



**Dana-Farber**  
Cancer Institute



**BRIGHAM AND  
WOMEN'S HOSPITAL**

## DANA-FARBER/BRIGHAM AND WOMEN'S CANCER CENTER

### Stress and Mindfulness

Stress is what you feel when you have to handle more than you are used to or when you encounter troubling or negative situations. A lot of things can cause stress. You may feel stress when you go on a job interview, take a test, or run a race. This kind of short-term stress is normal and even useful. It can help you if you need to work hard or react quickly. Stress also can last a long time. Long-term stress is caused by ongoing troubling situations or events. Examples of long-term stress include long-term health problems, continuing problems at work, and conflicts in your family. Long-term stress can reduce your quality of life.

Mindfulness is a focus only on things happening in the present moment. It's a process of purposefully paying attention to and being aware of your surroundings, your emotions, your thoughts, and how your body feels. The goal of mindfulness is to still be aware of these things but to not judge these experiences as "good" or "bad". Mindfulness can help you learn to calm your mind and body to help you cope with illness, pain, and stress.

#### **How Does Mindfulness Help to Relieve Stress?**

Mindfulness can help quiet your mind and relax your body. Studies show that it can help some people sleep better, feel less anxious, and bring their blood pressure down. It has also been shown to help some people live and cope better with certain health problems like heart disease, depression, chronic pain, and cancer.

#### **How Do You Practice Mindfulness?**

To be mindful is to pay attention, to be present, and to be accepting.

- When you're mindful, you do just one thing and you pay close attention to that one thing. For example, you may sit quietly and notice your emotions or how your food tastes and smells.
- When you're present, you focus on the things that are happening right now. You let go of your thoughts about the past and the future. When you dwell on the past or the future, you miss moments that can heal and strengthen you. You may miss moments like hearing a child laugh or seeing a friendly face when you think you're all alone.
- When you're accepting, you don't judge the present moment. Instead you acknowledge and accept your thoughts and feelings as they come.

You can practice anytime, anywhere, and in any way you choose. Here are a few ideas:

- While doing your chores, like washing the dishes, let your mind focus on what's in your hand. What does the dish feel like? Is the water warm or cold?
- Go outside and take a few deep breaths. What is the air like? Is it warm or cold?



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- When you can, take some time at the start of your day to sit alone and think.
- Take a slow walk by yourself. Count your steps while you breathe in and out.
- Try yoga breathing exercises, stretches, and poses to strengthen and relax your muscles.
- At work, if you can, try to stop for a few moments each hour. Note how your body feels. Let yourself regroup and let your mind settle before you return to what you were doing.
- If you struggle with anxiety or "worry thoughts," imagine your mind as a blue sky and your worry thoughts as clouds. Now imagine those worry thoughts floating across your mind's sky. Just let them pass by as you watch.

### **Resources for Mindfulness**

There are many online, print, and in-person resources to practice mindfulness. Apps like [Headspace](#) or [UCLA Mindful](#) offer guided meditations, and books like [Fully Present: The Science, Art, and Practice of Mindfulness](#) go more in-depth into the practice. There are also opportunities to take group classes on mindfulness and meditation; for example, nationally you can participate in online mindfulness classes through [True North Treks](#). Dana-Farber offers [several opportunities](#) through the Zakim Center. Multiple other courses are offered throughout the Boston area, including at [Cambridge Health Alliance](#) and [UMass Medical Center](#), as well as a multitude of drop-in classes, which can be found through an online search for your preferred location.