

Using mindfulness to lower stress

June 14 2016, by Harriet Myers

Many chronic conditions, like high blood pressure, insomnia or heartburn, can be traced to a single common problem: stress.

Common advice for fighting stress is to eliminate the stressors, which could mean going to bed early or just saying "no" more often. But that doesn't address how our brains handle stress hour-to-hour or moment-to-moment, says The University of Alabama's Dr. Harriet Myers.

Our minds, when not actively solving a problem, are continually criticizing—whether it's others or ourselves. Our minds are also frequently engaged in "[time travel](#)," which means we are either regretting and rehashing the past or planning and worrying about the future. Seldom are we present in the moment.

Practicing [mindfulness](#) is a simple way to help train the brain to be calmer and to free it of stress. By developing a habit of practicing mindfulness, it can lower [stress](#) in the long run.

Here are tips for practicing mindfulness:

- Make your thoughts free of judgment. Recognize negative or harsh thoughts as they occur, whether they are focused on you or on someone else. Just say to yourself, "Oh, there I go, being critical again," and gently let the thought go.
- Practice your breathing. Pay attention to your breath. Notice your inhale and your exhale. As you become more comfortable in your breath, make your inhales a bit deeper and the exhales

longer. Notice your stomach expand as you inhale for a deeper breath.

- Go for a walk. For those who don't like the idea of sitting still to practice mindfulness, a walk can be an ideal way to calm the brain. Inhale on one step, exhale on the next, take slow steps, then turn around after a few yards, and walk the same path back. The point is to not try to get anywhere but to just be in the moment.
- Scan your body. This can be done sitting, standing or lying down. Pay attention to your breathing, and then concentrate on each part of your body, from the tips of your toes to the top of your head. This can last as long as is comfortable for you.
- Add mindfulness into your routine. Taking a mindful shower and concentrating on the water hitting the body can be a calm way to start or end the day. Or, make meals mindful, and focus on the process of handling, tasting, chewing and swallowing each bite.

Provided by University of Alabama in Tuscaloosa

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