

MINDFULNESS FOR ANXIETY

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WHAT IS MINDFULNESS?

Mindfulness is a practice that helps us live in harmony with ourselves.¹ According to Jon Kabat-Zinn, a leader in the practice, “mindfulness means paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally.”¹

You might recall that anxiety is future-based worry. As such, one helpful strategy to reduce anxiety is to bring your focus back to the present moment by engaging your five senses through mindfulness.²

To ensure your practice is successful, the following is important to note:

- Mindfulness will not make anxiety go away. It might help reduce it, but if your intention going into your practice is to make anxiety disappear, you will likely be very disappointed.
- It is also vital to practice mindfulness regularly, even when you are not feeling particularly anxious.

EXERCISE #1: LEAVES ON A STREAM

The following exercise adapted from Dr. Russ Harris’ work is particularly helpful for letting go of our thoughts.³

1. Begin by finding a quiet space and closing your eyes or focusing on a spot in front of you.
2. Start by imagining a flowing river. As a thought pops up, imagine placing that thought on a leaf and watching it to the float down the river. You can do this with any thought, whether it is positive, negative, or neutral. It is also okay if the thought floats down the river slowly or gets stuck; just allow it to move at its own pace.
3. Continue to practice for 1-2 minutes. When ready, open your eyes.

EXERCISE #2: DESCRIBE AN OBJECT

You can practice mindfulness by simply choosing an object around you and describing it using your five senses.⁴ You can do this by asking yourself questions such as: What does it look like? Is it shiny or dull? What colour is it? What does it smell like? What noise does it make (if any)? What does it feel like? Is it soft, furry, rough? This practice is helpful because is difficult for our brain to hold on to multiple pieces of information at once. This makes it challenging to describe an object and worry at the same time.

EXERCISE #3: DROPPING ANCHOR

Dropping Anchor is a popular mindfulness exercise used in Acceptance and Commitment Therapy. The following exercise has been adapted from Dr. Russ Harris' work³:

Imagine there is a boat out at sea facing a large storm. In order to keep itself steady, it chooses to drop an anchor. Although dropping an anchor does not change the weather in any way, it makes riding out the storm more manageable. This is a helpful analogy to use when experiencing challenging thoughts, feelings, and sensations. We can think of those things as an "internal storm" and we can choose to "drop an anchor" as a way to ride them out.

1. Start by closing your eyes or starring at a point in your space.
2. Begin by turning your attention inwards and acknowledging any thoughts, feelings, and sensations that are coming up for you. You do not need to try and change them, or make them go away. You are simply acknowledging that they are there with you.
3. While keeping those thoughts, feelings, and sensations in mind, move your body by stretching your arms out in front of you. Keep in mind that you are in control of this movement as you stretch. You may also choose to take several deep breaths here.
4. Next, bring your attention to your surroundings and take notice of any sounds you hear around you.
5. Repeat Steps 2-4 several times as needed. When you are ready, open your eyes and return.



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References

¹ Kabat-Zinn, J. (2005). *Wherever you go there you are* (10th ed.). Hyperion.

² Kabat-Zinn J, Massion A O, Kristeller J, et al. Effectiveness of a meditation-based stress reduction program in the treatment of anxiety disorders. *American Journal of Psychiatry*, 149, 936–943.

³ Harris, R. (2019). *ACT made simple: an easy-to-read primer on acceptance and commitment therapy* (2nd ed.). New Harbinger Publications.

⁴ Chapman, A. L., Gratz, K. L., & Tull, M. T. (2011). *The dialectical behavior therapy skills workbook for anxiety: Breaking free from worry panic, PTSD, and other anxiety symptoms*. New Harbinger Publications.