

# Title: Meditation for the Medical Student

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## Why would a medical student wish to begin a meditation practice?

Medical school is challenging in ways that might lend themselves to self-improvement through meditation. As a medical student, you face constant demands, and these demands are stressful and sometimes contradictory. You are asked to consistently demonstrate competence and mastery, and at the same time allow yourself to be in a learning process – to be a fumbling beginner.

Meditation can help foster new strengths and sources of calm for the medical student. Medical school requires intense concentration and preparation, which can lead to insecurities and worries about the future, as a physician and

in a mindful state, we might over-identify with thoughts like this, without pausing to question their veracity or utility. With a mindfulness meditation practice, thoughts like this can begin to transform. We see them for what they are: desires to control the future and modulate anxiety by focusing on a specific outcome.

As a medical student, you have been trained to focus on outcomes. Before medical school, you were used to setting and achieving goals. To get into school, you must have been pretty good at achieving goals! Goal-orientation certainly has its utility, but it also presupposes that by working toward a goal, you can control the future. Being rigidly attached to goals can interfere with being fully present with your current experience. In medical school, rigid adherence to goals may outlive its usefulness. It is helpful to perceive how patterns of thinking and behavior that may have been adaptive at getting you into medical school can become mal-adaptive.

## Concentration Meditation Instructions

The immediate goal of concentration meditation is to focus your complete attention on the breath. This practice can bring about a sense of calm and develop your capacity to attend to the present moment.

- Before you begin, choose a length of time for your session. Beginning a meditation practice is much like beginning an exercise training program. You want to avoid starting out too ambitiously and risk getting discouraged or overwhelmed. Shorter and more frequent sessions are preferable to longer ones. Choose a time that feels manageable; as few as three minutes is acceptable.
- Use a device to keep track of time. There are several good smartphone apps that can help keep track of time. "Insight Timer" is a good one.
- What to do with your body. Many teachers recommend sitting on a small pillow, with legs crossed, to maintain a stable and erect posture. We recommend that you find a position that you can hold comfortably for several minutes: sitting on a chair or even.

## Mindfulness Meditation Instructions

Mindfulness meditation has much in common with concentration meditation, but it differs in important ways. While the main goal of concentration meditation is to focus your bare attention on your breath, the main goal of insight meditation is to develop non-judgmental and curious awareness through close observation of your moment-to-moment experience. .

- Follow the same steps as above through “Breathe normally, and focus on the breathe.”
- Instead of counting your breaths, continue merely focusing your attention on the sensation of your breathing.
- You will find that your mind will wander. If you pay careful attention to the present moment, you will notice that thoughts tend to emerge spontaneously. You may have thought about the future, the past, or the present. Your thoughts may seem to arise in the form of ideas, sounds or images. Likewise, your attention may be drawn to a bodily sensation, or emotional states. .
- When a thought arises, try to observe it with curiosity and acceptance. Note its presence and its nature. If you focus your attention on it, you may find that it soon fades away. Then gently bring your attention back to the breath.
- Sometimes thoughts will grab your attention and pull you in. This is okay! If you notice this has happened, simply note this with acceptance, and bring your attention back to the breath.
- If you’re not sure what to do, or if you become confused or disoriented, you can always bring your attention back to the breath. In this respect, your breath acts as your “anchor.”
- Continue with this practice until time is up.

### **I can’t meditate because I’m too easily distracted.**

If you tend to be easily distracted, then all the better! Distracting thoughts are not only inevitable in meditation, they are expected and form the basis for your practice. The repeated cycles of getting distractions, noticing those distractions, and then pulling your attention back to your breath are the basic units of meditation. Furthermore, constantly pulling your attention back to your breath cultivates the capacity for attention and avoiding being consumed by distractions.

### **My body gets uncomfortable or even starts hurting. Is it okay to move to feel better?**

At early stages of practice, moving to relieve significant discomfort is perfectly fine. If you feel that you need to move to relieve discomfort, we recommend you move deliberately and mindfully.

### **I tried meditating and I’m so bad at this! I can’t focus, can’t sit still, can’t count my breathes, etc...**

Try not to judge yourself! If you end a session and have had a very hard time concentrating, this is fine. Simply note this fact, and try again. Go easy on yourself.

**I am a goal-oriented person, and I need to become better and better at meditating to know that I am making progress toward my goals.**

Apps can be good for those with time constraints or those who would prefer exploring their practice alone. One word of caution about meditation apps: Some apps conflate meditation-like practices (e.g. body scans) with meditation, or even feature content that is non-empirical or pseudo-scientific.

## Books

*Mindfulness in Plain English* is a book by Sri Lankan Buddhist monk and academic Henepola Gunaratana published in 1992. It is considered a foundational text in the American Mindfulness Meditation movement and is accessible to meditators at all levels of experience. It begins with the very basics and progresses from there. The author writes simply, but with psychological depth and humor.

*Buddhism is True* is written by Robert Wright, an evolutionary psychologist. He discusses the evolutionary origins of our emotional experiences, along with a discussion of how meditation might be particularly well-suited to address the difficulties presented by the evolved nature of our minds and their mismatch to our current circumstances.

## In-person instruction

### Classes:

There are several good meditation resources here at UVM. The UVM Mindfulness program at Living Well offers free drop-in meditation classes and is a great place to start. They assume no prior experience with meditation and typically involve a brief introduction before the session and a short discussion following the session to share and reflect. Living Well also offers multiple-session classes. In our experience, instructors are friendly and welcoming, and can be great resources for both practical meditation advice and guidance toward other resources for advancing your practice. Classes afford the opportunity to connect with others in the UVM meditation community.