



# Anxiety Tips: Mindfulness & Breathing

Alleviating symptoms of anxiety can be achieved through mindfulness practices and consciously changing your breathing habits. Science is continually discovering new ways these two exercises benefit mental health.

The anxious mind is mired by repetitive concerns of future scenarios playing out in negative ways. Daily worries about chores to be done, tasks to manage, and goals to meet distract us from the immediate present of our thoughts, feelings, and reactions.

Anxiety disorders take the anticipatory nature of anxiety [1] to its extremes. A person with Social Anxiety Disorder [2] might fret about making a fool of themselves in public three months from now, while someone with Panic Disorder [3] avoids new experiences because they foresee disaster at every turn. This future-mindedness is a chronic byproduct of modern Western living and a staple of the most common anxiety disorders.

You've already learned the negative results of a life filled with too much anxiety [4]. You may even be anxious about how long this section of the course will be because you really have other things to do—things that can't wait, that must be managed and prepared for now!

If this sounds like you, if you find your anxious state is sucking the life and vigor out of your present life, this section is of utmost importance. Over 40 years of research [5] shows that mindfulness and breathing exercises are supremely effective skills to cultivate [6], whether dealing with the humdrum anxieties of everyday living [7] or entrenched in the throes of an anxiety disorder [8]. These practices are designed to reacquaint you with the present moment—your thoughts, feelings, and reactions here and now—and have become integral coping mechanisms [9] for many anxiety therapies.

Here we'll outline the basics of mindfulness and breathing and familiarize you with the ways science says these practices positively affect our moods [10] and calm our anxious proclivities.

## What is Mindfulness?

Mindfulness [11] is a state of intensely focusing on the present moment. To be mindful is to acknowledge anxious-ridden fears and worries, let them "float" and pass through your conscious awareness, and return your focus onto your present sensations and environment.

There are many varieties of mindfulness techniques [12]. Some are linked with specific religious traditions or beliefs, but secular mindfulness [13] is the one routinely studied. At its core, mindfulness is the practice of letting the mind's constant barrage of worries and contingencies play themselves out without reacting to them negatively. You come to realize these thoughts for what they are—*thoughts*—not as harbingers of doom or visions of future failure.

To achieve this relaxed, accepting, and nonjudgmental frame of mind, there are several ways

to begin:

- **Focus on your immediate environment.** What sensory stimuli are filling your immediate space? Concentrating on these details invites you to step out of your own anxious forecasting temporarily and gain perspective
- **Focus on your own bodily sensations.** Notice the weight and position of your body, any aches or pains. Perform a body scan to practice taking compassionate stock of these sensations, acknowledging their presence, and then moving on down your body. You are not trying to change how you feel, but learning to notice again and again how you feel, not how you think
- **Guided meditation and visualization** are further mindfulness techniques many anxious people find helpful. Imagining a beautiful scene in full richness and detail—senses included—usurps the hold your treadmill of anxious thoughts has on your thinking

At first consideration, it may seem that you are distracting yourself from the symptoms and thoughts of anxiety; in reality, the opposite is true. **Your anxieties and worries are distracting you from the immediate present!** Learning to approach with compassion and curiosity the ways you feel, accepting the thoughts that flicker through your mind's eye, and re-engaging with the present moment (whether the environmental details, physical sensations, or mental images) in both body and mind spare your limited concentration from ruminating. You reinforce the skill of distancing yourself from anxious thinking and not surrendering your precious conscious powers to a convincing, but overblown level of concern for future outcomes.

There are many places online which detail the wide variety of mindfulness practices. As with other coping strategies, mindfulness should be catered to the individual [14]. Experiment with multiple techniques until one feels right for you (i.e., helps guide your focus away from future anxious worry). Some remedial places to start [15] are right here [16]; many of them give you step-by-step instructions [17]. These are all free resources and come highly recommended [18].

The important thing is to begin integrating mindfulness into your life as a daily habit. Reserve time in your day (maybe right after you wake up, before going to bed, or while on lunch break) to dedicate yourself to **20-30 minutes of concentrated mindfulness**. Your resiliency and reactions to anxious symptoms and situations can dramatically improve through habitual mindfulness in as little as 8 weeks [19].

## What about Breathing?

In mindfulness practice, paying attention to your breathing is an inlet to that hallmark, hyper-focused, and sympathetic state of nonjudgmental awareness. It's another physical focal point to lead your thoughts back toward your body whenever anxious thoughts intrude and demand your unbiased attention.

Biologically, deep breathing activates the body's parasympathetic nervous system to stop producing fear and stress hormones, relieve muscle tension, and lower the heart rate—in short, to relax. Cortisol levels [20] have also been shown to reduce through routine

mindfulness/breathing practices.

The breath also plays a role in heightening the symptoms of many anxious conditions. The fear/anxiety response causes hyperventilation, which precipitates other bodily reactions (racing heart, sweaty palms) that anxious people may misinterpret as signs of immediate danger. When you retrain how you breathe during panic- and anxiety-inducing situations, you send a message to your mind that A) what's happening is not dangerous and B) you are in control of how you choose to react. Many Cognitive-Behavioral therapists teach their clients breathing techniques not only to help their mindfulness practice, but as a separate coping mechanism to use "in the moment" when fear and anxiety symptoms strike.

One of the most effective breathing techniques is practiced by American forces in active combat. (You can imagine the very real, immediate threats they contend with.) It's called tactical breathing [21] and can be practiced as follows:

- **Breathe in for a count of 4**
- **Hold your breath for a count of 4**
- **Fully exhale to the count of 4**
- **Pause between the next breath for a count of 4 (hold a "negative breath")**
- **Repeat 3-5 times**

To become even more familiar with your breathing patterns—and to start taking notice of how integral and triggering shallow, scared breathing can be to symptoms of anxiety—schedule time every day [22] to focus on your breathing, re-center yourself, and move forward.

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**Source URL:** <https://explorable.com/e/mindfulness-breathing-exercise>

**Links:**

[1] <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/debunking-myths-the-mind/201101/anticipatory-anxiety-the-suffering-and-solutions>, [2] <https://explorable.com/social-anxiety-disorders>, [3] <https://explorable.com/panic-disorder>, [4] <https://explorable.com/the-physical-psychological-risks-of-anxiety>, [5] <http://www.mindfulnet.org/page4.htm>, [6] <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2848393/>, [7] <http://steinhardt.nyu.edu/opus/issues/2014/spring/sethi>, [8] <http://www.health.harvard.edu/blog/mindfulness-meditation-may-ease-anxiety-mental-stress-201401086967>, [9] <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/the-mindful-self-express/201305/five-ways-living-mindfully-can-help-you-reach-your-goals>, [10] <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/feeling-it/201309/20-scientific-reasons-start-meditating-today>, [11] <http://greatergood.berkeley.edu/topic/mindfulness/definition>, [12] <http://www.helpguide.org/harvard/benefits-of-mindfulness.htm>, [13] <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/the-athletes-way/201306/how-does-meditation-reduce-anxiety-neural-level>, [14] <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/in-practice/201303/5-meditation-tips-beginners>, [15] <http://www.calm.com/>, [16] <http://www.mindfulness-solution.com/DownloadMeditations.html>, [17] [http://ggia.berkeley.edu/practice/mindful\\_breathing#data-tab-how](http://ggia.berkeley.edu/practice/mindful_breathing#data-tab-how), [18] <https://www.youtube.com/user/TheHonestGuys>, [19] <http://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2011/01/eight-weeks-to-a-better-brain/>, [20] [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/03/31/mindfulness-meditation-cortisol-stress-levels\\_n\\_2965197.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/03/31/mindfulness-meditation-cortisol-stress-levels_n_2965197.html), [21] <http://www.theblaze.com/stories/2012/06/07/these-are-the-secrets-for-tactical-breathing-in-combat/>, [22] <http://www.stress.org/take-a-deep-breath/>, [23] <https://explorable.com/users/grharriman>, [24] <https://explorable.com/e/mindfulness-breathing-exercise>