get distracted by other thoughts, simply dismiss them and return to your breath.

“I started out doing this just a few minutes, a few times a day and it has served as my gateway to doing formal seated meditation,” says Dr. Gruver.

3. Enlist a coach

With any goal — adopting a healthy diet, starting a fitness routine or learning a new language — utilizing an expert to help “train” you is often the most effective way to master it. If you’re new to meditating, diving right into formal seated meditation can be overwhelming, and may end up discouraging you if it’s too challenging right off the bat.

Using guided meditation is a great way to start a practice. A soothing voice leads you through a meditation with simple instructions to help keep you focused.

You should also find a guide that feels right: “Maybe you like a man’s voice over a woman’s, or the one you chose talks too slow. Maybe you hate the music. Keep trying — you’ll find one that works for you,” says Dr. Gruver.

4. Use technology for guidance

A coach doesn’t have to mean in-person training — there are a wealth of resources available, including online recorded meditations, apps and DVD’s.

“I use Insight Timer — a free app with paid upgrades available that allows you to use timers and chimes to keep you on track,” says Dr. Gruver.

Zabel also encourages the use of frequency sounds during meditation. “The tones are scientifically proven to enhance a state of deep relaxation, helping the meditation process.”

5. Commit to five minutes, once a day

You can do anything for five minutes, right? Start meditating once a day for as much time as you have to spare in your schedule. “Even if you start with five minutes and increase it as you get the hang of it, you will see the benefits,” says Dr. Gruver.

Zabel recommends working up to an hour a day. Starting slowly — so that the practice doesn’t feel like a burden — and following a routine will allow you to see the benefits sooner.

6. Choose a time of day that works for you

Whether you squeeze in your meditation after your morning coffee or set aside time before bed is up to you.

“Both have differing benefits,” says Zabel. “The morning is great for setting intentions and incorporating attributes that we’re looking to set into our lives, while the night is great for relaxation and unwinding from stress.”

If you often find yourself nodding off during your favorite prime time show, the morning may be your best bet. Others may barely get through a morning cup of coffee with their eyes open. Choose whichever time fits into your schedule that you’ll be able to stay awake for. It can be first thing, last thing, or whenever you have a few spare moments during the day.

7. Stick with it

Your practice won’t always come easily, and even long-time meditation experts have days when their minds wander. Meditation can be especially challenging for people with certain personalities, like those who tend to be high strung, so be patient.

“You wouldn’t stand up a newborn baby and then [scold him or her] because [they] can’t walk yet. You have to be as loving to yourself as you would be to a child or an animal who is trying to learn something new,” says Dr. Gruver. Patience is key, and so is embracing the process.

8. Notice improvements

As you commit to a daily practice, remember to also observe the effect it has on your daily life. Even the smallest improvements can encourage you to stay committed. You should start to find that you’re better able to handle the stress of daily life as you develop the ability to pause and respond, rather than react.

“Anger typically decreases, you will probably see a drop in blood pressure and respiratory rate, you’ll strengthen your immune system, find yourself more clearheaded, and long-term pain may start to fade away,” says Dr. Gruver. “Meditation really brings us into the present moment and slows everything down so that we have the ability to respond in the healthiest, most well-adjusted way possible.”

The most important thing is to figure out what feels right for you and when it feels right. If finding a quiet spot in the office mid-afternoon to take a five minute break and refocus feels right, go for it. Or if you need to decompress when you arrive home from work, take a few moments for yourself. Notice how you feel after each meditation and make small adjustments so you can sustain a personal and life-changing practice.