

Mindfulness: What. How. And The Difference 5 Minutes a Day Will Make

What mindfulness can do is remarkable. Once the domain of Buddhist monks or the ‘alternative’, mindfulness has made its way into modern medicine and modern life, and the world is taking notice.

You don’t need anything special to start and you don’t need a lot of time. Five minutes a day is enough to make a difference. There’s no chanting or knotted poses, unless you want to, then go for it. For those who think it’s all a bit too offbeat, it’s basically sitting, breathing and observing – nothing offbeat about that.

Mindfulness: What Is It?

Mindfulness is the practice of observing thoughts, feelings and sensations with the indifference of an objective bystander.

The need to analyse, change or judge is sidelined which can be easier said than done. The reality is that our attention very easily drawn away from the present. We often worry about what happened yesterday, what’s happening tomorrow, whether the iron has been left on or what’s for dinner. It’s this tendency to be drawn into the past or the future that lies at the core of so many disorders.

What’s All the Fuss About?

The changes that stem from mindfulness are not just because people relax. Mindfulness has been found to cause measurable physical changes in the body and the brain. Wait. What? Yep. By practicing mindfulness – five minutes a day is enough to make a difference – you can actually change your brain.

In the first study of its kind, researchers at [Harvard](#) have established scientific proof that meditation can change the brain’s gray matter.

After 8 weeks of practicing mindfulness exercises for an an average of 27 minutes per day, MRI scans of participants showed that mindfulness:

- stimulated a significant increase in the density of gray matter in the hippocampus, important for learning and memory;
- increased the density of gray matter in other neural structures associated with self-awareness, compassion and introspection;
- decreased the density of gray matter in the amygdala – the part of the brain associated with anxiety and stress.

According to [Harvard](#), mindfulness also:

- relieves stress;
- relieves depression;
- relieves anxiety;
- lowers blood pressure;
- improve chronic pain
- improve sleep;
- improves capacity to deal with stress;
- improves ability to form deeper connections with others.

According to the [University of Massachusetts](#) Medical School Center for Mindfulness, mindfulness can also help to:

- improve the quality of life for patients with cancer;
- improve the experience of various conditions and illnesses such as gastrointestinal disorders, HIV, and fibromyalgia;
- alleviate asthma;
- alleviate hot flashes.

Mindfulness has also been found to boost [immune](#) function.

Sounds Brilliant. I'm In. So How Do I Do It?

Anyone can practice mindfulness but it might take a bit of practice. At first you might find it hard to stop your mind from wandering. That's okay and it's completely normal. It's what minds do and they've been doing it for a while.

When you give your mind the opportunity to unwind – it's going to unwind. There will be thoughts, feelings and things you didn't even know were there. If it gets a bit much, your mind will go for a wander. Just bring it gently back to the moment – observe what you're feeling and thinking – and don't judge. Let it be. It's all part of it and you'll notice that the more you practice, the more you'll be able to stay in the moment.

Now for how. Ready? Here we go:

1. You can practice mindfulness anywhere but if you can, find somewhere quiet and uncluttered.
2. It's helpful to establish the duration at the beginning so you don't get distracted thinking about when you should stop. Use a timer if you can (I use the one on my phone), but set the alarm to be something gentle – nothing too jarring.
3. In the beginning, try for five or ten minutes. Eventually you can extend this to longer – 20 minutes perhaps eventually right up to an hour. If you can, try for once in the morning and once again at night. If you're busy, don't worry, anything you can do will make a difference so don't get too weighed down about how much time you 'should' be taking. It really doesn't matter. What matters is that you do something.
4. How you position yourself is up to you. The main thing is that you are supported, balanced and comfortable – but not too comfortable – you don't want to fall asleep. Try sitting in a chair with your feet on the floor, kneeling, or sitting with loosely crossed your legs – up to you.
5. Close your eyes and pay attention to your breath. Notice the sensation of the air and follow it as it goes in and out of your body. When your mind strays, come back to this point. Observe your thoughts, feelings or sensations. Just notice. You don't have to do anything with it. Undoubtedly your mind will wander to something other than the present moment – what's for dinner, the deadline, or maybe the conversation from yesterday. When that happens, gently come back to your breathing. Don't judge, analyse or try to change anything. Just come back to the moment.

With mindfulness, the more you practice the easier it will get. It's a bit like cleaning out a wardrobe. It might get messier before you get to the calm. There'll be things unwinding that you knew about and bits and pieces you didn't know were there. That's the way it's meant to happen. Just notice them and let them go. Then come back. And enjoy.