



Mindfulness meditation

- Mindfulness meditation focuses your mind on the present moment
- It has gained popularity for helping people manage their health and the stresses of everyday life

We live busy lives with so many distractions, interruptions and things that need to get done. Many times you find yourself doing lots of things at once, and not really focusing on any one thing. You're so busy *doing* that you often miss out on *connecting* with the moments you're living.

And along with all of this is your musculoskeletal condition. It's always there – pain, fatigue, stiffness, appointments, medications – competing for your time and attention.

It's no wonder we all feel a bit overwhelmed at times!

A practice that's being used by many people to manage these stressors, chronic pain, and many health conditions is mindfulness meditation. It's attracted a lot of attention, scientific study and enthusiastic followers in the last several years. So what is it?

What is mindfulness meditation?

Simply put, mindfulness meditation focuses your mind on the present moment. It trains your mind to be alert and pay attention to the thoughts and the sensations you feel, and accept them without judgement. Being mindful is being aware of the moment.

Mindfulness can be a formal or informal practice.

Formal mindfulness meditation is when you make a commitment to put aside time (the amount of time is up to you) on most days to practise your meditation.

During this time you focus on one thing, such as your breathing, a sound, the sensations of your body.

So if for example you're focusing on your breath, you would sit (or lie down) and get comfortable, then focus on your breathing. You notice how it feels, how your chest rises and falls, the sensation of the air as you inhale and how it feels when you exhale.

At times your mind may wander. That's ok and is very common, especially when you're learning mindfulness. You just need to gently draw your attention back.

Informal mindfulness, sometimes called everyday mindfulness, is when you bring this attention to everyday situations or activities. For example, when you're going for a walk, you notice how your body feels as it moves. How your feet feel against the ground, how your arms feel as they swing by your side, how the air feels against your skin, and the sun feels on the top of your head. You notice all of these sensations and focus on how they feel.

Pay the same attention when you're doing other activities throughout your day. For example, when you're washing the car, or listening to your children as they tell you about their day, enjoying a meal, having a warm bath before you go to bed. Focus your attention on the moment, how it feels, what it means to you.

By doing this, you're focused on 'being' rather than 'doing'.

Again, as with formal mindfulness meditation, your mind and attention may wander –there's so much going on in our lives! Just bring your focus back to what it is you're doing.

This constant refocusing, and bringing your attention back to the here and now, requires some time and effort on your part, so regular practice - of both formal and informal mindfulness - is important.

While this all sounds lovely, what does it have to do with managing our health? And why should you invest time and effort into it when you're already struggling to find time to fit everything in?



Mindfulness meditation and health

Research has shown that regularly practising mindfulness meditation can improve mood, relieve stress, improve sleep, improve mental health and reduce pain.

Part of this has to do with the fact that it requires that we become more self-aware and accept experiences and feelings without judgement. This can lead to a greater ability to self-regulate our thoughts, emotions and behaviours, which can in turn help us manage or cope with stressors, chronic pain and our health conditions.

Research also shows that regular mindfulness meditation can lead to positive changes in our brain and our genes. To find out more about these changes and other effects mindfulness has on our body, watch this - short [Smiling Mind video](#) featuring Associate Professor Dr Craig Hassed from Monash University.
https://youtu.be/IsXxvPWd_k4

Research is ongoing, and mindfulness is an area of great interest for researchers. As it stands there's a large body of research that supports the use of mindfulness meditation for all of us. There are no costs (unless you decide to join a class or buy a product) and the risks of practicing it are minimal.

Getting started

To practise mindfulness meditation you can join a class (in person or online), listen to a CD, learn a script from a book or play a DVD or online video.

You can also have a taster by doing this simple body scan. It helps you become aware of your body in this present moment.

Simple body scan

- ✧ Find a comfortable position. This may be in a chair, on your bed or lying outside in the sun.
- ✧ Close your eyes and relax your body.
- ✧ Breathe in and out slowly and gently.
- ✧ Take your time and focus on smooth, even breaths.
- ✧ Notice how your body feels. The weight of it as you sit on the chair, or as you're lying down.
- ✧ Keep breathing in and out, slowly and evenly.
- ✧ Now focus on your feet. Notice any feelings or sensations, tension, warmth, coolness, pain, discomfort. Just notice these feelings, they're not good or bad. They simply exist.
- ✧ Keep breathing smoothly in and out.
- ✧ Move up to your legs. Focus on your legs. Notice any feelings or sensations, tension, warmth, coolness, pain, discomfort. These feelings are not good or bad. They simply exist in this moment.

- ✧ Keep breathing smoothly in and out.
- ✧ If your mind starts to wander at any time, that's ok – just gently bring your attention back to your breathing...in and out. Then move back to your body scan.
- ✧ Continue scanning your body noticing each body part as you go, and any feelings or sensations you encounter. None of these are good or bad– they're just there.
- ✧ Keep breathing smoothly in and out. After you've reached your head and face, take time to notice the feelings and sensations in your whole body. Focus on your breathing, noticing it going in and out. When you're ready open your eyes.
- ✧ Take notice if how you're feeling in this moment.

Practise mindfulness meditation regularly. When you're trying to sleep, after a busy or stressful day, at your desk before a meeting, when you're out for a walk. Notice how you feel, the things around you, use all of your senses, be present and pay attention to the moment.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Your physiotherapist
- Musculoskeletal Australia
MSK Help Line 1800 263 265

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How we can help

Call our MSK Help Line and speak to our nurses.
Phone 1800 263 265 or email helpline@msk.org.au.

We can help you find out more about:

- arthritis and musculoskeletal conditions
- ways to live well with these conditions
- managing your pain
- upcoming webinars, seminars and other events.

More to explore

- Headspace
<https://www.headspace.com/mindfulness>
- Smiling Mind
<https://www.smilingmind.com.au/mindfulness>
- This Way Up
<https://thiswayup.org.au/how-we-can-help/courses/intro-to-mindfulness/>
- painHEALTH
<https://painhealth.csse.uwa.edu.au/pain-module/mindfulness-and-pain/>