

Practicing Mindfulness When Things Feel Chaotic

We're living through a time when normal routines, interactions, and expectations have changed quite suddenly and dramatically. You might be riding an emotional roller coaster right now -- and that's a normal response to such upheaval.

One of the things practicing mindfulness can do is help us navigate the ups and downs as they come. Mindfulness practices allow us to find our own centers of gravity when things around us feel chaotic, and help us remain calm and maintain perspective as we make our way through stressful situations.

Exercises to help bring you back to the present:

It's easy in this new normal to find ourselves suddenly spinning out into anxiety, worry, anger, and irritability. It's ok (and necessary) to let yourself feel your feelings. But if you find yourself going down a rabbit hole, these simple practices can help you bring yourself back into your body and into the present moment -- and out of whatever scenario your imagination is busy creating.

5-4-3-2-1:

Stop what you are doing and look around, wherever you are.

- Notice 5 things you can see.
- Notice 4 things you can hear.
- Notice 3 things you can feel.
- Notice 2 things you can smell.
- Notice 1 thing you can taste.

Seeing Colors:

Stop what you are doing. Sit quietly, and soften your gaze.

- Notice everything in your field of vision that is red.
- Notice everything in your field of vision that is yellow.
- Notice everything in your field of vision that is blue.
- Notice everything red, yellow, AND blue.

Breath practices to help calm the nervous system:

Another way to quickly bring yourself back into your body and calm the brain is to breathe in specific ways. There are many breath practices. Here are two to try:

Box Breathing/Square Breathing (commonly used by Navy SEALs):

- Close your eyes.
- Inhale for 4-10 seconds (you want to stretch your breath, but not stress yourself).
- Hold at the top of the breath for 4-10 seconds.
- Exhale for 4-10 seconds.
- Hold at the bottom of the breath for 4-10 seconds.
- Complete at least 3 full rounds.

Ujjayi Breath (a basic yoga pranayama):

- Close your eyes.
- Slightly constrict the back of your throat.
- Inhale slowly with your mouth closed, dragging the breath through the back of the throat, so that you sound like ocean waves, or like Darth Vader walking down the hallway.
- Exhale slowly, again letting the breath drag through the back of the throat audibly. You can keep your mouth closed, or sometimes it might feel good to sigh and slowly let the breath out the mouth. Relax your shoulders and jaw as you exhale.
- Complete as many rounds as feels helpful to you.

Setting boundaries with the news:

Of course it's important to be informed and responsible citizens, to stay aware of what's happening in our communities so we can be proactive and helpful. It's also important to give our brains regular breaks from all of that chaotic input.

Ideas to help you foster a healthy relationship with the news:

- Rather than scrolling random headlines, seek out sources you trust, and then go to those sources specifically to read or listen.
- Set a news schedule for yourself. For example, "I allow myself 30 minutes per day to catch up on the important news" or "I allow myself 2 breaks per day for taking in the news."
- Complete your morning routine *before* looking at the news. For example, "No screens before morning meditation." This can make a huge difference in your brain function and mood for the rest of the day.

The importance of a regular practice:

We humans are not very good at doing the things we need to do when we need to do them. But a meditation guru once said "You can't dig the well while the house is on fire." It's important to have a daily practice of "digging the well" -- a reservoir of calm and perspective -- so we can draw from the well during roller coaster moments. Right now it's tempting to put aside things like a meditation practice because it can feel less important than what's going on around us. But a practice to come home to is actually more important than ever.

Try as best you can to keep your practice going (whatever that looks like), and to create some space in your day for mental breathers, even when you're constantly drawn to other things that feel more pressing. Your days will go more smoothly -- and you will feel calmer and more capable -- if you do.