

Daily Meditation Practice Guidelines



Working with Trauma and PTSD

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Everyone is Different: Make Your Practice Your Own

Every body and mind is unique, and we each need to experiment and customize our daily meditation practice in a way that most serves our awakening and freedom.

This is especially important for those with PTSD, as the classic mindfulness instructions can potentially lead to a sense of emotional overwhelm. Modifying your meditation practice in ways that bring a sense of safety and stability is key to making meditation accessible and healing.

The popular notion of “how to meditate” can be limiting. Many people imagine that meditation means sitting serenely on the floor in full lotus position, eyes closed, following the breath or perhaps chanting. But there are many ways to meditate. Even within different styles of meditation, there are many ways you can adapt your practice to fit your needs.

- **Eyes open or closed?** You might explore how it feels to have the eyes open, closed, partially open and gazing downward, soft and diffuse gazing slightly upward or spread to the sides.
- **What posture allows you to feel most alert and relaxed?** In a similar way, you can explore practicing while sitting, standing still, lying down, slowly walking or otherwise moving.
- **What anchor for attention is most pleasant, or at least neutral?** Your anchor might be the breath (at nostrils, chest or belly, or throughout the body), listening to sound, feeling points of bodily contact while sitting, sensations in the hands, feet or elsewhere. You can also choose to focus on a meaningful set of words (a mantra). Or, you might prefer not to use an anchor for attention.

Note: While breath is a common anchor, for some with PTSD it can be triggering or activating in an unhealthy way.

Establish External Supports for Your Practice

When working with trauma, it's important to establish a relationship with a therapist, teacher, healer or close friend that you can contact if you encounter emotional overwhelm.

It's also essential to make a plan of what you might do if you become triggered in strong way.

Make a list of things that feel self-nurturing and keep it close by to remind you of what might serve. Your list might include things like: listening to music, reading something calming, showering, taking a walk outside, shaking, dancing, playing with your pet, or having a cup of tea.

You might take a few moments to make your list now:

Self-Care Action Plan

A person I can contact if I need help: _____

Phone Number: _____

Three things I can do to practice self-nurturing if I feel overwhelmed or triggered:

- ▶ _____
- ▶ _____
- ▶ _____

Ground Yourself at the Beginning of the Meditation

- **If you are doing a sitting meditation**, you might become aware of the sensations where your feet meet the ground, the weight of your body on your seat, or the points of contact where your arms or hands rest on your legs. If breath is not a trigger, let your breath be slow and full and feel the sense of gravity, of belonging to the earth, of being hugged by the earth. With your senses awake, recognize: *I am here in this moment, right now.*
- **If you like visualizations**, you can ground yourself by bringing to mind a majestic mountain and imagining your body becoming like the mountain—grounded, solid, still. You might sense how the weather and seasons change around the mountain, but the mountain remains still, quiet and steady throughout the storms. Sense yourself as a mountain, belonging to the earth, stable and strong.
- **You can also ground yourself by touching an object** that you experience in either a pleasant or neutral way. It might be something you carry with you such as a stone, shell, pencil, piece of jewelry, or meaningful talisman. Or you might touch the fabric of your clothing or the material of a chair or sofa.
- **Another approach to grounding** is to open the eyes and take some moments to look in each direction—behind you, to either side and in front of you.
- **Finally, you can open your eyes and observe** objects, colors and the surrounding space; and/or name ten things you are noticing in the room you are in, or name what you are seeing outside.



Practice Inquiry

What feels most grounding for you?

How might you integrate this into your daily meditation?

Explore Intentional Breathing & Relaxation

Conscious Breathing

Breathing slowly and deeply: a full in-breath for approximately 4 seconds and a longer out-breath, for approximately 6-8 seconds.

Alternately, you might match the length of the in-breath and out-breath so they are approximately 4-6 seconds each. If it helps, count to keep them the same length. Let the breathing be continuous, without a pause between in and out breaths.



Conscious Relaxation

Bring a gentle attention to parts of your body that feel tense with the intention to relax and soften. Let the sensations float in awareness.

Pay particular attention to the shoulders, hands, and belly. Also relax your face, including your tongue, from the tip right to its root. Some people find it helps to link relaxing with the out-breath.










Quiet the Mind with Sensory Anchors

Choose a sensory anchor—like the breath, sounds, or physical sensations—to give yourself a focal point for deepening attention. When the mind gets distracted, note “thinking” and return to your anchor.

In choosing an anchor, take time to experiment and discover what works best for you to be fully present. If one anchor feels uncomfortable, try another. It is helpful to select an anchor where sensations are neutral, or even pleasant, because the mind will be more inclined to rest there.

Some useful sensory anchors:

-  The breath as it enters and leaves the nostrils.
-  The rise and fall of the chest or the expansion and release in the belly. You can also put your hand on your belly and feel the breath in the palm of your hand.
-  The experience of the whole body as you breathe.
-  Other physical sensations as they arise, like sensations in the hands or through the whole body.
-  Combining the breath with sensations in the hands.
-  Sounds as they are experienced within or around you.
-  Listening to and feeling one’s entire sensory experience (i.e., receiving sounds and sensations in awareness).

Identify Resource Pathways to Safety & Connectedness

In addition to your ongoing practice anchor, it is helpful to find ways of arousing inner resources of safety, ease, strength and love.

These ways of **active self-nurturing** can be employed separately or in some combination, and can be called forward in moments of distress to help you return to the window of tolerance.

Some examples of these resourcing pathways are:

Focusing on areas in the body where sensations and felt-experience give you a sense of strength or balance (spine, back, sit-bones and touchpoints of sitting).

Mentally repeating a whispered phrase of reassurance, comfort, or love: *It's OK, sweetheart. I'm sorry and I love you. I'm here with you. Trust your goodness. You are enough.* You might also repeat a set of phrases, as in the Metta or lovingkindness practice: *May I be happy, may I be free from inner or outer harm, may I be peaceful, may I be free.*

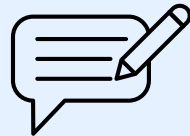
Visualizing something or someone that brings a sense of comfort, safety, or love—a person you trust, a place in nature where you feel at home, a pet, a spiritual figure, ancestor or deity. You might imagine a loving being embracing you and/or filling you with healing light.

Placing your hand or hands gently on your heart, belly, or cheek (or a combination of these) and feeling the sensations of warmth and contact. You might also hug yourself.

It is very important to practice self-nurturing with your resource pathway at times when you are not distressed. You might begin and end your regular meditation practice with self-nurturing, and return to your resource pathway whenever you feel it might be helpful.

What comforting or reassuring phrases feel most resonant for you?

Use the space below to write them down, along with anything else you want to remember about pathways to safety and connectedness.



Process Difficult Emotions by Titrating & Pendulating

When working with strong pain, fear, or other difficult sensations, it can be helpful to contact the felt intensity just a little at a time. This is called *titrating*, and it allows you to include and integrate the experience in a stable, mindful way.

To titrate, first set up a resource pathway (as described above), such as a place in the body where you feel pleasant sensations or strength, or an image of a person who evokes a sense of love or safety. Then shift your attention back and forth—or *pendulate*—between the fear and the pathway of self-nurturing.

Walking Meditation and Mindful Movement

Walking Meditation - If you can walk with ease, choose a walking path that is about 15 paces long. Bring and maintain your attention fully on the sensations in the feet and legs, and then walk mindfully from one end to the other, pause, and mindfully turn and return to the starting point.

Continue in this way, walking back and forth at a pace that allows you to be present with your senses. You may find that slowing down will naturally quiet the mind.

When you notice the mind wandering, you might come back to your senses by attending to sights and sounds, and then returning to the sensations in your feet and legs. If it's helpful, you might breathe rhythmically with the walking or offer messages of comfort or lovingkindness (as described in the section on resource anchors).



Practice Inquiry

What ways of moving your body make you feel more present and alive?

How might you incorporate walking meditation or mindful movement into your own practice?

Mindful Movement - There are many ways of moving that are conducive to gathering attention, releasing tension and finding balance.

You might do classical yoga asanas or qigong, or dance and shake. You can also sit still, but alternately raise and lower your hands, coordinating with the movement with the breath. Any movement, if done with mindful attention, can be included as part of your daily practice.

Words of Caution: When Meditations Elicit Strong Emotions

It is essential to recognize and embrace your own agency with any guided mindfulness practice that asks you to lean into body sensations and/or fully feel fear, shame, grief, anger or other difficult emotions. It's up to you what instructions you follow. If you are concerned the instructions will lead you to an experience that is overwhelming, trust your instincts and turn your attention elsewhere.

Body scans can be challenging for those with PTSD. Shame or other distress may arise if we are dissociated and therefore unable to feel sensations, or if strong emotions related to past trauma are triggered while attending to certain parts of the body. You might try offering metta to those areas of physical vulnerability as part of the body scan. You can also choose not to do a scan, or not to attend to or linger on particular areas of the body.

If you feel ashamed of your reaction to the scan, remind yourself that feeling numb or overwhelmed with emotions is part of PTSD, and is not your personal problem or fault. They are natural and common responses to trauma. You are not alone and you are wisely finding your way to what serves healing.

Forgiveness and RAIN practices can also tap into trauma. When doing these meditations, ground yourself ahead of time and connect with a pathway to inner resources. In selecting what to focus on in the meditation, it is very important to choose something that doesn't trigger trauma, unless you feel sufficiently resourced and have some experience addressing trauma in your meditation practice.

Remember that you have many choices about how you position your body (sitting, lying, standing), whether to keep your eyes open or closed, and where to rest your attention. You can experiment with what feels best, and can always stop whenever you choose.

Please approach these more evocative meditations with particular caution and care, and ensure that you have external resources available if you need assistance...a trusted friend, therapist, or other healer.

You might also choose not to do these meditations on your own, and instead to only do practices that might trigger trauma in the presence of a trusted healer or therapist.

With any of these practices, if distress does arise, shift your focus to self-nurturing with a resource pathway, to loving kindness, and/or to being with your anchor. You might also shift to a walking or moving meditation.

And, remember that you can also stop practicing altogether and turn to some more external form of self-nurturing—reaching out to a trusted person, listening to music, having tea, walking outside, etc.

Some Final Thoughts

Meditation can be a profound part of our healing from trauma. Our task is to discover which meditations serve us and how best to employ them. The key in moving forward is finding the right balance between the courage to explore and stretch, and the wisdom that knows what's enough.

We are a traumatized world and many of us struggle with PTSD—whether due to early abuse, generational trauma, the violence of racism, war, accidents and countless other causes. Perhaps the greatest suffering of PTSD is feeling ashamed that we are experiencing trauma. Let this process of customizing your meditation practice give you a sense of empowerment, of drawing on these powerful practices in honor of your healing and your spirit.

Be curious about what is arising. Relate with gentleness, kindness and patience. And for your own sake and for all those whose lives you touch, dedicate to loving yourself into healing!

Additional Resources:

- For audio/video talks, guided meditations & other free resources from Tara Brach, visit www.tarabrach.com
- For assistance in finding a qualified therapist in your area, *Psychology Today* has an excellent referral resource that allows you to search based on several useful criteria at www.psychologytoday.com
- This guide has been created as a helpful resource and is not intended to diagnose or treat any physical or mental health condition. If you are in crisis or in need of immediate assistance, contact your local crisis center or [find help here](#).