

Did you know that 86% of Americans reported feeling stressed in the past month¹? Stress is pervasive; it affects our health and our work and family life. Almost all of us can use some strategies to help stress less. Mindful living and practices can be an important tool to help manage stress.

BRAIN BITS: SOME NEUROSCIENCE OF STRESS

There's a scientific reason to "trust your gut." It's because the gut is your brain's sidekick, directly connected to the brain via the longest cranial nerve in your body, the vagus nerve. The vagus nerve wanders around the lungs and heart en route to the gut, and is the major channel of the parasympathetic nervous system, which promotes relaxation, slows the heart rate and calms the body. Your breath can actively engage and activate the vagus nerve, which in turn can help calm you down. Even just a few conscious, deep breaths can help. That's one reason why some mindfulness meditations use the breath as an anchor.

DATA BITS: SOME NUMBERS ABOUT MINDFULNESS AND STRESS

In one workplace study, employees who participated in some form of mindfulness training reported a 28% reduction in stress². And an academic study showed that just 4 days of meditation training reduce fatigue and anxiety³. Mindfulness won't miraculously cure stress (only silver bullets and unicorns can do that), but you *can* get some relief.

GUIDED BREATH AND BODY SCAN MEDITATIONS

Sitting (or lying) practices can help train the mind to focus on the present [moment](#). They can also offer a pause and a refresh, and have been scientifically proven to diminish anxiety and stress.

- Breath and body scan guided meditations
 - 15-minute [breath meditation](#) by Sharon Salzberg
 - 10-minute [breath meditation](#) by Elisha Goldstein
 - 7-minute [body scan](#) by Sharon Salzberg
 - 20-minute [body scan](#) by Steve Diamond

¹ [NPR/Robert Wood Johnson Foundation/ Harvard School of Public Health](#), 2014

² [At Aetna, a C.E.O.'s Management by Mantra](#), *New York Times*

³ Zeidan, F et al, [Mindfulness meditation improves cognition: Evidence of brief mental training.](#)

THOUGHT CHECKS

Stress chemicals are released when we interpret the situations we are in as threatening, even if the interpretation is taking place unconsciously. Most events in and of themselves are not stressful; it is our thoughts, opinions, and expectations about the event that trigger stress chemicals to be released and then we “feel” stressed. When we continue riding those unskillful thought trains, stress chemicals keep pumping. Getting yourself off the thought train and back into the body is helpful.

BODY CHECKS

When the feeling of stress arrives, releasing the thoughts and becoming an observer of the body experience brings us right into what is happening in this moment. Ask: How does this body feel in this situation? Then pay attention. *Noticing tightness in the jaw. Noticing shoulders up by the ears. Shortness of breath. Clenched fists.* Remember: no judgment, it just is what it is in this moment. The body lives in the present moment and this is the experience it is having. Paying attention and tuning in to the body’s present moment experience via the senses can assist in moving off the stress train.

MINDFULNESS THROUGHOUT YOUR DAY

Mindfulness is a way of being, not just something you do when meditating. You can notice where your mind is and bring it back to the present moment any time. It takes just a few seconds (literally)! Consider picking a habitually “mindless moment,” like picking up your toothbrush, stopping at a traffic light or responding to a quick email. Pause, take a few conscious breaths, notice what you notice, then proceed.

SOME GENERALLY GOOD ADVICE

You’ve heard this all before (ho hum), but these tips to manage stress are fundamentally true and worth a review.

- Spend time with friends or family
- Exercise, take a walk, move your body
- Keep a journal
- Quiet time, including meditation, prayer or enjoying nature
- Eat mostly healthy foods
- Go to bed earlier and get more zzzzz’s
- Unplug from your devices