



MINDFULNESS & MEDITATION



What is Mindfulness and Meditation?

These days Mindfulness and Meditation seem to have become synonymous with each other. We can use either to relax or re-centre ourselves. There are many similarities between the two techniques, but they are also distinct practices.

Mindfulness can be practised anywhere, at any time, with anyone you are with.

Meditation is often performed alone in a quiet space where there are limited or no distractions.

Both Mindfulness and Meditation have been proven to relieve stress and anxiety, and even improve our concentration and physical wellbeing.

Mindfulness

Mindfulness is about becoming aware of the here and now. It's about focusing on what is going on for you in the moment and exploring your thoughts and feelings around your present situation. When practising mindfulness, you may find your mind wanders or you start having intrusive thoughts – but the goal isn't to block these thoughts out, but rather to be aware of them and how they might be making you feel.

How can I practise Mindfulness?

For this example, we're going to pretend that we're in a stressful situation which is making us anxious – such as during an exam or an interview, and we're going to explore some of the questions you might start asking yourself in that situation.

Try to relax as much as you can and try to breathe in and out gently. Now contemplate what is happening for you:

1. Where are you and why are you there?
2. Who are you with?
3. How is this situation making you feel? Do you feel anxious or angry or sad? Why do you feel that way?

Meditation

Most of us associate meditation with spiritual beliefs such as Buddhism, however, meditation can be performed by anyone – and does not have to form part of a spiritual practice. Asking what meditation is can be a tricky question as it's a bit like asking 'How long is a piece of string?' There are many different meditation techniques and many different styles. The goal of meditation is to relax, de-stress, reduce anxiety, and to clear and calm the mind.

As previously stated, there are many different forms of meditation, but the two we're going to look at in this guide are Concentration (or Focusing) and Loving (or Kindness or even Loving-kindness). When starting meditation, people often find it useful to start off with short sessions of 5 – 10 minutes, and then work up to something longer, like a 30 minute session.

Focusing Meditation

Focusing meditation is used when a person wants to shut the rest of the world out. They concentrate on one particular thing: an object, a mantra, a sound, a smell, or even their own breathing.

1. Choose the object of your focus. This can be anything you want. If there's a scent you like, light some incense; if there's a sound you like, put on some music; if you want to focus on an object like a crystal or ornament – get it out and set it down in front of you.
2. Get comfortable. Meditation is usually performed while sat cross legged on a mat or pillow – but sit however you feel comfortable and let your whole body go loose. Relax. Slow your breathing and just be.
3. Turn your attention to your chosen object. Focus on it. What is it that makes that object it? Try not to think about the object per se, just experience it.
4. Calm your inner monologue. If the little voice in your head starts asking questions, or analysing things, or you begin to worry about something: stop. None of that matters, focus on the object and let everything else fall away.
5. There is no right or wrong. You can't fail at this task. It is what it is. If your mind wanders, it wanders. Don't beat yourself up about anything else that is happening for you. Be grateful that you're self-aware and that you've noticed it, and then let it go.
6. All done. There's nothing else to this task. You're done. Do this whenever you need to and let your mind go completely blank (or as blank as you can make it)

Loving Meditation

The goal of Loving meditation is to cultivate an attitude of self-love and love towards others by increasing our 'positive' emotions. This type of meditation works well with those affected by anger, frustration, resentment, and personal conflict. This has also been linked to reduced depression, anxiety and stress, and even lessening the symptoms of PTSD.

- **Take some quiet 'me' time.** Find some time for yourself to practise this in a situation where you can be calm and relaxed. Take some deep breaths, close your eyes, and allow yourself to be comfortable.
- **Feel the love.** Imagine experiencing completely unconditional physical and emotional wellbeing for yourself. Feel the love for yourself and others. Know that you are brilliant just as you are. Thank yourself for everything you are and everything you have, and concentrate on that feeling of complete inner-peace.
- **Repeat your mantras.** Three or four times in a row, state aloud your own personal mantras. These can be anything, but they should mean something to you and they should be about showing yourself kindness and love. "I am happy. I am safe. I'm happy, healthy, peaceful, and I'm strong. I'm thanking myself for all the things I am and I'm not. Today I am giving and receiving thanks, kindness, love, and joy." (Or something like this...)
- **Bathe in the love.** Let all that positive, gooey, warming goodness surround you. If your focus shifts, bring it back to the love!

- **Shift your focus. Or don't.** You might want to repeat steps 2 – 4 over and over until you're really feeling the love, and you're ready to carry on with your day. Or you might shift the focus onto other people or things in your life: "I wish you happiness. I wish you kindness and love. I wish for you to be safe, healthy, peaceful, and strong. I hope you give and receive appreciation today." You can do this person-by-person, or focus on one person. Extend those feelings outwards as far as you want. While you don't have to, you can even extend these feelings to someone with whom you are in conflict with so that you can try to feel a sense of greater peace with them – or even forgiveness. Some people find this very healing, but this isn't mandatory. This is about you feeling good about who you are, and giving thanks to those you want to 'reward' (if anyone)
- **Hold on to it.** When you're done, you can open your eyes and carry on with your day – but hold on to those feelings of love. If you feel down, remember how good being surrounded in all that love and warmth felt.

Tools for Meditation and Mindfulness

If you're finding it difficult to practise mindfulness or meditation on your own, there are numerous videos online, which you can watch for free, which will guide you through your meditation.

If you have a smart phone (such as an iPhone or Android etc.) then you can also download apps that you can then listen to whenever you need to and wherever you are. Some of these apps are free and others are paid for as a one-off, or by subscription. Two of the best known are Calm and Headspace. Don't forget to check the costs and features before you make any purchases!

Further Reading

If you're suffering with anxiety, you might also want to read our guides on anxiety, panic attacks, and distraction and grounding techniques.