

These mindfulness practices can help you to stay calm and focused as you revise for your exams.

### Important

If you feel that stress and anxiety are getting on top of you, speak to someone you trust. Opening up about how you feel can really help in dealing with what can be an intense time. If you have recently experienced the loss of a loved one, a traumatic event or have been diagnosed with a mental illness, or have any ongoing physical pain, it's really important that you check in with someone (such as a parent, teacher, counsellor or doctor) before doing these practices.

### What is mindfulness?

Mindfulness is essentially awareness. It is about training your attention to notice your thoughts, feelings, emotions, sensations, physical reactions, and anything around you that is happening right now, without judging them. This can help you to make better, more skilful decisions. Your brain can be 'rewired' to work in more helpful or skilful ways. In many ways it's like brain training. Just as people go to the gym and lift weights regularly to build muscle, mindfulness helps train the brain by doing the practices daily.

### Preparing for exams

Neuroscientists are starting to understand more about how mindfulness practice can help. Studies indicate that it helps in two main ways, especially when it comes to exams.

- 1 It helps to increase the density in the front of your brain. This is the part of the brain associated with memory, your ability to solve problems and to manage distraction.
- 2 It helps us to manage strong or difficult emotions. Feeling some stress and anxiety around exams is natural and, indeed, can help boost performance. It's when this becomes too much that it becomes a problem.

Mindfulness helps to calm activity in the bit of your brain associated with worry.

### Doing and being

Very often, it is easy to want to get straight into doing a task like revision just to get it finished and out of the way. This is called **doing mode** - it helps you to get things done, but not always to consider the best way of tackling the task. Mindfulness helps by giving you a moment to pause and enter **being mode**. This allows time for you to ground yourself and be fully focused on the present moment, so you experience things more fully. Usually this will help you to take a calmer and wiser approach to a task, which will mean you're more effective.

The pressures of revision and exams may make you feel that taking 'time out' from revision to do these practices is not possible. However, regularly doing even short practices where you can drop into 'being mode' can begin to give you greater mental space or clarity.

### Mindfully making a drink

- What can you **hear**? For example, when making a drink, notice the sound of pouring the drink or boiling water.
- What can you **smell**? For example, for tea, coffee or juice, notice how the smells **change** as you make the drink.
- What can you **see**? For example, notice the colours and how they **change**.
- What can you **feel**? For example, the warmth or coolness of the drink in your hands.
- What can you **taste**? For example, when taking a sip of the drink, notice how it first tastes and any **changes** in taste.
- Enjoy **being in the moment** as you consume your drink.

This simple exercise can have a big impact. Many people find they notice and taste far more.

When you take time to slow down and live in a more moment-to-moment way, you are able to experience life more fully and appreciatively.

This can then help to create a greater sense of calm.

### Being kind to yourself

Exam preparation can be a stressful time, so it's important to take some time out regularly to be kind to yourself: to recharge your batteries, give your brain some breathing space and acknowledge all the good preparatory work you're putting in. Take regular breaks and enjoy some 'downtime' with your friends and family to help recharge.



## Practising mindfulness

Just as learning any new skill, for example playing a sport or an instrument, mindfulness is something that has to be practised daily to have richer benefits. Doing daily practices of 10 minutes or so can really help you to move your awareness to be fully in the present moment in a non-judgemental way, helping you to avoid overthinking, which can lead to worry, anxiety and stress.

It is best to learn how to practise mindfulness through a course. There may be courses running in your area. An internet search will help you find a course local to you or one running online.

### Good posture for practice

Getting your posture correct for doing mindfulness practice is really important. These practices are designed to be done in a seated position. They can also be done lying down.

Try to find a chair you can sit in that allows your feet to rest fully on the ground with your ankles, knees and hips all at right angles, with your back slightly away from the back of the chair.

The room you choose should be somewhere you won't be disturbed. Turn your phone onto silent or flight mode. Let the people you live with know that you'll be doing mindfulness practice so that they do not disturb you. Mindfulness can help you take a healthy, effective approach to your revision. But remember, you will still need to plan and revise!

## Practice 1: Mindfulness of breath and body

### The benefits

Very often our minds like to wander. In this practice, you focus your attention on your breathing and on different parts of your body. It's a bit like shining a torchlight so that you focus on just one thing at a time, feeling the sensations that arise. Practising this regularly helps the mind wander less, which leads to less worrying and helps with concentration. Remember – it is normal for your mind to wander while you are meditating as that is what minds do! You are just trying to train it.

The Mindfulness of breath and body practice will help you to develop your awareness and focus, which can help with revision. In addition, focusing on breath also has a calming effect (great if you are worrying about exams). Moving the focus to the body can also help to identify physical feelings caused by stress. Examples of stress in the body might be 'butterflies' or cramps in your stomach, your hands shaking, getting sweaty or your mouth going dry.

### Guidance on the practice

If your mind wanders, try to bring it back with a sense of kindness. It doesn't matter how many times the mind wanders, it's bringing it back each time to the focus on the breath or the body that's important, as you are increasing your concentration and training your attention each time. Don't be frustrated as it is just part of training your brain.

To access the audio file for Practice 1, please use the app.



## Practice 2: The three-step breathing space

### The benefits

Worrying about what has gone on in the past or what might happen in the future cannot change events and distracts you from the present – from what you are doing now. The present is something that you can change, so that is where your focus should be. For example, worrying about your exams in several months' time won't be as helpful as revising now! The three-step breathing space practice helps you to fully ground yourself in the present and gives you a few moments to rest and recharge. The practice is structured a bit like an hourglass.

The three-step breathing space is a very useful practice if ever you start to feel stressed and want a pause to help you step back and get perspective.

### Guidance on the practice

The great thing about this practice is that you can do it in three minutes or less. Use it to 'recharge' yourself while revising or ground yourself just before or even during your exam.

- 1 Firstly, you do a 'weather check' of the mind, to see what's going on, by observing your thoughts, giving you a more objective viewpoint of how busy or calm your mind is.
- 2 Then you turn your attention to your breath, helping to focus you in the present moment.
- 3 Finally, you expand out that awareness to sensations in the rest of your body, becoming aware of where you may be holding any emotions in the body as stress or tension.

To access the audio file for Practice 2, please use the app.