

Mindful reading can promote mental health, says expert

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Reading provides benefits throughout all stages of life. It increases knowledge, solidifies previously learned information, and benefits children with their development, learning, socialization and imagination.

Some studies even suggest that older adults who read frequently tend to fare better when it comes to cognitive outcomes, such as potentially helping lower the risk of dementia and other cognitive disorders. A Baylor College of Medicine neuropsychologist explains how reading promotes positive mental health outcomes.

"Reading is a quiet pursuit that can be a more adaptive coping strategy than some other hobbies we engage in," said Dr. Samantha Henry, assistant professor of neurology at Baylor. "As kids, reading is thought to be more of a leisure activity we can engage in as a form of recreation, and it is encouraged. As adults, it is a pursuit that is often seen as a form of escapism—it feels wrong and people feel guilty engaging in reading because they think about all the other things they have to do."

Many people engage in reading for mental health purposes whether they are aware of it or not. Reading helps to reduce stress and anxiety and takes your mind away from other things happening in your environment. Cultivating a quiet space to focus and be present in the moment promotes mindfulness. Reading and mindfulness can overlap in terms of emotion regulation, stress and the benefits on the brain. Combining reading and mindfulness allows you to engage in mindful meditation while incorporating reading, which requires you to read in a different way.

When we read, the goal typically is focused on completing a book or article in a certain amount of time to acquire knowledge. Mindful reading is focused on the act of reading itself, with no necessary destination or goal other than to be aware of and attend to what you are reading in that moment and being fully present.

Mindful reading requires more structure. Henry recommends starting with mindful breathing, which helps cultivate and develop skills for mindful reading. Mindful reading is an advanced step that people benefit

from after trying [mindful meditation](#) typically in the form of breathing.

"We can think of mindful reading in the way we think of mindful breathing, which is just focusing on your breath. Normally when we breathe, we don't think about it because it's automatic. Traditional reading can be that way too; to get to the destination of finishing that book. Try to slow that down and be aware of the process actually involved in reading," says Dr. Henry.

Mindful reading requires practice since it removes the element of passive reading, skimming and multitasking while trying to read. The goal is to focus on adding an extra layer of consciousness to your reading. Try to slow down with the intention to understand what you're reading and how you're reading. Remove all external distractions and incorporate a nonjudgmental attitude to engage in a deeper, meaningful understanding of what you read.

Start with a smaller passage instead of a whole book to really attend to and be aware of what you're reading. Eventually, work your way up to bringing your thoughts and intention back to the present. Henry stresses the importance of building a habit for reading.

"Our thoughts drift all the time, and mindfulness practices help redirect them back to the [present moment](#) in trying to savor what's happening. For both mindful reading and leisure reading, one of the important elements is setting aside that time. It's far too easy to forget to do these things because we haven't built out a space for it, so just try to incorporate it into your schedule. Start with small steps so it can be achievable and accessible," Dr. Henry advises.

Everyone's schedules and life circumstances are different, so incorporating reading in your daily routine might not be feasible. If you only find 15 minutes in a day or a week to engage in reading, it can still

be beneficial as long as it becomes a habit. You do not need to read at a certain time of day or a certain number of sessions per week but it will be important to carve out time to do so.

Those who are new to mindful reading should pay attention to the book, such as what the pages look, smell and feel like, as well as focusing on the individual words.

Eliminating distractions is crucial for leisure and mindful reading. Reading on a phone or tablet is not always conducive to this because we are constantly barraged with notifications that appear on our screens, so mute notifications for a period to filter out distractions. Listening to audiobooks is inherently different from reading, and people tend to multitask while listening to audiobooks, like driving or cooking. Holding a book or tablet requires you to invest your energy in that pursuit, while listening to an audiobook can pull away your attention and lends itself to more distractibility.

Provided by Baylor College of Medicine

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