

Take a deep breath: the art of mindfulness

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The practice of mindfulness has been a hot topic recently, but what does mindfulness actually mean and how does one practice it? One Baylor College of Medicine expert discusses this.

"Mindfulness is the art of paying attention with a purpose and without

judgement," said Dr. Monica Alzate, licensed clinical social worker and assistant professor of family and community medicine. "Essentially, the idea is to be in the moment and become aware."

Research has shown that mindfulness techniques work to help prevent, reduce and even eliminate physical and mental health symptoms, Alzate explained. These techniques also have been proven to be very helpful for people with anxiety and depression as well as those with anger management and concentration issues. Research is being done to study why mindfulness works.

"We still do not know exactly how or why mindfulness techniques work, but we know that they do," she said.

For example, one experiment showed that a group of people who practiced mindfulness based [stress reduction](#) for eight weeks had positive changes in the structure of the brain, such as increase in hippocampal thickness (involved in memory, learning, and modulation of emotional control), and decrease in brain cell volume in the amygdala (responsible for fear, anxiety, stress). Other studies have shown changes in gray matter volume and density, as well as in activation levels of the insula, which is involved in the process of awareness. These changes have been observed through neuroimaging studies using Electroencephalogram and Functional MRI.

There are several types of mindfulness exercises that Alzate recommends practicing. They include:

Five senses [exercise](#): For this exercise, you decide which of the senses you want to focus on for five minutes. For example, if you choose sight, then you would focus on picking out five objects you have never noticed before or if you choose hearing, you would then listen to five things you have never paid attention to before. You can do this exercise while

simultaneously practicing abdominal [breathing](#).

Body scan exercise: For this exercise you use your mind to scan your body all the way from the crown of your head to your toes. When doing this exercise you should try to exhale through your nose as it helps relax you more. This exercise can be as short as five minutes or as long as 30 minutes.

Mindful eating exercise: This technique involves focusing on the food you eat and can be helpful for people with eating issues. For this technique, you take a small piece of whatever you are going to eat in your hand and observe it without judgment. After observing it, you pick it up, put it close to your ear and move it around so you can hear the sound that might come from the food's texture. Eventually, you put the piece of food in your mouth and you slowly feel the food as it breaks down and, lastly, you swallow it. The idea of this technique is to help people slow down and pay attention to what they are eating and to be present while doing so.

Alzate emphasized the importance of practicing mindfulness techniques before you need to use them and suggested practicing with a mindfulness expert so you can learn how to properly execute different techniques.

"You have to learn the exercises and practice them properly when you are not experiencing stress, that way when you need them you know how to do them," she said. "Many people wait until the moment that they need to use a technique to start using it, but this will not work. Training helps the brain get used to how you are going to react when you practice a mindfulness technique. You cannot learn a new thing in a moment of stress."

She added that although abdominal breathing is not a mindfulness [technique](#) in itself, it is the first step of many mindfulness practices, and

many people do not do it correctly. To help practice abdominal breathing, Alzate said you should start by lying down and putting a very light pillow or a stuffed animal on your abdomen with a pillow behind your head so you can see if the pillow or stuffed animal goes up and down when you are breathing. If it does, then you are breathing correctly. Once you have mastered this, then you can put a hand on your chest and a hand on your abdomen so you can actually start feeling your body when you are breathing. After you are able to do this comfortably, you can start practicing your abdominal breathing while you are sitting, standing and walking. It is important to be able to do abdominal breathing in all situations because you may find yourself needing it when you are sitting in your car stuck in a traffic jam or standing in the back of a long line.

Once you have mastered how to properly practice mindfulness techniques, Alzate suggests downloading a mindfulness app so you have access to mindfulness resources at any time.

She cautions that for some people with higher anxiety levels practicing mindfulness alone may not be enough and she recommends seeking help from a mental health professional.

"Practicing [mindfulness](#) can be a great first step for any kind of change that you may want to accomplish whether it is a short-term change like refocusing during a meeting or a long-term change like managing an anger problem," Alzate said.

Provided by Baylor College of Medicine

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