

Mindfulness Meditation Instructions

Working With a Traumatized Mind

Many of us have been traumatized, which can make meditation difficult. For example, the meditation instructions below suggest that you take the felt sense of the breath to be the main object of meditation. But, for some traumatized people, being “inside” their bodies doesn’t feel safe. In that case, an external object might work better. Meditation instructors talk about “gas and brake” in terms of intensity. The challenge with this language is that what might be gas for one person could be brake for another. Here are the key elements that you may want to consider as you practice, remembering that there is no better or worse option – the point is to enable yourself to work with your mind.

- (a) **Sitting Still vs. Moving:** If sitting still is very challenging for you, try walking slowly (even in circles). If walking, you may want to switch the object of meditation to the felt sense of your feet making contact with the ground.
- (b) **Eyes Open vs. Closed vs. Cracked:** Whatever works best for you!
- (c) **Internal Object vs. External Object:** The breath is a great internal object, whereas a candle, flower, or other object that brings you comfort or inspiration would all make great external objects. While the instructions below use the breath as the object, feel free to switch to another.
- (d) **Session Timing:** There is no need to be a hero and try to meditate for an hour straight right off the bat. A 10-minute session that includes five 1-minute periods of intensity each followed by a 1-minute period of relaxation also works quite well to get you out of the gate!

If you would like to learn more about trauma-informed meditation, the book [Trauma-Sensitive Mindfulness](#) is a great resource.

Mindfulness Meditation

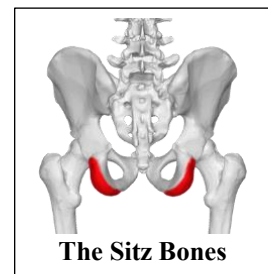
There are three components to this mindfulness meditation technique:

- 1) **Posture**
- 2) **Mindfulness (of breathing)**
- 3) **Labeling thoughts “thinking”**

1. Posture

Posture establishes the foundation of the practice. A good sitting posture helps the mind settle and synchronize with the body. Poor posture encourages the mind to be withdrawn or agitated.

- **Pelvis:** feel the two sitz bones that protrude from the base of your pelvis. You should be leaned somewhat forward on them, so that there’s a curve from your tailbone through your lower back.
- **Lower Back:** a slight inward curve from the middle to the lower back when you’re sitting up straight.
- **Shoulders:** spread and open and your **chest** uplifted – rather than your shoulders bowed in or hunched in any way.



- **Hands:** rest your hands on your thighs, palms down, with your elbows falling at your sides.
- **Head:** sits upright with your chin somewhat tucked in, which naturally heightens your posture a bit. Draw the crown of your head upward.
- **Jaw:** relaxed, not clenched.
- **Eyes:** open and gaze down on the floor in the area in front of you. You don't concentrate or stare particularly, just rest your eyes on a space on the floor. Open eyes keep you connected to the immediate environment and the present moment, but the downward gaze limits being too distracted by your visual field.

It's important to check your posture every little while and make sure you haven't started to slump or hunch or fall into some other imbalanced way of holding your body. Ideally, one sits upright, but not in a frozen or forced way; it should feel balanced with some sense of relaxation.

If you sit on the floor without a cushion, your knees will likely be above your hips, which rocks your pelvis backward. To maintain your center of gravity (and not fall backwards), you will be forced to lean forward, which crunches your core and restricts the flow of the breath. Thus, it's better to sit on a chair, as shown. Alternatively, if you have a meditation cushion or some blankets or some other way to prop yourself up sitting on the floor, and this isn't too great a strain on your body, then that might be best, but again, it's not necessary. The main point here is to maintain an upright posture; all other details are secondary.



2. Mindfulness (of Breathing)

The meditation object of this practice is your breathing – mainly the sensation of the breath going in and out of your body. One feels the sensation of the breathing moving out, then moving back in again. So mindfulness of breathing means placing one's attention onto the breath in a very simple, experiential way, just feeling the sensation of breathing wherever you feel it the most – nose, chest, or belly. Placing your attention on the breath helps the mind settle into the present moment and develop a sense of steadiness.

Inevitably, however, thoughts arise. One thought occurs, followed by another, then another, and very quickly one is caught up in a memory of something that happened 10 years ago, or you're wondering what's for lunch, or you're absorbed in a fantasy, angry at someone, or worried about such and such.

Nevertheless, sooner or later, you'll remember that you're meditating. Your thoughts will peter out or something will interrupt them from your environment like a noise or movement, or maybe for no reason you can tell suddenly you're back in the room. Having recognized that you were lost in thought, you refocus your attention on the breath. Every time you lose track of the breath, you just bring your attention back to it.

You're training yourself in staying in the present moment through maintaining your mindfulness of breathing, but to be distracted by thoughts is a natural part of the process, so accept that it *will* happen.

3. Labeling Thoughts “thinking”

If you do get completely spaced out, forgetting all about what you're doing, with no connection to your breath or meditating, then when you come back and realize that, it's useful to say to yourself "**thinking**" to describe what just happened. What happened? You were thinking. It doesn't matter what you were thinking about, in meditation we just regard that in a neutral, unbiased way. It's not necessary to label every thought you have "thinking," but it can be helpful when you get entangled in some sequence of thoughts and emotions to identify what's going on as, very simply, "thinking," and then return to the breath.

One thing that it's *very* important to understand about meditation practice: **You are not trying to stop your mind from thinking.** Instead, you're learning to be fully present. Thoughts arise, play themselves out, and dissolve naturally. That's what they'll do if you let them. If you fight with them, try to stop them from being there, or blame yourself because you're having thoughts, in the end all you'll do is create more thoughts and more tension inside yourself. What you're learning is to dissolve your grasping and fixation onto thoughts by returning to the breath and letting go of them instead of dwelling on them. Thoughts have no power if you don't suppress or cling to them. They'll just arise and subside naturally, like waves on the ocean. If you give them the opportunity, over time, thoughts will become less numerous and agitated.