

Mindfulness: a mental health tool for challenging times

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As the COVID-19 pandemic sweeps across the nation and the world, people are taking special measures to protect their health – from frequent handwashing to social distancing to sheltering in place. These are all important steps to limit the spread of the virus and “flatten the curve.”



However, along with preserving our physical health, we also need to safeguard our mental well-being from stresses and strains brought on by the pandemic. One way to do this is through mindfulness, which the website [Mindful.org](https://www.mindful.org) defines as “the basic human ability to be fully present, aware of where we are and what we’re doing, and not overly reactive or overwhelmed by what’s going on around us.”

Practicing mindfulness has many research-backed [benefits](#), including reducing stress and emotional reactivity, while boosting focus and working memory. Caryn Wells, a professor in OU’s Department of Organizational Leadership, is a published author on mindfulness and also leads an array of mindfulness workshops, which are offered through OU’s [Professional and Continuing Education](#).

Here, Dr. Wells shares mindfulness tips to help people deal with feelings of stress and anxiety in the midst of challenging times.

Name it to tame it

There is a phrase in mindfulness, “Name it to tame it.” Labeling our thoughts allows us to have distance from them. It allows us to look at our thoughts and have a sense of curiosity and openness about them, instead of trepidation or fear. When we do this, we might sense a feeling that this thought relaxes. If it does not relax, mindfulness teaches us to notice that too.

If we stay with it for some time, we might notice that the thought changes. Worry can change to another emotion, such as our health, or that of friends or family. This worry cloud may move out, and another cloud may roll in. The new cloud might be about food, work, assignments, our pets, etc. Mindfulness does not empty out thoughts. Rather, it allows us to notice what our mind is bringing to our attention. The key is not to suppress these thoughts, but to gently lean into them. There’s another saying in mindfulness, “What we resist, persists. What we feel, we can heal.”

Mindful breathing

Sometimes we might wish we could talk to ourselves when an anxious thought surfaces. We might feel the worry of what is happening around us. Mindfulness allows us to pause, acknowledge what we are feeling, and rest in awareness. We can turn our focus on our breathing, with a practice like this:

*Breathing in, I breathe in peace;
Breathing out, I breathe out worry.*

*Breathing in, I breathe in peace;
Breathing out, I breathe out anxiety.*

*Breathing in, I breathe in peace;
Breathing out, I breathe out fear.*

People can go through these breathing exercises throughout the day. Simply choose what you would like to breathe out. Feel yourself breathing in peace, and feel yourself breathing out whatever is troubling in the moment. The breath is like a good friend, always available and with us. When we are troubled and anxious, our breath might be shallow, fast, and in the upper part of the chest. Mindful breathing allows us to slow that angst and relax. The tense feeling can be calmed in as little as three breaths.

Self-compassion

Having self-compassion serves several purposes. First, it allows us to feel what we're feeling without self-judgment or being harsh with ourselves. There's nothing wrong with acknowledging the pandemic as a source of trauma that has seriously disrupted normal life.

Another element of self-compassion is acknowledging our common humanity and that many people are going through this experience just as we are. This can lead us not only to taking the best care of ourselves, but also reaching out to others through texting and social media. Even though the pandemic presents social barriers, it's important to recognize that social connection is a vital part of our healing. When we're able to say to someone "I'm here for you" and also receive that support from others, it increases our sense of well-being.

This information is not offered as counseling. For personal support, please contact your health provider or the [Oakland University Counseling Center](#).