



## WHY 10 MINUTES OF MINDFULNESS PER DAY CAN IMPROVE YOUR HEALTH

BY ABBY WYNNE

Most people live their lives in a constant low level state of stress which can wear a body down and lead to burnout. Burnout is lack of energy and enthusiasm for life, low motivation leading to depression, and an increase in anxiety. Highly stressful events are not that common for most people, but they are for emergency responders who are potentially subjected to much more serious exposures of stress each day by the nature of their work. If stress management is not regularly employed it takes longer and longer after an event for the body to recover.

Many of us never realise the extent to which our environment and our state of wellness affects our body. The actor Jim Carrey says "There's a huge difference between a dog that is going to eat you in your mind, and an actual dog that's going to eat you"; however your body can't tell the difference between stress that is in your mind and an actual stressful event. If your mind is constantly telling you you're about to be eaten by a dog, your body responds accordingly by producing cortisol and staying on high alert. For emergency responders, stressful events do happen; there is always the possibility that people may be trapped or dead, or there may be danger to their own lives - so it is not surprising that there might be strong thoughts that you're about to be "eaten by a dog" and your body responds accordingly by producing cortisol and staying on high alert.

Once the event is over the mind works on overtime, playing and replaying the situation in order to learn where all the sources of stress were so we can prevent it the next time. Reliving a traumatic event can create a huge amount of stress off the job, too, and if left unchecked, over time and many stressful events, an overactive mind eliciting stress in the body can lead to Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.

However, we can learn how to be the master of our thoughts, rather than letting them master us. Mindfulness is very effective way to become the master of your thoughts and deliberately and consciously release stress from your body at the same time. It takes time, practice and patience, just like training a dog! And similarly you won't want to wait until the bad behaviour is displayed to start working on the training.

It helps to understand how your body works, so you can work with it and not against it. Cortisol is the stress hormone which works with certain parts of the brain to control the flight, freeze or fight mechanism. Cortisol regulates blood pressure, reduces inflammation and affects your sleep/wake cycle. But it's not designed to be in our system all the time; long-term exposure to cortisol increases sugars in the bloodstream, alters the immune response and suppresses the digestive system. It compromises your body's natural healing ability. When we experience stress over long periods of time we overproduce cortisol. The tension created by cortisol stays in the body and can go deeper in the system and affect connective tissues and internal organs, and this in turn can affect the skeletal alignment, and basic processes in the body such as digestion and excretion. When the body is tense for prolonged periods the flow of blood, of lymph, and of life-force energy is blocked, which compromises the body's natural healing processes. Therefore if someone is periodically on high alert, their body also goes into high alert and unless the body is given time and space to recover, the tension that is created in these alert states builds up over time, and becomes much more difficult to release. This is one of the reasons why stress makes us sick.



### Editor's note

*Abby Wynne is a therapist and author of many books available Internationally including "How to Be Well" and "Heal your Inner Wounds". She has a private practice and works with people in groups and online to help them release anxiety, gain stability and feel empowered in their lives.*

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# HEALTH AND WELLBEING

We may know in our mind that the cause of the stress was short-lived, or is not life threatening, but our body doesn't know this, and continues to hold onto high levels of tension long after the cause of the stress has been removed. We may know in our minds that we are safe, but it takes a lot longer for our body to feel safe and release the tension, and drop its cortisol levels. We cannot ask the muscles of the chest and diaphragm to release and relax the same way we can consciously

but in reality many people have difficulty doing this, namely because they don't want to feel the stress that they are already carrying.

Here's a simple exercise that you can try, however if you don't bring your full focus to this it won't be effective.

**Step 1:** *Set aside 10 minutes, switch off your phone and set your intention to simply bring your awareness into your body.*

Anything that distracts you during this 10

reason why we can be in stress mode far longer than the event that caused the stress in the first place.

Where we let our mind have free rein our thoughts are in control, and we are not aware of how our body is feeling. This is our normal state of being most of the time, so this exercise takes you out of that state and teaches you how to bring your awareness into your body so your body consciously relaxes and releases that stress.

**Step 2:** *Ask yourself where your thoughts are right now – outside of your head or inside your head? Can you 'lock' your focus onto them wherever they may actually be outside of your body? Now see them solidifying, and turning into an anchor, the more attention you give the anchor, imagining it into form with colour, size, weight.*

Let the anchor become the magnet for your focus and attention, rather than the actual thoughts themselves. As the anchor becomes more visible in your mind, your brain sees that you're not going anywhere and not abandoning it, and it can take part in this exercise too. I know this sounds childish, but in my experience we have child-like aspects of us that cry out for our attention, and when we are afraid to feel what we may be feeling in our bodies our brain can play all sorts of tricks on us to keep us outside of it.

**Step 3:** *Visualise this anchor as if it's slowly sinking into your body, start with your head and work your way down slowly.*

As you bring your awareness into your head, feel what your head feels like, the muscles of your face, your cheeks and your jaw. Take a long slow deep breath and keep your awareness in your face, and as you breathe out, imagine you're breathing out the tension you've been holding in your face. By doing this you are giving your body permission to relax and let go of this built up tension, and this might be the first time you become aware of how much tension you are actually holding. Stay in your head for several breaths, releasing tension, softening the muscles, becoming more and more aware of your cheeks, the inside of your mouth, your teeth, your tongue. If you feel you've been able to do this successfully without



open a tight fist hand, but we can take some time out and sit and slow down our thoughts and reassure ourselves that we are safe, and let the body unfold by itself, in its own time.

We need to have patience to allow this process of relaxation to take place. Depending on the person and the amount of stress already present plus the weaknesses of their body, the time that it takes for someone to totally relax is different for everyone. The good news is that we can train our bodies to relax when we are not stressed. Making the time to train our bodies to let go of stress and tension really can really help with our overall fitness and health, and releasing held stress in the body in times of rest can also speed up our physical recovery time after stressful events in the field.

A very simple way to train your body to release stress is to simply bring your full awareness into your body and breathe. Breathing with your body may sound easy,

minutes must be acknowledged, and once you have done so, bring your focus back to the work in hand. So if this means you need to write a 'to do' list, write the list. Then if your mind keeps bringing you back to it, you can remind yourself that you have written it all down, that you won't forget, and that you're doing this exercise now. I find that people often have to tell their minds that they are only going to be doing this for 10 minutes, and that whatever it is that's so important and needs our attention, we will give it our full attention, after the 10 minutes is over.

It might take you several attempts to sit down for the 10 minutes before you feel settled enough in your mind to actually sit for 10 full minutes, but do persist. Our minds have never really been trained to step aside and let the body have our full attention, they always try to take over, and this is part of the



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being distracted for 2 or 3 breaths, you can move that anchor of your awareness down to your throat. Feel what your throat feels like, notice the tightness there, breathe with the tightness and as you breathe out, give permission to release some of the tightness, so that your neck and your throat feel a little bit softer. Stay here for 2 or 3 breaths. When you're ready, you can move the anchor of your awareness down to your upper chest. Breathing in and out with the anchor of your awareness, releasing stress and tension across your shoulders, down your arms, softening the muscles there, and not letting your mind pull you out of your body is a lot of things for you to be doing! see if you can stay here for 3 breaths, becoming aware of your shoulder blades and your rib cage too. You might find it helpful to remind your body that you're not in a stressful situation, that it is okay to release the tension, and with each out breath, you can tell your body that it is safe to relax. Keep going with this exercise, it is only

effective if you bring your full awareness into your body, and keep it there. Each time you can go deeper in, but start at your head, stay for 3 breaths, then your neck and upper chest, 3 breaths, then your heart centre, 3 breaths, then your stomach, 3 breaths and then your hips, your legs and your feet. By doing this exercise you will discover how difficult an exercise it is, to simply be in your own body and breathe with it. Just do it for 10 minutes, see how far into your body you can go. Each time you do it you will get a little bit deeper in – you may be 'training your body to relax', but you also have to train your brain to let you do it. Notice after the 10 minutes if you feel different, if you feel physical pain, and where the physical pain may be. Every time you try this, it will become a little easier to 'get in', as your body and mind begins to trust you - yes your body does need to learn how to trust you even though it's your body! And your mind needs to trust that you're not abandoning it in favour for your body!

By consciously releasing stress in the parts of your body that respond well to this exercise, over time your body will begin to release the stress that has built up in the involuntary muscles too, but only in the parts of your body that you bring the anchor of your awareness into. So as you get better at it you can bring the 'anchor' of your awareness into the parts of your body that are in pain and as you breathe with them they soften and release the tension that is stored there. You will notice an overall difference in your confidence too, because your cortisol levels will gradually drop, you will be less stressed, less prone to anxiety and more in tune with what your body needs.

**A note from Abby:** If you want some extra support and guidance as you do the exercise in this article you can visit <https://soundcloud.com/abby-wynne/tracks> where I have a number of 5-10 minute long guided meditation tracks that you can choose from where I talk you through the breathing and focussing work.

## FIREFIGHTERS AND CANCER

A recent publication of the Firefighter Cancer Support Network USA confirms that whilst cancer is the leading cause of firefighter line-of-duty deaths, there is a proliferation of inaccurate statistics circulated by a number of well-intended journalists, legislators, and manufacturers. As a result the largest cancer study of U.S. firefighters to date has taken place under the auspices of the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) and the results have been published.

*“ Firefighters have a 9 percent higher risk of being diagnosed with cancer and a 14 percent higher risk of dying from cancer than the general U.S. population’*

The study has shown that firefighters have a 9 percent higher risk of being diagnosed with cancer and a 14 percent higher risk of dying from cancer than the general U.S. population. The cancers mostly responsible for this higher risk were respiratory (lung, mesothelioma), GI (oral cavity, esophageal, large intestine), and kidney. Firefighters' risks are significantly higher for some specific types of cancer and NIOSH researchers reported a two-fold excess of malignant mesothelioma, a very rare cancer. Put another way, firefighters have a 100 percent increased risk (100 percent = double = 2 times) of getting mesothelioma. Firefighters

have a 129 percent increased risk of dying from mesothelioma. Firefighters have a 62 percent higher risk of getting esophageal cancer, and they have a 39 percent increased risk of dying from esophageal cancer, according to the NIOSH research. Here's an overview with some specific additional risks for firefighters noted:

- testicular cancer - 2.02 times the risk (again: 100% = double = 2 times)
- mesothelioma - 2.0 times greater risk;
- multiple myeloma -1.53 times greater risk;
- non-Hodgkin's lymphoma -1.51 times greater risk;
- skin cancer - 1.39 times greater risk;
- malignant melanoma - 1.31 times greater risk;
- brain cancer -1.31 times greater risk;
- prostate cancer - 1.28 times greater risk;
- colon cancer -1.21 times great risk; and
- n leukemia -1.14 times greater risk.

The report noted that some fire departments are addressing occupational-cancer rates that are higher than national averages. The overall conclusion of the study is that firefighters do have higher cancer risks than the general population, and their risks are significantly higher for some specific types of cancer. Further information is available from the nonprofit Firefighter Cancer Support Network at [PIO@fcsn.net](mailto:PIO@fcsn.net)

