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How to Create a Meditation Practice and Experience More Peace

By Jan Mundo, CMSC, CMT

Have you ever noticed that you can relax in front of the TV and rest your bones, but not necessarily feel refreshed? Who knew that relaxation was a skill? Meditation is both the same as and different than simply doing nothing.

Meditation is a skill you master with practice, and although physically you are “just sitting,” it is very different from doing nothing. The difference lies in where you place your attention and how you use your attention.

Meditation can seem hard, and many people say they are not good at it—but that’s because while we’re doing it, life comes up. We think about and remember people, places and things, and we plan. Emotions and memories bubble up.

And then we return to the breath. *Again and again.*

As you practice over time, you will get better at noticing what

comes up and letting your mind settle into a peaceful state. It’s not that your troubles disappear but that your relationship to them and the pull they exert can lift and soften into “being with what is.”

As with almost everything, practice makes it easier.

Notice I didn’t say, “Practice makes perfect.” Perfection implies that you are striving to achieve something. In meditation, striving for perfection takes you away from simply being in the moment. Rather than attaining enlightenment or entering into some other state of being somewhere else, mindfulness is about paying attention in the here and now.

The Best Reason to Keep Going

Because thoughts naturally keep arising, sometimes people get discouraged about their inability to meditate, as if it’s a talent only some people are born with. They abandon their practice, reporting that they “can’t do it very well” and feeling as if they’ve failed.

I often hear this from clients when I begin working with them. This frustrating predicament is actually the best reason to keep going.

The instructions for mindfulness meditation are simple: Pay attention to your body and your breath as you breathe in and as you breathe out—and return your attention to your breath if your mind wanders.

And yet mindfulness is more than sitting on a cushion and following the breath. It is a practice of being awake to life in each moment.

Mindfulness Meditation Setup

This section will help you prepare a place to sit that supports your posture in keeping a straight back and staying alert. Read through the entire section before you begin.

Seating

- You can sit on a meditation cushion or in a chair, whichever you find most comfortable. This might vary, depending on whether you are at home, in an office, riding on a train, traveling or in other settings.
- With knee, or other issues, sitting on a cushion or the floor can be difficult. It’s fine to use a chair if you prefer.
- If you cannot sit, you can lie on your back, arms by your sides, palms facing up
- In a chair: Have your feet flat on the floor, hip-distance apart, toes facing forward. Scoot forward in the chair, with your thighs parallel and your legs perpendicular to the floor, so your feet make solid contact with it.
- On a cushion: Sit with your legs crossed or in half-lotus or full-lotus position. In half-lotus, one foot is placed on the opposite thigh; in full-lotus, both feet are placed on opposite thighs.
- A zafu, or firm, kapok-filled meditation cushion, provides a supportive way to sit on the floor because it raises your seat and hips higher than your legs and keeps your back straight, posture aligned and mind alert. (Some people do cross-legged postures in a chair or on a firm couch. Here, too, use a cushion to raise your hips.)

- To cushion your knees and feet, you can place the zafu on a zabuton, a flat, rectangular pad, or just use a folded-up blanket.
- Align your ears, shoulders and hips vertically. Proper alignment helps you settle into gravity, reduces upper-body tension and promotes breathing and alertness.
- Feel your seat on the chair or cushion, settle in and let gravity hold your weight, rather than pulling up and away from it.

Hand Positioning

Position your hands in one of two ways:

- Fold your hands together in your lap by placing one over the other and interlacing your thumbs, but don’t interlace your fingers. It doesn’t matter which hand is on top; whatever feels best.
- Or, place your hands palms up on your thighs. (I advise against a palms-down position, because people tend to grip.)

You Can Use Props

“You can use props, you know,” my meditation teacher assured me. What a relief. There is no reason to be uncomfortable or suffer pain during meditation.

For instance, if your knee sticks up and your thigh and hip joint need support when you’re sitting cross-legged on a cushion, wedge a small pillow underneath your knee or thigh, so they can rest comfortably.

If your arms feel too short, place a pillow in your lap, whether you’re using a chair or a cushion, to support your hands and arms and reduce shoulder strain.

When seated in a chair, you can place a small pillow or rolled-up blanket below your waist to support your back if needed. Sitting under your own power instead of leaning against the chair will strengthen your back and core muscles over time.

Every body is different. What is comfortable for you might not be comfortable for someone else, and even what’s comfortable for you can vary over time, especially if you have a physical challenge or an injury, or are recovering from an injury. Make modifications as necessary whenever your body needs support.

Mindfulness Meditation Instructions

Now that your body is in position, you’re ready to begin. Read through these instructions first, and set a timer for 20 minutes

before you begin meditating so you don't have to keep checking the clock.

- First, take three full, relaxing breaths and release each with an "ah" sound. Notice where and how you breathe—chest, stomach or both? shallow or deep?—and pay attention to the quality and mood of your "ah"—loud or soft? relieved or tired?
- Next, rest your tongue on the roof of your mouth and let your teeth slightly part to soften your jaw.
- Close your eyes and focus your attention on your breath as you inhale and exhale naturally.
- Breathe through your nose, if possible, to warm and filter the air and not parse the breath.
- Focus your attention on the filling and emptying of your lower abdomen, below your belly button. Breathe as if a balloon is gently inflating and deflating with each breath.
- Let your breathing be easy and circular, without any holding between the inhale or exhale.
- When your mind wanders, bring it back to your breath. (It may have been drawn away by a thought, a pain, a noise or something else.)
- You might notice your attention wandering within the first seconds of practice, or just a minute before it ends.
- Whenever you notice your mind wandering, no matter when or how many times during your

practice, return your focus to your breathing.

- To complete your practice after the timer goes off, let your eyes come open slowly and let the world come to you.
- Check in with yourself to see what is different. How do you feel, compared with when you started? What do you notice? If you feel calmer and less tense in body and mind, note your feelings and sensations. If you were in pain when you began, has the pain shifted?
- Meditate for 20 minutes each day, five days per week if possible.

Calm in the Midst of Chaos

You now know how to meditate, a practice that can set the tone for your day and help you find calm in the midst of chaos and decompress when it is over. You can practice anytime, anywhere, by simply remembering to stop, breathe and pay attention. **M**

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Excerpted from the book *The Headache Healer's Handbook: A Holistic, Hands-On Somatic Self-Care Program for Headache and Migraine Relief and Prevention*. Copyright © 2018 by Jan Mundo. Printed with permission from New World Library (newworldlibrary.com).

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