How to Meditate

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What are you practicing? Start with breathing

How wide can you open the window of your awareness without getting blown away by the winds of distraction? When your attention wanders, how long does it take for you to realize? Can you refocus your attention easily, like a well-used muscle?

Over the years, meditation practice has carried me through many things: navigating the intensity of raising teenagers in the age of social media, leading editorial teams through a pandemic, caretaking both of my parents through their last days and sitting with the kind of grief that doesn't resolve on a timeline. When I was Editor-in-Chief of *Mindful* magazine, I saw up close how the science of mindfulness matched what my body already knew, that this practice changes you from the inside out. Now, as a mindfulness meditation teacher in training with Tara Brach and Jack Kornfield, I'm learning to share it with others in a deeper way.

I tell you this not to establish credentials, but to be honest: I know what it's like to sit down, close your eyes, and feel like you're doing it wrong. I know what it's like to wonder if it's working. I know what it's like to let the practice slip for weeks and start again. And I can tell you, with confidence earned over years of returning to the cushion, that meditation is the most helpful thing I've ever done.

My meditation teacher **Carla Brennan** says: *We're always practicing something.* And what you practice becomes how you live.

So the question isn't really *how* to meditate. It's: What are you practicing?

What Meditation Actually Is (and Isn't)

Let’s clear something up first: Meditation isn’t about **stopping your thoughts**.

It’s about practicing not getting lost in your thoughts. It’s about noticing that you’re planning, worrying, replaying, and still being present rather than swept away. It’s about practicing presence so you can *be present*, even when the world around you may be chaotic.

I like to think of it this way: when you “clear the table” after dinner, you don’t throw everything away. The dishes get washed and put in the cabinet. The leftovers get put in the fridge. The garbage gets composted. “Clearing your mind” works the same way… Rather than emptiness, it’s about putting thoughts in their place and creating enough space around them that they don’t hijack your entire awareness.

In meditation, we practice **being in a relationship with whatever is arising**, thoughts, sensations, emotions, without becoming overwhelmed by them, overly reactive to them, or overly attached to them. We just notice them. Maybe label them. Lightly touch in and set them down with curiosity and kindness. And when we practice doing that, we open ourselves up to experiencing more of the world as it is.

The Breath as Anchor

When we practice meditation we choose an “anchor” for our attention. Something steady to place our attention on and return it to when the mind wanders. Of all the possible anchors for meditation (a sound, a sensation, a candle flame, a mantra) the breath is the most universal. It’s always with you. It’s always changing but always the same: inbreath, outbreath. Can you feel your breath in this moment? We usually don’t pay attention to it because it happens without us having to do anything. But your breath connects you to your aliveness. To this present moment.

Even when your mind wanders, you can always come back to the next breath. Not with force. With kindness, you can return to the breath. And if you get lost in thought

again, there is always the next breath. As meditation teacher Sharon Salzberg says: “*Beginning again is the most important part of the whole process.*”

Mind wandering is not a failure. It’s part of the practice.

Why Meditation Practice Matters: What the Research Shows

If you’re the kind of person who wants to know *why* something works before you commit to it, the science of meditation has never been stronger. Here’s what decades of research tell us.

1. **It Protects Your Attention**
   Neuroscientist Amishi Jha, PhD, at the University of Miami, has spent more than 25 years studying what happens to attention under stress. Her finding is stark: we miss roughly 47% of our lives because our attention is somewhere other than the present moment. Under stress, it gets worse: attention degrades, focus fractures, and attention lapses increase.

   But meditation reverses that trajectory. In a **2017 study with Division I football players**, Jha’s team found that players who practiced just 12 minutes of mindfulness meditation daily showed protected attention and working memory during the high-demand preseason, a period when a control group’s cognitive performance declined. Similar results appeared in **research with soldiers preparing for deployment**: those who practiced regularly maintained their cognitive edge while non-practitioners’ attention degraded. In fact, meditation was the only thing that prevented attention from eroding under pressure.

   The takeaway*:* 12 minutes a day, five days a week is Jha’s recommended minimum

effective dose. That's one hour per week to protect the most valuable resource you have. And it's a dose-response relationship: more practice, greater benefits. But 12 minutes is where measurable results begin.

2. **It Rewires Your Brain**

   A **2024 systematic review published in *Biomedicines*** found that regular mindfulness meditation is associated with increased cortical thickness in the prefrontal cortex and the anterior cingulate cortex, the brain regions tied to attention, decision-making, and emotional regulation. At the same time, research suggests meditation reduces the size and reactivity of the amygdala, the brain's alarm system. The smaller and less reactive the amygdala, the less likely you are to be hijacked by anxious thoughts or emotional reactivity.

   This body of research began with landmark studies from Harvard's Sara Lazar, whose **2005** and **2011** neuroimaging work first showed that meditation practice is associated with measurable changes in brain structure: thicker cortex in regions tied to attention and sensory processing, increased gray matter in the hippocampus, and reduced volume in the amygdala.

   In plain terms: the brain you have right now is not fixed. With consistent practice, you can physically rewire it for calm, focus, and emotional balance.

3. **It Supports Immune Function**

   In a groundbreaking **2003 study**, Richard Davidson and Jon Kabat-Zinn found that people who completed eight weeks of mindfulness training not only showed increased activity in brain regions associated with positive emotion, they also produced significantly more antibodies when given a flu vaccine than the control group. And, a landmark **review of 20 randomized controlled studies** found effects on inflammation, cellular immunity, and biological aging.

4. **It Lowers Stress Hormones**

A **2024 meta-analysis in *Psychoneuroendocrinology***, reviewing 58 randomized controlled trials, found that mindfulness and meditation were among the most effective interventions for reducing cortisol, particularly morning cortisol awakening levels. This matters because **chronic cortisol elevation** is linked to inflammation, impaired immunity, disrupted sleep, and accelerated aging.

5. 5 **It Supports Mental and Relational Well-Being**
   In a **landmark clinical trial published in *JAMA Psychiatry***, an eight-week mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) program reduced anxiety as effectively as escitalopram, a leading anti-anxiety medication. Other research shows that regular meditators report greater **emotional resilience**, improved **relationship satisfaction**, and a stronger **sense of connection** to others.

The research points in one direction: meditation makes you feel better in the moment and it builds the neurological, hormonal, and relational architecture for a longer, more resilient life.

How to Meditate: A Simple Breath Practice

Here's how it works. You sit. You breathe. You rest your attention on an anchor (like your breath). Inevitably, your mind drifts. You start planning dinner, replaying an argument, solving a work problem. That's normal. That's how our brains work.

This is also the moment where most people think they're failing. But if you've *noticed* your mind has wandered, you're actually meditating. Because you're aware. That's one rep. Now do it again.

That's the practice.

Meditation is returning again and again to the present moment, and the returning

becomes resilience, and the resilience widens into presence. And, with compassion, presence widens into allowing. And allowing is can open the door to becoming intimate with your own wisdom, gratitude, and compassion.

When you're ready, try this:

A Guided Breath Meditation

Find your seat. Sit in whatever way feels supported and comfortable for you. You can sit in a chair, on a cushion, or even lie down. This is your time. Close your eyes if that feels accessible, or soften your gaze downward.

Take a few deep, cleansing breaths. Inhale through the nose. Extend your exhale through the mouth. Release any obvious tension: soften the shoulders, the neck, the jaw, the tongue. Let your belly be soft. And let your heart be soft as well, to receive whatever arises with kindness.

Settle into your natural breath. Let the breath return to its own rhythm. Notice that your breathing happens without you having to do anything. Notice where you feel the breath most: the rise and fall of your belly, the air at your nostrils, the expansion of your chest. Just notice. There's nothing to change, nothing to fix.

Follow one breath at a time. Notice the inhale. Notice the exhale. Notice the small pause between them. If it helps, you can silently say "in" and "out" with each breath. You can try counting your breaths from one to ten and if you lose count, simply start again at one.

When your mind wanders (and it will) come back. This is the most important part. When you notice your attention has drifted, don't scold yourself. Congratulate yourself for noticing. That moment of recognition (*oh, my mind wandered*) is the neural rep that strengthens focus, steadiness, and emotional flexibility. Gently return to the breath.

Notice. Some people find it helpful to name whatever pulled them away: *this is planning* or *this is worrying* or *this is remembering.* No judgment. Just kind recognition. Or labeling. Then back to the breath.

Close with care. When your time is up, take a few deep nourishing breaths. Wiggle your toes. Open your eyes. Stretch your arms overhead. If you'd like, place a hand on your heart and offer a moment of thanks for your practice.

That's it. That's the practice. You can do this for one minute or 30 minutes. The duration matters less than the consistency. And every time you return to the breath, you're training your brain for resilience.

What if the Breath Doesn't Feel Right?

For some people (about 20%, according to my training) the breath isn't the easiest anchor. It might feel tight, forced, or even trigger anxiety. That's completely normal and worth knowing. If that's you, try one of these alternatives:

- **Sound:** Rest your attention on whatever sounds are present: birds, traffic, the hum of a room. Let sound be your anchor instead of breath.
- **Touch points:** Feel the sensation of your hands resting on your thighs, your feet on the floor, your body supported by the chair. Cycle gently between these points of contact.
- **Whole-body awareness:** Instead of narrowing attention to the breath, widen it to include your whole body sitting, breathing, being. Let the whole body be the anchor.
- **Hand on belly:** If the breath is subtle or hard to locate, place your hand on your belly and feel the physical rise and fall. Sometimes touch makes the breath more tangible.

The anchor itself matters less than the practice of choosing it, staying with it, noticing when you've drifted, and returning.

How to Build a Meditation Habit That Lasts

Knowing how to meditate is one thing. Doing it consistently is another. Here’s what I’ve learned (both from my own practice and from the research) about what actually helps meditation stick.

1. **Start Smaller Than You Think**
   Amishi Jha’s research points to 12 minutes a day as the minimum effective dose. But if 12 minutes feels like too much right now, start with one minute. Seriously. One minute of sitting, breathing, and returning to the breath is still a rep. It’s still practice. You can build from there. The goal is to make the habit automatic first, then extend the duration.
2. **Same Time, Same Place**
   Link your practice to something you already do every day. After your morning coffee. Before you pick up your phone. Right after you brush your teeth. This is what behavioral scientists call **habit stacking**, and it works because you’re attaching the new behavior to a neural pathway that already exists. Over time, the cue becomes automatic: coffee’s done, time to sit.
3. **Protect the Space**
   You don’t need a special room or a meditation cushion. But you do need a few minutes where no one is asking you for anything. Close the door. Put your phone in another room. Tell your family this is your time. Even five minutes of uninterrupted presence is more valuable than 20 distracted ones.
4. **Expect Your Mind to Wander**
   This isn’t a design flaw. It’s the whole point. Every time your mind wanders and you bring it back, you’re building the muscle. If you sit for five minutes and your mind wanders 50 times, that’s 50 reps. Don’t worry if you struggle — that’s useful

information.

5. **Celebrate Consistency**
   A checkmark on a calendar. A note in your journal. Whatever system helps you celebrate the accumulation of days. Consistency compounds. You probably won't feel a dramatic shift after one session, but after a few weeks, you'll start to notice: a little more patience in traffic, a beat of space before reacting to something your teenager said, a steadiness you were always capable of and now can celebrate.
6. **Practice Compassion**
   You will miss days. You will be reactive. You will be stressed. Meditation is a practice that expands human capacity, not perfection. We practice returning, to the breath, to the anchor, to the present moment, with kindness for a reason. Because when you can soften enough to be kind to yourself, you learn so much about how to be kind to others. Meditation is a relational practice. You build the capacity to be present with another person's experience, because you've practiced being present with your own.

Why This Matters Now

As my teacher **Jack Kornfield** says, when you take a breath, you are "interbreathing" with the pines and the redwood trees, with the air that crossed over the ocean. The breath is a gateway to feel our interdependence, our connectedness. When you place your attention on your breath, you can begin to see everything else that's going on around it: your moods, your states, your feelings, your stories. They all become more visible, because placing your attention on the breath is an invitation to experience the present moment. In that way, the breath can also be a mirror.

When you practice returning to the breath, again and again, with patience and with kindness, you're not just doing something for yourself. You're building the capacity to walk alongside others. To sit with someone else's pain and joy and frustration and

celebration. To be present in a way that reminds you that you belong just as you are, and reminds the people around you that they belong too. Right here.

You don’t have to stop thinking to meditate. You just have to notice.

You don’t have to be peaceful to practice. You just have to sit with what’s here.

And you don’t have to get it right. You just have to begin.

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