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### MINDFULNESS

Practicing mindfulness means paying attention to the present moment and settling your thoughts.

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# Meditation and Mindfulness

By Lisa Farrell, PT, PhD, AT, C

## BUSTING THROUGH MISCONCEPTIONS AND BUILDING OPPORTUNITY FOR SUCCESS

When meditation comes up in conversation people often say, "Oh, I tried that, and afterward, I felt so calm and relaxed." If this has been your experience, that's wonderful! Feeling calm and relaxed can be one of the many benefits that occur from practicing meditation.

However, people also say, "I can't meditate. It's too hard for me." If this has been your experience, you are not alone. You might have the expectation that your mind should be quiet and your body relaxed during meditation. When it isn't, you feel like you're doing it wrong or it isn't working.

Other common reasons people give for not meditating include:

- "I can't sit still long enough to do it."
- "I don't have time to meditate."
- "It's not for me because it is too weird."

Even though social media has been a game changer for providing easy access to guided meditation, these resources can be off-putting if they don't provide clear guidance. Lack of proper instruction and clear explanation are frequently obstacles for a successful meditation practice.

Meditation is a mind-body practice with a wide variety of techniques from both ancient and modern times. Some of the current popular forms of meditation are Mindfulness Meditation, Transcendental Meditation™, Vipassana (or Insight) Meditation, Metta (or Loving Kindness) Meditation, as well as movement-based meditations like Yoga, Tai Chi, and Qi Gong. What unites the various schools of meditation is the intention to build attention and awareness by observing and experiencing the present moment.

This article focuses on Mindfulness Meditation and covers its definition, importance, and best practices. Also, some insights and suggestions for using this type of meditation are provided for those dealing with the consequences of vestibular dysfunction.



Beyond helping to calm the mind, regularly practicing meditation has many benefits, including:

MEDITATION BENEFITS
Encourages creativity and innovation
Fosters self-awareness
Cultivates compassion for oneself and others
Activates the healing response
Promotes emotional and physical well-being
Enhances the ability to focus

**ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS**

**What is mindfulness meditation?**

The practice of mindfulness has you simply pay attention to the present moment by placing your focus in a particular way... without judgment, with curiosity, and with a gentle awareness.

**Why is it important to be mindful?**

Most of the time, our attention is not where we want it to be. Our thoughts and emotions, hopes or worries for the future, and memories and regrets from the past can distract us. An inner voice tends to chatter away nonstop and can be likened to monkeys that jump around from tree to tree, often referred to as having a “monkey mind.” Modern living only makes the “monkey mind” worse as we try to keep up with all the input that comes from social media and try to manage all of our responsibilities. Besides having difficulty living in the present moment, we tend to live life on autopilot by doing things unconsciously. Living with a monkey mind and on autopilot hijacks our attention from the present moment here and now. Most people live this way for most of their lives, and, therefore, they don’t get the chance to fully experience or appreciate their lives. However, it is in this moment that we live our lives--not in the past, which is no

longer happening, and not in the future, which has yet to come. Mindfulness meditation focuses our attention by settling the monkey mind and turning off our autopilot, allowing us the opportunity to reap the benefits life offers.

**How is mindfulness meditation practiced?**

Although this article is not a replacement for being properly instructed in mindfulness meditation, here are the basics to help you have a better understanding:

**When to meditate:** When you meditate does not matter. Choose a time that works best for you and practice every day, which reinforces and deepens your commitment to meditation. However, practicing right before bed is not recommended for everyone because meditation can sometimes energize you and affect your sleep.

**The place to meditate:** You can meditate wherever you feel comfortable. Ideally, choose a place that is convenient to access and quiet. Avoid potential distractions---turn off your cell phone, television, and any music. Also, let others know in advance that you will be meditating and don’t want to be disturbed unless there is an emergency.

**What you wear:** Whatever clothes you feel comfortable in work well with meditation.

**Your position:** Mindfulness meditation can be practiced in a variety of positions. Sitting in a supportive chair that promotes good posture, placing your hands on your legs so your arms are supported and relaxed, and having your feet uncrossed and flat on the ground is most accessible. However, you could also choose to sit on a cushion on the floor with legs crossed. Also, some mindfulness techniques are practiced standing or while moving or walking. Your intention with your posture is to promote being awake and alert. Therefore, laying down is not the ideal posture for meditating because you can be tempted to fall asleep. Ultimately, you should choose the best position to practice meditation because its most important that you are comfortable.

**What to do with your eyes:** Ideally, mindfulness meditation is practiced with the eyelids closed. However, if you prefer to keep your eyelids open, you can look down toward the floor a few feet in front of you while you keep your gaze soft and unfocused.



## What are the key principles of mindfulness meditation?

It's OK for you to have thoughts while meditating. It is the nature of the mind to think. That's its job! Know that all thoughts and feelings are welcome when practicing meditation.

You do not try to force your mind to be quiet and stop thinking while meditating. Instead, you give it something to focus on so it has an anchor to keep your attention in the present moment. When you do this your mind will naturally settle.

Mindfulness meditation uses different objects to focus on. Since the breath is always with us in the present moment, it is often used as the focus of your attention. Also, your body only lives in the here and now, so it can also be used as the focus for your attention. You can pay attention to internal experiences within your body, such as feeling or imagining different body parts, or you can pay attention to experiences outside of your body, such as different senses like sound, sight, smell, taste, touch, and temperature.

Attention can be directed to focus on one object, like the breath, body, or something in the environment. This form of mindfulness meditation is known as "focused attention," and is used when you are first learning. However, focused attention is also often used by many experienced meditators.

Another method of paying attention is allowing your focus to be on anything that comes into your awareness in the present moment. It provides a broad view of whatever is happening in the moment. This form of mindfulness meditation is known as open awareness or open monitoring, and although it may seem simple to do, it is considered an advanced form of practice.

It is important to know that while meditating your mind will become distracted and it will wander. You will often get lost in stories that you tell yourself. It is natural to lose your focus. It happens to everyone. When it does, simply recognize it and bring your attention back to the focus of your meditation.

Remember, you have the chance to redirect your focus again, and again and again. Paying attention is not a one-time event. When you bring your attention back to the focus of your meditation, you are doing what mindfulness is all about: being present.

The attitude to take when you lose your focus is to remain open to whatever is present in the moment. Do this by allowing yourself to not have any expectations or judge the meditation experience by saying, "this should be happening" or "this shouldn't be happening." Instead, kindly and gently, without trying too hard, redirect your attention back to the focus of your meditation.

Additionally, keep an attitude of curiosity by allowing yourself to explore and have a genuine interest in the experience. Being curious will help reduce judgement and guard against boredom or the desire to have a different experience.



Lastly, with meditation, it only works if you practice it consistently and do not give up. If you feel restless or think of something else you would rather do, you can make the choice to stay with the practice until the time that is set in the beginning is completed. This will help nurture commitment for your practice.

With mindfulness, there is the formal meditation practice and the practice of incorporating mindfulness by being present with your daily activities. Your meditation practice will help you cultivate being mindful in life.



## **SUGGESTIONS FOR USING MINDFULNESS WHEN DEALING WITH VESTIBULAR DYSFUNCTION**

Vestibular dysfunction causes physical symptoms (i.e., vertigo, dizziness, blurred vision with head movement, and/or imbalance) that can frequently be overwhelming. Feeling anxious or overwhelmed by physical sensations can worsen emotional symptoms, like fear, depression, frustration, and anger. When treating the physical consequences of vestibular dysfunction, the emotional consequences should be addressed, too. The best advice is to seek treatment from a psychologist. Additionally, formally practicing mindfulness meditation on a daily basis helps change your relationship to emotions, which can give you better perspective about the negative impact troubling emotions have.

Beyond psychological treatment and formal mindfulness practice for vestibular rehabilitation for symptoms related to vestibular dysfunction, physical exercise and mindfulness principles significantly help heal the body and mind. Some specific ways to incorporate mindfulness when dealing with the consequences of vestibular dysfunction include:

**GROUNDING TRAINS THE BRAIN TO USE INFORMATION FROM THE BODY FOR ORIENTATION, INSTEAD OF USING VISION FOR THIS INFORMATION.**

### **Body Scans (AKA Grounding)**

This exercise helps train the brain to use information from the body for orientation (i.e., knowing), instead of using vision for this information. Vision can act as the dominant sense when there is vestibular dysfunction and vision shouldn't always be relied on because it can easily be fooled. For example, when you are sitting at a traffic light and the body is still, but you see

movement in the environment from the passing traffic in the intersection. The brain has to figure out what sense to pay attention to. Your body sense tells the brain that the body is still, however the visual sense tells the brain the body is moving because it sees the passing cars. This mismatch of sensory information causes a conflict that has to be resolved. Training the brain to use the body sense can help resolve this conflict.

There are many ways to perform a body scan (AKA Grounding). Here are the instructions for one way:

1. While sitting comfortably in a supportive chair that has a back, rest your hands comfortably in your lap, and allow your eyelids to close. However, if you prefer to keep your eyelids open, you can cap them by looking down toward the floor a few feet in front of you while you keep your gaze soft and unfocused.
2. With a gentle attention, slowly and steadily scan your body by starting at your feet.
3. Feel the pressure of your feet on the ground and your legs/buttocks on the seat.
4. Find different points on your feet that are touching the ground as well as on the back of your leg/buttocks that are touching the seat. Note and experience how the ground and seat are solid and unmoving and how stable your feet and legs are by being connected to the surfaces and how you are also solid and unmoving with this connection.
5. Feel how your trunk is touching the chair back and is providing support. Also, explore and experience what is happening from the pelvis, to the abdomen, up through chest, and along back from the tailbone to the base of the neck.
6. Move your attention from your trunk to your arms---focus your attention first with your fingers, then your hands, and move up to your forearms and then your upper arms and shoulders.
7. Next note how your head is connected to your trunk and explore and experience your face and head.
8. Finish the scan by moving your attention back from your head, through your trunk, to your legs, and returning to your feet.



9. While doing this, know that you are supported and stable.
10. Allow your breathing to remain natural and relaxed throughout the body scan.
11. As you scan, simply be an observer, allowing yourself to experience whatever is present. If you notice that you become uncomfortable or distracted at any time, recognize it, allow yourself to gently and kindly let it go, then continue with the body scan. And, you can do this over and over again.
12. Also, if you find yourself trying too hard at any time, allow yourself to ease up and gently, with as little effort as possible, simply experience what is happening.
13. This can be practiced throughout the day, such as before or after an activity. Also, it is recommended to be practiced before and after different vestibular exercises and between sets of each exercise.

### **Body Scans (AKA Grounding) that integrate active relaxation**

This exercise counteracts the “fight or flight” response (AKA stress response) that occurs from experiencing both physical and emotional stress by cultivating the relaxation response.

Perform a body scan, like the one above, with the addition of actively tightening and relaxing different muscles in the body. As you scan from the feet, legs, abdomen, back, hands, arms, shoulders, and face, tighten the muscles and hold for a couple of seconds. Then, let go of the contraction. After you let go of the contraction, allow yourself to experience the feeling of relaxation that occurs from the letting go. Slowly and steadily move up the body, tightening and letting the contraction go, while you allow your breath to remain natural and relaxed.

This can be practiced throughout the day, especially when you notice that you are experiencing stress. However, even when you don’t experience stress, it can also be practiced to build resiliency against the stress response.

### **Practice ABC’s**

ABC’s is an acronym that was coined by the author and that stands for Attention, Breath, Change, and either Savor or Support. This exercise has you practice paying attention to uncomfortable emotions and physical discomforts that are experienced throughout the day and then has you take action without judgement, with kindness, and curiosity. This exercise can help you change the relationship with how you are experiencing what is happening.

<b>ABC’S INSTRUCTIONS</b>		
<b>A</b>	<b>Attention</b>	When you feel uncomfortable in any way, draw your ATTENTION to the moment.
<b>B</b>	<b>Breath</b>	Take a long, slow deep BREATH in and out with the focus on allowing the out breath to relax you.
<b>C</b>	<b>Change</b>	Ask yourself if there was a CHANGE?
<b>S</b>	<b>Savor or Support</b>	<p>If you answer “yes, there was a positive change”, then SAVOR it by allowing yourself to appreciate it---enjoy it---and be grateful for it.</p> <p>If you answer “no, there wasn’t a positive change”, then SUPPORT yourself, such as changing or stopping what you are doing, asking for help, etc. Once you SUPPORT yourself, SAVOR when a positive change occurs.</p>



## LEARN MORE ABOUT MEDITATION

To overcome the misconceptions of meditation and have the best opportunity for success, proper training is essential. Meditation classes can be found online or they may be offered in local communities. Before signing up to take classes, make sure the instructor is qualified and research the meditation technique that is being taught. When anxiety, depression and/or trauma are so overwhelming that mindfulness meditation does not seem to work for you, look for a psychologist who is a qualified mindfulness meditation instructor to work with you.

## MORE RESOURCES

Here are a few books to further your education about meditation:

- The Headspace Guide to Meditation and Mindfulness: How Mindfulness Can Change Your Life in Ten Minutes a Day by Andy Puddicombe
- Mindfulness: An Eight-Week Plan for Finding Peace in a Frantic World
- by Mark Williams and Danny Penman with Forward by Jon Kabat-Zinn
- Wherever You Go, There You Are by Jon Kabat-Zinn (Father of 'Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction' method)
- Loving-Kindness: The Revolutionary Art of Happiness by Sharon Salzberg
- Radical Compassion: Learning to Love Yourself and Your World with the Practice of RAIN by Tara Brach

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Farrell is a physical therapist, athletic trainer, and certified meditation and mindfulness instructor in South Florida. She has been specializing in vestibular and balance rehabilitation for adults with various neurological pathologies since 1999. For more information about her practice, visit [symmetryalliance.com](https://symmetryalliance.com).

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