



What is the mind-body connection? And why is it so important?

Your mind and body are powerful partners. How you think can affect how you feel. And how you feel can affect your thinking.

An example of this mind-body connection is how your body responds to stress. Constant worry and stress over jobs, finances, relationships or other problems can cause tense muscles, pain, headaches and stomach problems. It may also lead to high blood pressure or other serious problems.

On the other hand, constant pain or a health problem like heart disease can affect your emotions. You might become depressed, anxious and stressed, which could affect how well you manage or cope with your illness.

But your mind can have a positive effect on your health, too. Having a positive outlook and letting anxious or negative thoughts go, may help you stay healthier overall. Having hope and finding healthier ways to cope with health challenges can be empowering and improve the body's physical sensations.

How your thoughts and feelings can affect your health

Your brain produces chemicals that can improve your health, such as endorphins, which are natural painkillers, and gamma globulin, which strengthens your immune system.

Research shows what your brain produces depends in part on your thoughts, feelings and expectations. For example, if you're ill, but you have hope and a positive attitude and you believe that you'll get better, your brain is

likely to produce chemicals that will boost your body's healing power. On the flipside, negative thoughts and emotions can keep your brain from producing some of the chemicals that help your body heal, and also can increase stress hormones, like cortisol. Exposing your body to stress hormones over long periods of time can be bad for your health.

This doesn't mean you should blame yourself for getting sick or feeling down about a health problem. Some illnesses are beyond your control. It just means your thoughts and state of mind are helpful resources you can use.

How stress can affect you

How you handle stress has an effect on your health.

When you're stressed or anxious, your body reacts as if it is under attack. Your body goes into the "fight-or-flight" response, and releases hormones to speed your heart rate and breathing, increase blood pressure, and make your muscles tense.

This stress reaction is good if you need to avoid danger. But if you constantly feel stressed, your body's natural fight-or-flight response lasts too long, and your blood pressure may stay high. This is bad for your heart and body. Stress can also affect your emotions. It can make you feel moody, tense, upset, depressed and even hopeless.

But when you are able to relax your mind and body, your body stops producing high levels of the stress hormones. The fight-or-flight response can decrease, and you return to a state of calm, both physically and mentally.

That's how your mind and body work together, and why mindfully nurturing their connection can support your health and well-being.

7 tools to help you relax

Sure, stress is a natural part of life, and our bodies have built-in physical, emotional and mental responses to help us through it. But chronic stress can take a serious toll on our mental and physical health — including contributing to depression, anxiety, sleep problems, high blood pressure, heart disease, obesity and a weakened immune system, among other conditions.

To help combat stress, you can incorporate the following techniques into your routine to trigger your body's natural relaxation response:

- Tune in to your body. Become aware of your breathing and try to take slower, deeper breaths. This can help slow your heart rate.
- Be mindful of any muscle tension you may find in your body. Progressively and slowly tense and relax your muscles, starting with your feet and working up to your head. Take deep, slow breaths while doing so, to further connect the body to the breath.
- Replace negative images with positive, peaceful ones in your mind's eye. For example, envision a day at the beach or relaxing in a hammock in the shade.
- Listen to music or sing out loud to songs you enjoy. This can help lower your heart rate and blood pressure. It can also help you feel calm or energized.
- Find a way to bring laughter and humor into your day. Watching a funny video clip, a movie, or talking with a friend who makes you laugh can help break tension during the day. Laughter releases feel-good, stress-busting hormones.
- Practice gratitude to help cultivate a positive perspective. For example, jotting down things that you appreciate or sending a thank-note to someone can help remind us of what is truly important.
- Use your senses to practice being present. Push aside thoughts about your to-do list, future events and things in the past. Try to keep your thoughts on the here-and-now.

While relaxation techniques won't eliminate the stress in your life, they can help in managing your stress load. Keep in mind, relaxation techniques are most effective when they are combined with other tools for healthy living, including getting enough sleep, eating nutritious foods and moving your body regularly.

Sometimes stress can still take a big toll on our well-being, even when we try mindfulness and relaxation techniques. If you feel like you are struggling to feel better after trying a few of these tips over time, consider talking to your doctor or a mental health professional. It's never too early or too late to get more support.

Decrease stress with this mindful technique

From practicing yoga, running, walking, swimming and dancing, to meditation, deep breathing or taking a hot bath — people find all kinds of ways to de-stress. Here's one you may not be as familiar with — mindful-based stress reduction.

This stress-reduction technique helps you train your mind to focus on the present moment in order to help you not dwell on the past or worry about the future. It can be a great way to create an overall sense of calm and also stop or slow any racing thoughts.

For example, maybe you keep second-guessing a decision you already made or cycling through every possible outcome of an upcoming meeting. Perhaps you are fixating on feeling slighted by a friend, or whatever else might make you feel tense, frustrated, pressured or at your wit's end.

By learning and using mindful stress-reduction techniques, you can give yourself a useful tool to stop spiraling thought patterns and reset. Practicing this technique regularly can help you gain control over your thought patterns overall, so you'll be better able to let go of the unknown or what cannot be changed, and accept what is. In other words, mindfulness teaches you to be aware of and in control of your thought patterns so the patterns don't control you.

Now, let's first take a look at mindfulness techniques you can use during stressful times to help you bring a sense of calmness:

- **Take a "mental" body scan.** It's often helpful to begin by focusing your attention on your body one area at a time, starting with your feet and gradually moving your awareness up until you reach your head. As you do this, you may note places where there is tension or pain. You also may notice how your belly rises and falls as you breathe.
- **Scan your thoughts.** It is common for the mind to wander when a person begins to practice mindfulness. If that happens to you, it's OK. Allow yourself to temporarily focus on the thought or distraction without judgment. Then let it pass.

So, for example, you might notice a worrisome thought about work comes to your mind. Simply note the thought — "work" — and the feeling — "worry". Don't hold on to the thought. Instead, be aware of it and move on by turning your attention back to the present moment.

This will likely happen more than once with thoughts that want to stick around. That's OK. It takes practice to let your thoughts go and stay in the present moment. We often have to repeat the exercise several times throughout the day.

- **Strengthen and relax your muscles**, such as by practicing yoga breathing exercises, stretches and gentle movement.

Here are some ways to practice mindfulness — and be present — in your everyday life:

- **Go outside and take a few deep breaths.** What's the air like? Is it warm or cold? How does the warmth or chill feel on your body? Try to accept that feeling and not resist it. Notice any plants, their colors, and the contrast of those colors against the sky and clouds.
- **Eat a meal in silence.** Focus on your food. Smell your food before eating it. Notice what your food looks like. Eat slowly, and savor each bite. What flavors do you taste?
- **Take time to be alone and present.** For example, focus on your breathing, gaze out a window and listen to the sounds outdoors, or take a leisurely walk.
- **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.
- **Visualize.** Imagine your mind as a blue sky and your thoughts as clouds. Imagine those thoughts floating across your mind's sky, like you would watch clouds float across the sky. Do not judge or resist your thoughts. Just let them pass. This can be especially helpful if you have anxiety or lots of "worry thoughts." Even when there may be lots of thoughts coming quickly, still try to let them float by.