



FocusMinder

A Beginner's Guide to Mindfulness & Meditation

Welcome

Hello there. I'm so glad you're here. Thanks for making a little time for yourself. It'll be very well spent.

No doubt you've heard about some of the benefits of mindfulness and meditation – stress relief and mental clarity are two of the biggies. You might even have some friends or colleagues who practice. Whether you are literally at your wit's end with the pressures of your fast paced life or you are just a bit curious, you've come to the right place.

For many, the terms *mindfulness* and *meditation* conjure up images of robe-clad monks or yogis with eyes closed and serene expressions. Maybe you picture incense burning, long strings of beads with tassels, and a planter of bamboo shoots. There is no sense of hurry, nor worry. Hours on end are devoted to quieting the mind and contemplating the meaning of life.


But you wear dress clothes and work in an office – incense burning is strictly prohibited and “serene” isn't a word anyone would use to describe the look on your face. You live and die by the clock and your calendar, rushing from one deadline to the next. You don't have time to ponder the meaning of life other than in passing when you turn another year older. Devoting even an hour per day to mindfulness and meditation is strictly out of the question.

Good news. You can find inner peace without trading your modern life for a robe and a hut on a mountain top. And it only takes a minute to get started. Actually it only takes one deep breath to get started.

Let's try one together. Inhale for the count of four. 1 – 2 – 3 – 4. Now exhale for the count of four. 4 – 3 – 2 – 1.

Let's try another one. This time, as you inhale intentionally tense up every muscle in your body and as you exhale let everything relax. Inhale and tense for the count of five. 1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5. Now exhale and relax for the count of five. 5 – 4 – 3 – 2 – 1.

Nice, eh?

And look at you – you're great at following directions. That means you'll be a natural at using  FocusMinder's guided meditations.

Be Well,
Katie

Mindfulness vs Meditation

You'll often hear these terms used together or interchangeably. They each have multiple definitions having to do with bringing attention to the present moment in some manner. Some people say mindfulness is a subset of a more formal meditation practice. Some people say they're really the same thing just different "flavors" so to speak.

For our working definitions, we'll say that meditation is an umbrella term that encompasses a wide variety of techniques for quieting the mind (e.g., Vipassana, Zen, Mindfulness, Transcendental, Kundalini, Chakra, etc). And mindfulness is an approach to the thoughts and actions we take – whether in our meditation practice or in every-day life. For example we could eat our dinner mindfully by paying attention to each bite and the way the food feels as we chew and swallow. We could walk to our next meeting mindfully by noticing how our feet feel in our shoes as we take each step and how the air feels on our skin as we pass through space.


The Point of M&M Practice

Mindfulness and meditation are tools for being in the present moment. We need to practice being present because the brain is an amazing time traveler. While you are reading this paragraph, you may flash to a memory of the 2nd grade when you read a story about time traveling, then to a deadline coming up later this month, then to a thought about how annoying your coworker Kyle is, and then back to these words. Congratulations – you're normal.

It's not that reflection or looking forward is bad per se. But we often do them in a haphazard manner while we're supposed to be focusing on something else. When we intentionally reflect, we can notice patterns, subtleties, and unresolved issues – giving us insight that we can act on if we choose. Thinking about the future and formulating plans and strategies is certainly useful, but frequently our future thoughts are unfocused, based on fantasy, or dwell on unlikely worst-case scenarios.

While your brain travels through time (and the world of imagination) your body only experiences the present in physical space. Mindfulness and meditation can help us experience the present more fully as they tether the mind to the moment at hand and bring it in unison with the body.

Prepare Yourself for Some Serious ... Breathing?

As you listen to the  FocusMinder recordings, you'll notice that breathing plays a large role. But you breathe every minute of every day so what's the big deal?

Conscious breathing is the quickest way of overriding the sympathetic nervous system and telling the parasympathetic nervous system it's time to take over. You are no doubt familiar with your fight or flight (or freeze) response. That's your sympathetic nervous system in action. Its job is to keep us safe in situations of mortal danger. The parasympathetic nervous system is our "rest and digest" response. Very few of us office dwellers encounter mortal danger on a regular (or even irregular) basis. Our parasympathetic nervous system is what we want running things behind the scenes.


The part of our brain in charge of self-preservation is pretty old school – it hasn't evolved to perceive different levels of threat differently. Whether you are getting ready to give a presentation or running from a tiger, your brain tells the sympathetic nervous system to get in gear.

But you aren't in any mortal danger from your presentation. There's no need for your body to send blood and adrenaline to major muscle groups in preparation for battle or escape. An elevated heart rate and faster respiration isn't going to help you advance your presentation slides while standing behind a podium. But your body doesn't know that. It just knows that the sympathetic nervous system is in control.

So how do you tell your body that the only present threat is your fear of giving a bad presentation? By overriding your breathing.

Breathing, blood flow, and digestion are three of our autonomous bodily functions – but breathing is the only one we can control at will. When we consciously choose to take long slow breaths, the parasympathetic nervous system says "The breath seems calm. I guess there's no danger so I'll take it from here".

You can still experience stress while your parasympathetic nervous system is engaged, but you can approach the situation with a clear head and from a state of calm.

The  FocusMinder breathing techniques may feel really strange at first. At least that's how I felt when I first started practicing them. And to this day, I like some far better than others. Use what works for you. You may like to try them at home a few times first and when you are comfortable, do them at the office.

Beginning Meditation

It's important for you to know that "advanced" meditators can't keep their mind focused all that much longer than newbies. The difference is they don't get frustrated with having to repeatedly come back to the present moment when their focus meanders away. They also more quickly catch themselves when their mind wanders.


Different styles of meditation have various techniques and guidelines associated with them – there's no definitive right way. But just like with everything else in life, some people seem to believe that the meditation technique they practice is the best one or the "true" one; some even look down on other techniques.

I'm here to give you permission to ignore those people. If they found what works for them, great! More power to them. Your job is to find what works for you.

You can spend years studying the nuances and principles of a particular method. You can also just jump right in. For the beginning meditator, guided meditations are a great way to experience the benefits of practice. Guided practice is just as good as silent practice on your own.

The only wrong way to meditate is not to try it at all.

Getting Started

You're busy. I'm not going to ask you to set aside 30 minutes a day for practice. Instead, I'm asking that the next time you are stressed, you browse the list of  FocusMinder recordings and listen to the one that suits your situation. Most are less than 5 minutes. Many are less than 3 minutes.

- Choose a Situational Meditation if you are navigating a workplace issue.
- Try a Relaxation Meditation to help you transition from work to home or while you are on a lunch break.
- Breathing Meditations are good in all circumstances.
- Awareness Meditations give you a glimpse into a more formal meditation practice.

I will make one suggestion. Don't sit on the floor while you meditate. Sure this is what you see in all the pictures – someone sitting cross-legged on a cushion on the floor – but for the average professional, sitting on the floor is really uncomfortable and distracting. So sit up in a chair instead. Or if you are at home doing a guided relaxation, you could lie down. The point is, be comfortable in your body while you are exploring this new practice in your mind.

What if the guided meditation doesn't calm me down?

These recordings aren't a magic bullet. There will be times when you just can't concentrate and feel agitated at the end of a session. That's normal. Over time, it will become easier to use the techniques and your overall level of stress should shift. On a day by day basis, you are still a human and things may not feel different. However, by pausing, noticing, and even just attempting to be mindful about a situation, you are changing your deeply ingrained patterned responses – and that ultimately makes a huge difference over the long run.

Do I have to close my eyes?

No. Do what makes you feel comfortable. For many people, it helps to close their eyes because it blocks out the visual stimulation. If you leave your eyes open, try to look out a window or at least away from your computer screen.

Does it get easier?

Yes and no. As you get familiar with the techniques, they are easier to attempt. But in any given situation on any given day, you might have a hard time staying present and tuning in. That's normal. Perfection isn't the goal. Consistency in noticing is.

As you get familiar with the recordings you may naturally transition into using the techniques spontaneously as you need them, without the audio guidance.

What if I get interrupted?

Interruptions are part of life. And part of a meditation practice in the real world. When your practice is disrupted, take a breath to acknowledge it and move on.

I thought meditation was about totally clearing the mind – this seems different, what gives?

It's a common misconception. Meditation is actually about being completely present with what's going on in the mind and the body. It's about letting go of distractions. When thoughts arise, you learn to gently let them go without judgement. You witness them as though you are an outside observer instead of engaging with them and following them.

Should I track my progress?

Many people do find it helpful to track their experiences. You may wish to try one recording per day until you've tried them all, or you may wish to try listening to the same recording every day at the same time. Experiment and find what works for you.

Following the FAQs, there is a log for you to make notes about the recordings as you use them. Feel free to make extra copies of the log for your personal use.

How do I explain this to my coworkers?

As mindfulness and meditation have become increasingly mainstream, it's far less likely you'll be judged for trying it out at work. In fact, your colleagues are likely to be curious about your experience – especially when you see positive results in your patience, focus, and stress level.

If you'd like some language to use, consider something like:

I'm trying out a new stress management app. It's got 3-minute guided meditations based on real life office scenarios.

How do I explain this to my boss?

Depending on your workplace and the nature of the work you perform, you may find it helpful to get buy in from your manager before listening to recordings while “on the job” (as opposed to listening solely on break). Fortunately, respected publishers like the Harvard Business Review have published multiple articles on the benefits of mindfulness and meditation. Find one article to read as background and then use it to start a conversation with your manager.

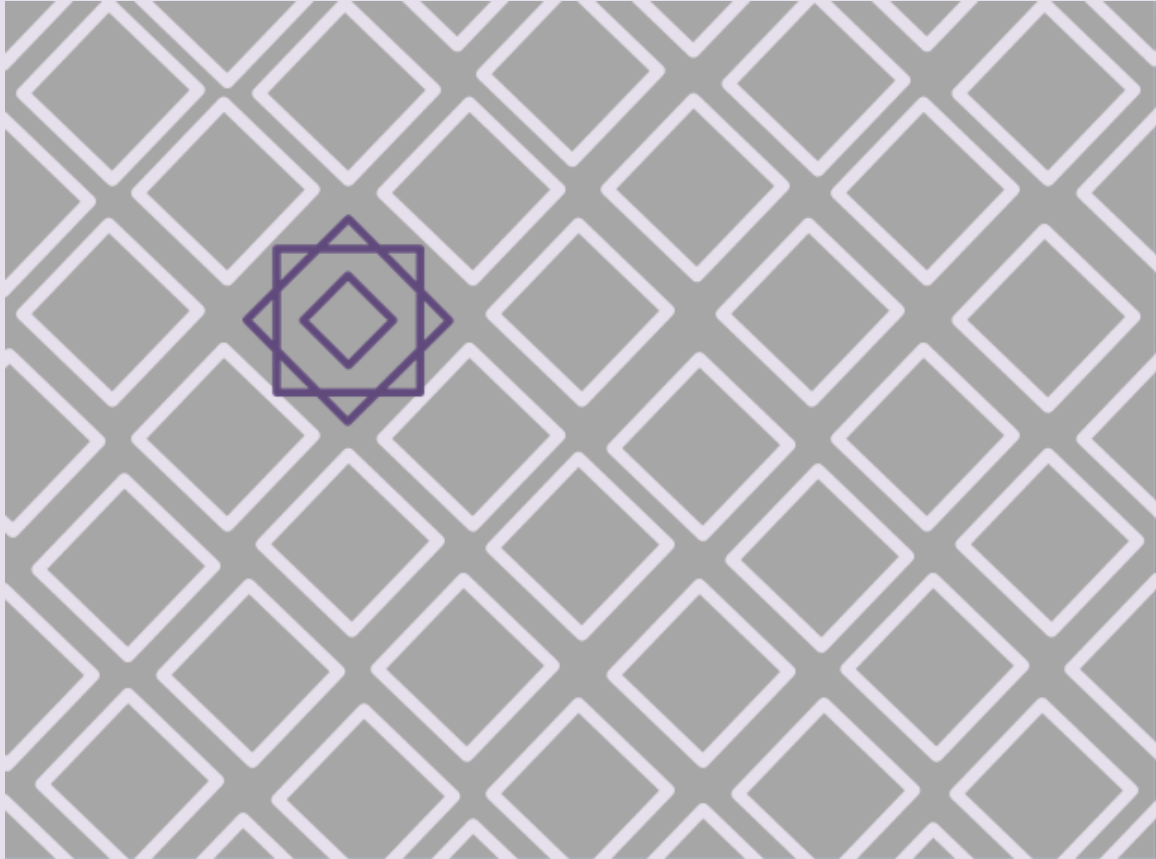
If you'd like some language to use, consider something like:

I read an article in the Harvard Business Review about the benefits of mindfulness and meditation. I found an app that has 3-minute guided meditations specifically for use during the workday. I'd like to [give you a heads up][get your permission][etc] ... and try it out for two weeks here at work.

It can be helpful to specify a length of time as a trial period. That let's your manager know there is a point of time in the near future when the two of you can revisit the experiment to evaluate whether or not it is detracting from or enhancing your productivity.

Experience Log

Recording:	Date:	Time:
How I feel before:		
How I feel during/after:		
Recording:	Date:	Time:
How I feel before:		
How I feel during/after:		
Recording:	Date:	Time:
How I feel before:		
How I feel during/after:		
Recording:	Date:	Time:
How I feel before:		
How I feel during/after:		
Recording:	Date:	Time:
How I feel before:		
How I feel during/after:		
Recording:	Date:	Time:
How I feel before:		
How I feel during/after:		



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Tune in, To Yourself