

## **THE MINDFUL PAUSE**

*“Discomfort avoidance is the common thread that binds all anxiety problems together.”*

- *John Forsyth, Ph.D., and Georg Eifert, Ph.D., psychologists specializing in anxiety.*

*“Short moments, many times.”*

- *Tibetan master Tsoknyi Rinpoche (and a zillion other Tibetan masters; this is very old advice)*

These two insights combined reveal a solution: Turn toward your difficulties and do not flinch away from them. (Yeah, I know, easier said than done.) The following provides a bite-sized way to do that so you can deal with anxiety right away in the moments when it arises.

This is called a “mindful pause.”

- A mindful pause is a meditation but not in a scary, “oh my gosh, how can I wipe my mind clear for 30 minutes” kind of way. Studies show that meditation can reduce stress and anxiety, and even in 30 seconds, the mindful pause lets you experience that firsthand. One study even found that meditation shrinks the amygdala, the part of the brain responsible for stress, anxiety, and fear.
- Basically, the mindful pause is a great “spot treatment” for times when you feel stressed, anxious, or overwhelmed but have lots to do.
- It involves taking 30 seconds to tune into your own body, and you can do it anywhere. You can be sitting, standing, lying down, whatever. Plus, no one will even know that you’re meditating. When you’re spinning out into an anxiety loop, sometimes you just need to interrupt the process. Inserting a pause gives you the opportunity to collect yourself.
- Here’s how it works:

### **1. Take a deep breath.**

Take a slow inhale, filling your lungs from bottom to top. Inhale into your lower belly and then fill upward through your mid-torso and chest.

This will help you take advantage of the well-documented connection between breath and mood. By slowing and deepening your breathing, you can actually create feelings of relaxation and calm.

### **2. Turn toward your body.**

Open your attention to the sensations in your body. Let yourself notice whatever comes up: warmth, coolness, tingling, pressure, or the touch of clothing. There’s no need to evaluate the sensations as “good” or “bad.” Itching is simply itching. Coolness is simply coolness.

If you notice a complex array of sensations: perfect. If all you notice is the feeling of your butt on the chair: also perfect.

- If you notice sensations that seem connected to stress or anxiety, those are especially good to pay attention to. Maybe it's a twisting in your gut or a tightness in your chest or warmth on your face. If you can stay with these bodily sensations and watch them, rather than taking the bait of anxious thoughts, you can let tough emotions pass without taking too much heat.

It's like playing in the ocean: When a wave is coming, and you try to plant your feet and resist, you get knocked over. But if you dive straight through the wave, it's no problem, you eventually end up on shore.

This step need not take longer than one in-breath or out-breath. Stay with it longer if you like, but it can be that quick.

### **3. Rest your attention on your breath.**

Pay attention to the sensation of air touching your nostrils as you breathe. With gentle curiosity, watch the flow of changing sensations at the nostrils. These sensations anchor you in the present moment.

In this step, there's no need to deepen or slow your breath at all; just let your body breathe however it wants to. And just like the previous step, this step can be as short as one in-breath or one out-breath. You might feel like staying with it longer, but that's up to you.

### **4. Carry on with your life!**

The last step of the mindful pause is to simply re-engage with the world, without hurry.

Open your eyes if you closed them...and carry on with your day. But see if you can maintain that calm feeling and groundedness you just created. Don't lunge for your phone (I know, it's tempting) or speed off to your next activity. If you can, take a few seconds just sitting or standing there quietly, and then move at a more leisurely pace.

Because mindful pauses are so quick and discreet, you can do them anywhere, anytime. You can use the mindful pause at your desk, on public transit, in line at the grocery store...the hardest part isn't actually completing the mindful pause itself; **it's remembering to do it in the first place.** You may want to remember to take mindful pauses by linking them to specific moments that occur on a daily basis: when you first get up in the morning or before you turn on your computer.

Be careful not to fall into the trap of using the mindful pause as a way to resist your anxiety. If you're doing the four steps, then thinking to yourself, "What the hell? My anxiety is still here, the stupid thing didn't work..."

***The "trick" is to accept that tough feelings, like anxiety, will come and go.*** When they're here, they're here, but that doesn't need to be a problem. By turning toward your emotions and watching them, even for 30 seconds, you can find real relief.