

An Ounce of Prevention

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Approach your laptop mindfully to avoid digital overload

Information overload has become an everyday experience for anyone who works with computers, owns a smartphone or waits at a bus stop with minute-by-minute updates about arrival times.

And this information overload has been cited as a major factor in the rise of [stress-related diseases](#). Some advocate a [digital detox](#) as the antidote to the curse of email, social media and constant communication but for many, that just isn't practical.

Others are turning to traditional mindfulness meditation techniques as a way of managing their digital dependence without having to switch off from their everyday lives entirely. It's seen as a way to calm the mind and help the body to cope with the overwhelming amount of data coming our way from all different directions and sources.

As long ago as June 1983 Time magazine ran a cover feature on stress as a [modern anxiety](#). Three decades later, answers to the problem are being put forward by that same magazine. A February 2014 issue of Time featured a cover that read: [The mindful revolution: The science of finding focus in a stressed-out, multitasking culture](#).

In 2014, Time readers, like many others, want practical solutions to their stress. We answer work emails while waiting in a supermarket queue, we pay bills while preparing dinner and we follow our favourite celebrity's tweets while we eat it. We can begin to feel like we couldn't escape all the stimuli even if we wanted to.

Answer your work email on the weekend often enough and you can feel like it's expected of you to do so all the time. Once you are used to receiving a constant stream of news, you start to feel lost without it. That can cause anxiety and depression.

Managing mindfully

Mindfulness has been [described as](#) "a moment-to-moment attention to present experience with a stance of open curiosity". It's our ability to deliberately become more aware of the present moment and less caught up in our regrets for the past or anxiety for the future.

Mindfulness has been studied extensively in the medical domain as a potential tool in managing a number of conditions such as [anxiety](#) and help with recovery from [illness](#).

Mindfulness is using the brain's ability to change and became stronger when trained accordingly, an ability called [neuroplasticity](#), which is comparable to a muscle changing as a result of physical exercise. [Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction](#) is a training programme developed by Jon-Kabat-Zinn at the University of Massachusetts Medical Center that draws on this trait and aims to complement medical treatment for chronic pain and stress related disorders.

Then there is the use of mindfulness as a business tool. Mindful leadership, for example, is often viewed as a way to help individuals and organisations to be successful while also being kind and thoughtful. The [search inside yourself](#) programme developed by Google's Chade-Meng Tan, is an example. Tan

urges people who take his course to [cultivate emotional awareness](#) as a way to handle the stresses of work. The trend has spread and mindfulness meditation has been common practice at companies across [Silicon Valley](#).

Your daily dose of mindful

Away from Silicon Valley, there are small steps we can take to bring mindfulness to our digital lives. E-mail is a good place to start. It is believed that most people overindulge in mindless emailing as it is considered a quick and convenient way to communicate.

In a [study](#) conducted by the University of Glasgow and Modeuro Consulting, executives at the utility company London Power were asked to be more mindful about the emails they send to staff and to think twice every time they were about to hit the send button. As a result, email around the office was reduced by half during the study, leading the researchers to conclude that the company could save 11,000 working hours a year as a result.

Mindful emailing includes practices such as taking three breaths before responding to a stressful email and also considering the psychological effect that the email will have to the recipient or recipients.

Social media, which feeds our desire for constant information sharing, is another practice that, when done mindfully, can become a fruitful social interaction rather than a mindless disruption.

Mindful use of [social media](#) includes checking our intentions before uploading a feed, being authentic in our communications and choosing the time we spend on social media rather than falling in to it. That way, we give it some of our spare time rather than allowing it to creep around the fringes of our whole life, potentially disrupting us at any time.

These are all relatively small steps but rely on the user of a technology to pause for thought as they go. It's a simple technique that many think has had significant results in a variety of contexts. We've been coping with our very modern malady for decades, perhaps we are finally making some progress.

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Meditation and other practices that foster mindfulness

Mindfulness can be cultivated through mindfulness meditation, a systematic method of focusing your attention.

You can learn to meditate on your own, following instructions in books or on tape. However, you may benefit from the support of an instructor or group to answer questions and help you stay motivated. Look for someone using meditation in a way compatible with your beliefs and goals.

If you have a medical condition, you may prefer a medically oriented program that incorporates meditation. Ask your physician or hospital about local groups. Insurance companies increasingly cover the cost of meditation instruction.

Getting started on your own

Some types of meditation primarily involve concentration—repeating a phrase or focusing on the sensation of breathing, allowing the parade of thoughts that inevitably arise to come and go. Concentration meditation techniques, as well as other activities such as tai chi or yoga, can induce the well-known relaxation response, which is very valuable in reducing the body's response to stress.

Mindfulness meditation builds upon concentration practices. Here's how it works:

- **Go with the flow.** In mindfulness meditation, once you establish concentration, you observe the flow of inner thoughts, emotions, and bodily sensations without judging them as good or bad.
- **Pay attention.** You also notice external sensations such as sounds, sights, and touch that make up your moment-to-moment experience. The challenge is not to latch onto a particular idea, emotion, or sensation, or to get caught in thinking about the past or the future. Instead you watch what comes and goes in your mind, and discover which mental habits produce a feeling of well-being or suffering.
- **Stay with it.** At times, this process may not seem relaxing at all, but over time it provides a key to greater happiness and self-awareness as you become comfortable with a wider and wider range of your experiences.

Practice acceptance

Above all, mindfulness practice involves accepting whatever arises in your awareness at each moment. It involves being kind and forgiving toward yourself.

Some tips to keep in mind:

- **Gently redirect.** If your mind wanders into planning, daydream, or criticism, notice where it has gone and gently redirect it to sensations in the present.
- **Try and try again.** If you miss your intended meditation session, you simply start again.

By practicing accepting your experience during meditation, it becomes easier to accept whatever comes your way during the rest of your day.

Cultivate mindfulness informally

In addition to formal meditation, you can also cultivate mindfulness informally by focusing your attention on your moment-to-moment sensations during everyday activities. This is done by single-tasking—doing one thing at a time and giving it your full attention. As you floss your teeth, pet the dog, or eat an apple, slow down the process and be fully present as it unfolds and involves all of your senses.

Exercises to try on your own

If mindfulness meditation appeals to you, going to a class or listening to a meditation tape can be a good way to start. In the meantime, here are two mindfulness exercises you can try on your own.

Practicing mindfulness meditation

This exercise teaches basic mindfulness meditation.

1. Sit on a straight-backed chair or cross-legged on the floor.
2. Focus on an aspect of your breathing, such as the sensations of air flowing into your nostrils and out of

your mouth, or your belly rising and falling as you inhale and exhale.

3. Once you've narrowed your concentration in this way, begin to widen your focus. Become aware of sounds, sensations, and your ideas.
4. Embrace and consider each thought or sensation without judging it good or bad. If your mind starts to race, return your focus to your breathing. Then expand your awareness again.

Invest in yourself

The effects of mindfulness meditation tend to be dose-related — the more you do, the more effect it usually has. Most people find that it takes at least 20 minutes for the mind to begin to settle, so this is a reasonable way to start. If you're ready for a more serious commitment, Jon Kabat-Zinn recommends 45 minutes of meditation at least six days a week. But you can get started by practicing the techniques described here for shorter periods.

Learning to stay in the present

A less formal approach to mindfulness can also help you to stay in the present and fully participate in your life. You can choose any task or moment to practice informal mindfulness, whether you are eating, showering, walking, touching a partner, or playing with a child or grandchild. Attending to these points will help:

- Start by bringing your attention to the sensations in your body
- Breathe in through your nose, allowing the air downward into your lower belly. Let your abdomen expand fully.
- Now breathe out through your mouth
- Notice the sensations of each inhalation and exhalation
- Proceed with the task at hand slowly and with full deliberation
- Engage your senses fully. Notice each sight, touch, and sound so that you savor every sensation.

When you notice that your mind has wandered from the task at hand, gently bring your attention back to the sensations of the moment.

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Mobile Apps

[Mindfulness Coach App](#)

Mindfulness Coach will help you practice mindfulness meditation.

Net News

Here are some web sites you & your family may find helpful:

Search: [Mindfulness in schools](#)

Search: [Mindfulness Meditation Linked With Positive Brain Changes, Study Suggests](#)

Search: [Mindfulness Meditation Training Changes Brain Structure in Eight Weeks](#)

Self-Help Corner:

City of Edmonton Community Resources: 211

Support Network / Distress Line: 780-482-HELP

Kids Help Line: 1-800-668-6868