

MINDFULNESS AND MEDITATION:

Practicing Tools to Reduce Stress during COVID19

As we adjust to many changes to our daily routine caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, many of us are experiencing an increase in stress, and looking for healthy ways to reduce stress during COVID-19.

Mindfulness and meditation have been scientifically proven to reduce stress, anxiety, impulsivity and other emotional challenges. Research also shows that mindfulness and meditation can improve attention, learning, and cognitive and academic performance. Many people have heard of mindfulness and meditation for stress reduction, but may not be sure what it means, where to start, or how to adapt it for children.

What's the difference between mindfulness and meditation?

Mindfulness means intentionally bringing our awareness into the *present* moment, without judgements.

Meditation is the *practice of using a technique* to train our use of attention and awareness, intentionally.

This is an unprecedented time. Our attention is being demanded and divided to solve many problems and address various concerns. In the wake of the COVID19 pandemic, we focus on whether we have enough groceries or toilet paper, how to adjust our family life and schedules to working or schooling from home, and how best to protect our families and loved ones from becoming ill. Now more than ever, our awareness and attention can become overwhelmed with what we know from the recent *past* in other countries who have also fought the virus, the *present* threat, and the *future* for ourselves and our communities.

Why practicing mindfulness is important

Being **mindful** and living in the present does not come naturally to most people. We have all had times in which we ruminate about the past— about what has already happened, whether it was fair, what we should have said or done differently or what we wish someone else would have said or done differently. Many times, when our thoughts get stuck in the past, we focus on negative things that happened. We can feel sad, mad, upset or scared all over again in the present, even though those past events might not be happening right now.

We have all had times in which we stress about the future— about what will become of us. What if we don't learn as much in the homeschool environment and we don't get into the college we want? What if something happens to us or our families that puts us in danger? What if we never reach our goals? What if scary things from the past happen again? When our thoughts get stuck thinking about the future, we can invent all sorts of scary scenarios and cause ourselves to worry unnecessarily.



LONG LIVE CHILDHOOD

Practicing **mindfulness** is a way to shift our thinking away from the past or future and live more fully in the present moment. The present can be an uncomfortable place, too, especially during the COVID19 pandemic. Maybe you're in pain, grieving, or you're concerned about something happening right now. Even though the present may be stressful, it can never be as bad as all the negative events that happened in the past and all the terrible things that could happen in the future. Nothing is all bad, and we can miss out on some of the joys of living if we don't pay attention to what is going on around us in the moment.

Bringing our awareness to the present moment takes practice. Here are a few ways to build mindfulness into your family's everyday routine:

Mindful Breathing

Conscious breathing is a simple way of training your attention and awareness toward the present moment by regulating your breaths.

Diaphragmatic or Belly Breathing

Diaphragmatic breathing, or belly breathing, is a kind of deep breathing that lowers heart rate and blood pressure, and helps our bodies and mind relax. Diaphragmatic breathing uses our diaphragms, a dome-shaped muscle under our lungs, to help get more air in our lungs and more oxygen to our bodies and brains.

- First, sit in a comfortable position, or lie flat on your bed or on the floor. Relax your shoulders and soften your stomach muscles.
- Place a hand on your chest and a hand on your belly. Imagine that your belly is a balloon. When you breathe in or inhale, you will fill that balloon with air and your belly will rise. Then when you breathe out or exhale, you will squeeze air out of the balloon with your stomach muscles and your belly will fall. The hand on your belly should move away from you when you inhale and move back in when you exhale. In this kind of breathing, the hand on your chest shouldn't move much, while the hand on your belly should move out when you breathe in, and in when you breathe out.
- If you're lying flat, you can put something light on your stomach like a book or a stuffed animal and watch it move up and down with your breaths.

Practice this kind of breathing, 10 breaths at a time, several times a day, to build strength in your diaphragm and learn to consciously shift your awareness and focus to regulating your breathing.



Using props for young children

Young children can learn to regulate their breathing by using different items around the house to make it into a game. Here are a few ideas:

- Blow bubbles to learn to take deep breaths. Make slow, controlled exhales to make the most bubbles or one big bubble.
- Blow slowly into a pinwheel to make it move.
- Rustle a feather by using your breath.
- Blow gently next to a candle to make the flame flicker but not go out. Kids should only do this with parent supervision.

Five Finger Breathing

Stretch your hand out in front of you with your fingers stretched out like you're about to give a high-five. Then take the pointer finger of your other hand and put it on the bottom of the outside of your thumb. When you inhale, trace up a finger, and when you exhale, trace down a finger. If your mind gets lost or your thoughts get loud, try to bring your attention back to the feeling of tracing your fingers and the sight of your hand.

Mindful Grounding

In this activity, we use our senses to bring our attention to what we are experiencing right now, without judgement.

- Name three things you see in your room or space.
- Name three things you hear in your room or space. Even in a very quiet room you can usually hear the sounds of your own breathing, movement or some air flow.
- Name three things you feel on your body or your skin. This could be texture, temperature, the weight of your body on a surface, etc.

When we pay attention to our senses, there is not much time to think about the past or the future. In classic mindful meditation, we try to observe what we notice without judgement.

But what if your present isn't very pleasant? What if what you saw was your bother messing up your room, or you heard an annoying TV show playing next door, or you felt pain on your body, and you became overwhelmed by paying attention to all of it?? In classic mindful meditation, we strive to observe what we notice **without judgement**. For example, we may recognize a sound, acknowledge it annoys us, but try not to place judgement on the sound itself or the source of it.



Positive Attention Adaptation

An adaptation of this exercise can be helpful in promoting awareness of positive aspects of an environment, even in stressful situations. You can choose to pick out three things you see that you like, three sounds you hear that you like, and three things you feel on your body that you like.

You can practice mindful grounding anywhere! While walking your dog you might notice a tall tree, hear the sound of birds, and feel the pavement under your feet. While you are doing the dishes, you might see light reflected off the water, hear the sounds of dishes clanking together, and feel the slickness of the soap on your fingertips.

Practice this exercise throughout your daily life to train your mind to come back to the present. Try to practice even when you are not distressed, to teach your body to recognize when it is thinking in the past or future, and how to choose to live more fully in the present.

Mindful Noticing

In mindful noticing, we try to bring our awareness and presence fully into a specific object or activity.

Know your penny

Many people find that when they try to notice every thing they can about a common object that they are able to stay more present-minded. For this activity, you will need a penny or another coin.

First, bring your attention to what your penny looks like.

What markings does it have on the front? What words or numbers are there? Is your penny shiny or dull? How does the light reflect off your penny? Does it change if you tilt it around? Are there smudges, nicks, or other identifying features on your penny? Take a moment to really get to know your penny. Look at the edges of your penny. What do you notice about those? Flip your penny over and notice everything you can about the back of your penny. What is written? What pictures are there? How does the light move off your penny?

Now, bring your attention to what your penny feels like.

How heavy is your penny? Is it warm or cold? Does its temperature change depending where you hold it? Are the edges smooth or grooved? What does your penny feel like between your finger and your thumb? Notice all the ways your penny feels in your hand. Know what is special about your penny so well that if you were to drop it in a bucket of pennies, you could pick out which penny was yours.



You can use these techniques with other senses, too:

- Listen to a song you love but try to notice all the things you haven't noticed before. Listen for when the singer takes a breath, listen to a particular instrument throughout the song, or to the beat or bass.
- Try mindful eating, noticing all the different flavors and textures of a bite of food and how it tastes different on different parts of your tongue.
- Focus on how your muscles feel when doing yoga to help build movement into your routine.

Loving-kindness Meditation

While mindfulness meditation helps us bring our awareness to the present moment, with acceptance and without judgement, loving-kindness meditation seeks to grow warmth, kindness and authenticity in how we feel about ourselves and others. Research has shown that daily practice of a loving-kindness meditation can reduce self-criticism, pain and grief, and can increase tolerance of annoying behaviors, foster social connectedness, and cultivate compassion for oneself and others.

First, repeat these four sentences, either out loud or to yourself:

- May I be safe.
- May I be healthy and strong.
- May I be happy.
- May I be peaceful and at ease.

Next, direct these wishes to someone you value, love, respect or feel positively toward.

Then, direct these wishes to someone you find challenging, or whose behavior you don't like.

Finally, direct these wishes to the world and all beings.



Mindful Mantra Meditation

A mantra is a sound or phrase that is meaningful to a person. Mantra meditation includes repeating a sound or phrase and allowing your awareness to explore what that means for you in the present moment.

Helpful mantras for kids include:

- I can handle this.
- I am safe.
- Let it go.
- I am thankful.

You can set aside times of the day to practice mindfulness and meditation or find ways to build these skills and thought practices into your everyday activities. We all need practice to become experts, so be sure to practice mindfulness and meditation regularly — in times of peace as well as times of stress. Soon, you will be able to harness the ability to move your awareness to the present and cultivate compassion at will.

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

To explore mindfulness and meditation further, check out the following resources:

<https://www.headspace.com/> — A mindfulness app for everyday life.

<https://www.calm.com/> — A sleep, meditation and relaxation app.

<https://leftbrainbuddha.com/> — A website for modern mindfulness.

<https://www.cosmickids.com/> — Guided meditation and yoga for kids.

“The Mindful Teen” by Dzung X. Vo, a mindfulness-based stress reduction workbook for teens.

“The Mindful Dragon” by Steve Herman, a children’s book that teaches mindfulness, for ages 4-8.

“The Ultimate Mindfulness Activity Book” by Christian Bergstrom, featuring 150 playful mindful activities for kids, teens and grown-ups.

<https://blog.chocchildrens.org/mindfulness-and-meditation-practical-tools-to-reduce-stress-during-covid19/>

