

The Basics of Mindfulness Meditation

Adapted from Dr. Ronald Alexander's new book, *Wise Mind, Open Mind: Finding Purpose and Meaning in Times of Crisis, Loss, and Change* (New Harbinger Publications, 2009).

(965 Words plus Bio)

Mindfulness meditation practice is a commitment that many resist, but it requires far less time and effort than most people realize. The time of day isn't important; the regular practice is. Ideally, it should be practiced for 20 to 30 minutes twice a day in a quiet room with a closed door with no distractions. But it's better to start doing 10 minutes once a day than aiming for the overall goal and then feeling overwhelmed by it and falling short. Use a timer to ensure that you meditate for as long as you planned. Aim for meditating at the same time in the same quiet and serene place, such as sitting down in your office chair for the first time in the morning, or sitting in your car, getting ready to drive home from the gym after your daily workout. Again, ideally choose a time when distractions will be minimal.

How to Perform Mindfulness Meditation

Here are the six steps of mindfulness meditation:

Step 1. Get into a comfortable posture. Sit crossed legged on a meditation cushion or with your legs extended straight out with your back against a wall for support, or sit in a chair with a firm back, keeping your feet on the floor and your spine straight, and tucking in your chin slightly to keep your vertebrae aligned properly. If you have any back, pelvic, or neck pain, back support is essential. In fact, you may want to lie down, with your head propped up at a 45-degree angle. If you're sitting up, close your eyes, but if you're lying down, keep your eyes half open to prevent yourself from falling asleep.

Step 2: Focus your eyes. With your eyes closed, focus them on one spot, ideally toward the tip of your nose or on your "third eye" (the chakra, or energy point in the middle of the forehead). Alternatively, look straight ahead at the insides of your eyelids or allow your eyeballs to roll upward. Whichever eye position you choose, make certain it feels comfortable and that your eye muscles are relaxed. If you have

heightened anxiety or fears, you may want to open your eyes halfway or even fully, looking straight ahead at a spot on the wall or out the window at a stationary object, in order to ease those feelings. Another idea is to close your eyes and imagine being in a place where you always feel relaxed, safe and secure.

Step 3: Pay attention to your breathing. With your eyes closed or halfway open, fixating them on one spot, breathe in with awareness of your lungs and your diaphragm. As you inhale, say to yourself, "In." Exhale from your lungs and then your abdomen, saying to yourself, "Out." Do this each time you breathe. You can also use the words "rising" and "falling away," or "comfort" and "letting go," or "surrender" and "release."

Step 4: Place your hands in a relaxing and energizing mudra (hand position). In Buddhism, the *mudra*, or position of the hands, in meditation is important, because it affects the flow of energy throughout the body. There are three traditional mudras. Probably the most popular one is to touch the thumb and first finger to each other, and then hold your palms up, with your other fingers relaxed and straight, and rest the backs of your hands on your thighs. I describe two other ones common in Zen Buddhism in my book, **Wise Mind Open Mind**.

Step 5: Be aware. As you breathe in and out, mentally note the thoughts, feelings, sounds, tastes, smells, and physical sensations (such as itching, temperature, pain or discomfort, or feelings of heaviness and lightness) that you experience. Don't try to analyze any of what you're noting. Simply be present, open, alert, and watchful as you allow the witnessing mind to emerge. Observe the quality of the sensation if it has one, and categorize it: "heaviness in shoulders," "bitter taste," "lawn mower outside," "painful thought about son," and so on. Don't explore this thought or feeling unless it occurs more than twice, in which case, ask if you need to deal with it now or after your meditation. If it needs to be addressed right away, allow yourself to be present with that sensation, feeling, or repetitive thought without judgment as it fades away or lessens in intensity. Afterwards write about it in a mindfulness journal (described in Chapter three of **Wise Mind Open Mind**), contemplate it or talk to a friend or counselor about it.

Step 6: Slowly come back into ordinary consciousness. Take three long, slow, deep breaths, breathing in through your nose and out through your mouth. Rub the palms of your hands together to generate heat, and place the palms over your eyes and face. Open your eyes and slowly lift your hands away from your face as you return to awareness. Inhale deeply and stretch your arms up over your head, with your hands interlocked. Bend slowly to the right and then to the left. Do this several times, and then bend forward toward your feet. Reflect on whether anything of importance revealed itself to you that you wish to write about in your mindfulness journal, think about, or attend to.

If you're anticipating a stressful situation in which it will be challenging to remain nonreactive, or you'll need to be able to access your creativity more than usual because you're dealing with a perplexing problem, try to schedule a mindfulness meditation immediately beforehand. I've had clients meditate before attending a late afternoon meeting in order to refresh themselves creatively, and before a phone conversation with their ex-spouse, and they've reported that just five minutes spent in mindfulness practice makes a dramatic difference in their ability to remain calm, focused, and nonreactive.

Ronald Alexander, Ph.D. is the author of the just released book, *Wise Mind, Open Mind: Finding Purpose and Meaning in Times of Crisis, Loss, and Change*. He is the director of the OpenMind Training® Institute, practices mindfulness-based mind-body psychotherapy and leadership coaching in Santa Monica, CA, for individuals and corporate clients. He has taught personal and clinical training groups for professionals in Integral Psychotherapy, Ericksonian mind-body healing therapies, mindfulness meditation, and Buddhist psychology nationally and internationally since 1970. (www.openmindtraining.com)