

Adult ADHD and Emotional Regulation: Acceptance and Mindfulness Interventions

Lots of things may come to mind when hearing the word “mindfulness.” Some people think of religious traditions such as Buddhism. Others might envision someone sitting cross-legged on the floor, chanting with an otherwise blank mind. While mindfulness is a part of many different religious traditions, a more common definition of mindfulness is “maintaining attention on immediate experience while taking an orientation of openness, acceptance, and curiosity.¹” Essentially, mindfulness is simply the ability to notice your thoughts, feelings, and physical sensations in order to ground yourself when faced with overwhelming emotions. For individuals with ADHD, mindfulness can be beneficial because it teaches you to pay attention. It also helps you become more aware of your emotional state so that you don’t react as impulsively².

Below are a few mindfulness exercises you can integrate into your daily routine in order to improve focus and attention in your life.

Visualization

Research shows that visualization of one's performance before a certain event can lead to positive feelings and beliefs, which in turn can positively affect one's actual performance. You can use this exercise to help reduce stress around a number of events, for example, before taking a test or giving a presentation, or to increase the likelihood of just having a good day.

- Set a time for 7 minutes or whatever amount of time works best for your schedule.
- Start the visualization with a quick breathing exercise.
- Visualize yourself accomplishing your goals.
- Visualize yourself again, this time accomplishing each specific step of your goal.
- End the visualization with another quick breathing exercise.

Diaphragmatic Breathing

Breathing exercises work because they help your body feel more like it does when you are relaxed. Diaphragmatic breathing is particularly effective because it focuses on breathing from the diaphragm, which introduces more oxygen into the body. To practice diaphragmatic breathing, follow the steps below.

- Get into a comfortable position, either by laying down or sitting in a chair.
- Put one hand on your chest and one hand on your stomach.

¹ Bishop, S. R., Lau, M., Shapiro, S., Carlson, L., Anderson, N. D., Carmody, J., Sefal, Z. V., Abbey, S., Speca, M., Velting, D., & Devins, G. (2004). Mindfulness: A proposed operational definition. *Clinical Psychology: Science and Practice, 11*(3), 230-241.

² Sherman, C. (2021). *Mindfulness meditation: ADHD symptom relief with breath.*
<https://www.additudemag.com/mindfulness-meditation-for-adhd/>

- Breathe in through your nose, allowing your stomach to fill like a balloon. Your stomach should poke out and the hand on your chest should remain still.
- Breathe out slowly through your mouth. This time your stomach should be like a deflating balloon. Again, the hand on your stomach should be moving while the hand on your chest remains still.

Meditation

One of the primary goals of mindfulness is to develop skills that help you: (1) redirect your attention, (2) separate yourself from your thoughts, (3) accept and allow your thoughts to flow freely, and (4) strengthen the part of yourself that just notices what you are thinking or feeling. Meditations such as Leaves on a Stream promote these skills by helping you notice your thoughts without getting caught up in them.

- Get into a comfortable position and take a few deep breaths.
- Imagine a river flowing in front of you.
- Notice how the river carries everything in it downstream—pebbles, branches, and leaves.
- Now, imagine placing each one of your thoughts on those leaves and watch them flow down the stream, eventually drifting completely away.

Things to Remember

Mindfulness is a practice. In order to get its greatest benefit, you should integrate it into your daily practice. When practicing mindfulness, you might worry or think you're doing wrong if your attention wanders or you become distracted. Never fear! Losing focus is a normal part of mindfulness. When you become distracted, simply redirect your attention to your breath or your object of focus. The ability to catch yourself wandering and regain your focus is what makes this tool so effective for individuals with ADHD.

You Try

An example of a mindfulness routine might be taking 15 minutes every morning to practice breathing and visualization exercises, and then journaling. In the box below, identify a mindfulness routine you think might work for you. Revise it as necessary.