

# A guide to meditation for teachers and education staff

## Introduction

Our annual [Teacher Wellbeing Index](#) tells us stress is incredibly high among senior leaders, teachers and education staff. And while it is clear that the well documented drivers of stress in the system need to be removed, it can be helpful to know how to protect yourself.

78%

of teachers told us they were stressed

89%

of school leaders described themselves as stressed

One thing you can do to protect yourself from the potential harm caused by stress is meditate.

Meditation is a useful tool that can profoundly affect your sense of wellbeing. And the good news is that it doesn't have to take hours!

Below we have broken down the benefits of meditation — backed up by science — and a few different types you might want to consider trying.

We also explore the connection between meditation and breathing. With simple but effective breathing techniques provided by [The Zen Project](#), a social enterprise working with schools, colleagues and universities to reduce stress and ease anxiety.

# What is meditation?

Meditation is learning to be present in the moment and perceiving your thoughts without judging them. This can allow you to understand your emotions better. Through meditation, you can learn to pause and respond better to a stressful situation — at work or elsewhere.

We understand how challenging it can be to make time for yourself alongside your busy careers. But, it is worth remembering that your bodies are not designed to cope with the constant or long-term presence of stress hormones. These hormones are messengers, intended to be present in the body for short periods. Their long-term or chronic presence can have significant health consequences.

Meditation has been shown to activate the parasympathetic nervous system, which is the network in your body responsible for bringing you into a state of relaxation. Long-term positive changes to the brain can occur through continued meditation, particularly in the part that regulates empathy, self-awareness and perception (this part is called the left anterior insula). Meditation also improves brain efficiency, which is likely because of more sustained attention and impulse control.

## Meditation and breathing

Have you ever wondered why many meditations (but not all) ask you to focus on your breathing?

Jon Kabat-Zinn, scientist, writer, and meditation teacher shares that once you start meditating; breathing is no longer just breathing. He teaches that the breath reminds you to tune into your body and to encounter the rest of your experience in the present moment.



By concentrating on your breathing, he shares that it's possible to become more aware of your thoughts and feelings with a greater degree of calmness and with a more discerning eye. Helping you to potentially see things more clearly and with larger perspective. And, with this awareness, may come a feeling of having more options and being free to choose effective and appropriate responses in stressful situations.

Studies have also shown that practising mindful breathing can help to improve brain function and cognitive abilities.

However, it is important to remember that there are numerous types of meditation — some that focus on your breathing and some that don't. If you find focusing on your breath too challenging, feel free to explore different options and do what works best for you. There is no right or wrong way to meditate!

1. [How breathing can reduce stress and anxiety, NHS therapy in focus](#)

# Benefits of meditation for teachers and education staff

Benefits might include improved self-confidence, empathy, and emotional resilience. Additionally, meditation can help with aspects specifically related to classroom practice, such as patience, focus, and thoughtful communication.

Meditation may also help you with classroom management and allow you to be more present for pupils, colleagues and those at home.



## Improved wellbeing

Aside from the physical changes and improvements to the brain brought about by meditation, you may also notice an improved sense of wellbeing.

In our [Teacher Wellbeing Index](#), 81% of staff reported they experienced at least one symptom of poor mental health linked to their work, including including insomnia, difficulty concentrating and tearfulness. Meditation may help you cope better with these types of issues. Happiness has been shown to increase through even short-term practice of meditation.

Meditation can also have a preventative effect, although it is unlikely to remove signs and symptoms of poor mental health and wellbeing overnight. But you may live a life of noticeably better wellbeing and improved emotional resilience with ongoing practice.



## Effectiveness in your role

If your wellbeing and mental health are both in a good place, then you will be likely to be effective in your roles - with a range of knock-on effects for children and young people.

You may feel more able to face challenging behaviours or manage situations more readily and feel less adversely affected by them. Additionally, improved wellbeing can mean that absenteeism decreases.

Being more effective and feeling better about your job can improve your wellbeing further, boosting your confidence and making space for more lightbulb moments in the classroom.





## Types of meditation

There are many different types of meditation, some of which you may find more helpful than others.

The following list is an overview of some different types of meditation. We've gone into detail on three types. This is because we think they're the best place to start and easiest for fitting into teachers and education staff's busy lives. But, please explore whichever type you find the most appealing!

### Mindfulness:

Mindfulness is about paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, bringing in qualities such as kindness, curiosity and acceptance. It can help you to better understand thoughts and emotions, and respond to life's challenges.

### Focused meditation:

Concentrating with one of your five senses to focus your attention, this type of meditation can help to refocus your attention if you become anxious or stressed throughout the day.

### Visualisation:

Using all five senses to vividly imagine a scene of calm or serenity. This technique can allow you to create a sense of calmness and wellbeing, which can help you to regulate your emotions at stressful times.

### Progressive relaxation:

By gradually tensing and releasing different muscle groups in the body, the body can achieve higher levels of relaxation. This type of meditation may be useful if you are finding physical feelings of tension associated with stress.



### Loving-kindness meditation:

Used to strengthen feelings of compassion for others, by employing this form of meditation, you can learn to work and live more harmoniously with others.

### Movement meditation

Movement meditation involves any type of gentle motion i.e. walking, gardening, yoga. Movements are usually done slowly, with moment-to-moment awareness of sensations — reconnecting you to a sense of inhabiting your body.

### Mantra meditation:

Using a repetitive word or sound, originally stemming from Buddhist and Hindu teachings. You may find this type useful if you find silence challenging or find it easier to focus on a specific sound rather than on your breathing.



# Try: mindfulness (3 minutes)

Mindfulness is simply being aware of what is going on, as it is arising. It allows you to work with your attention to cultivate the potential to change mental gears. Mindfulness is not about trying to 'clear your mind', reject or ignore any particular thoughts or emotions. Instead, it provides a way to process them with more acceptance and compassion.

Mindfulness has been shown to help some people cope better with stress, anxiety, pain and illness. But it is worth bearing in mind that everyone's experience is different and in some cases mindfulness might not be the right course of action i.e. for those processing a recent bereavement or suffering with PTSD.

If you are unsure if any of these practices are right for you, seek advice from a medical professional.

## How can I fit it into my day?

If you have three minutes while you wait for your next class to come from the other side of the school, or you've dashed to the toilet but still have a moment before the break time bell rings, then this mini-meditation could really work for you.

There are three steps to this practice<sup>2</sup>. Some people find it helpful to imagine an hourglass as they move through each step.

**1 Awareness (1 minute)** — recognise and acknowledge your current experience. Ask yourself — what is going on for me in this present moment? What am I thinking? How do I feel — emotionally and physically? You may want to lower your gaze or close your eyes if you are somewhere safe.

**2 Gathering (1 minute)** — bring your attention to sensations of breathing in a particular place on your body i.e. the feeling of air as it passes through your nostrils, or by resting a hand on your stomach and feeling it rise and fall. No need to breathe differently to how you would normally.

Or focus on the contact of your feet on the ground/body on the chair if that feels more comfortable.

**3 Expanding (1 minute)** — now begin to expand your attention to consider your whole body. If your gaze was lowered/ eyes closed, gently let in some light and take in your surroundings before stepping back into the activity of the day.

Remember to be kind to yourself. If you get distracted, that's perfectly normal. Just note this — perhaps with the word 'distracted' — and return to the step you were on.

If you practice this for just three minutes a day, you may surprise yourself with how quickly you get the hang of it. You can schedule it in alongside key moments of your day, returning to it several times a day.

2. Segal, Williams and Teasdale, 2013



# Try: **focused meditation** (5 minutes)

This is similar to mindfulness, though with less emphasis on thoughts and breathing. Instead, it is recommended that you choose a sensory stimulus — such as a sound — and focus wholly on that.

As with mindfulness, the idea of this practice is that you are trying to focus on your experience in the

present moment. If your inner monologue starts to wander — to marking you need to finish or an email you've not responded too — then don't beat yourself up about it.

Just try to gently, but firmly come back to your stimulus again.

## How can I fit it into my day?

This can be done in just five minutes, making it ideal for the hectic life of teachers and education staff.

It can help to be sat down (preferably not standing up) or in a position that lends itself to comfort and relaxation, though preferably without lying down (so you don't drift off to sleep!).

If you are sitting on a chair, you can try to sit at the edge to relax your pelvis, with your feet on the floor. Whether sitting on a chair or the floor, a cushion behind you may help your spine stay straight, keeping you alert.

The idea is that you really *experience* whatever it is that you've selected to be your focus.

For example, if you have chosen sound, let any sound vibrations come into your ears — rather than looking for any sounds in particular.

### Questions to ask yourself:

- What am I hearing nearest to me?
- What can I hear further away?  
i.e. in another room/outside?
- Are any sounds quieter than others?
- What about pitch/tones?
- Are any sounds continuous?
- Are there gaps between some sounds?
- How many sounds can I hear right now?

Again, if your focus starts to wander, don't worry. Just note it, and return to whatever you're hearing. You can adjust these questions, depending on the sense you have chosen to bring awareness to.



# Try: visualisation (10 minutes)

Visualisation is about picturing uplifting images and ideas in your mind, with the only limit being whatever you can dream up.

As well as helping to improve wellbeing and potentially achieve your life goals, visualisation can also enhance creativity by encouraging your imagination. It may even improve your self-image by letting you see yourself in a positive light.

## How can I fit it into my day?

We've suggested ten minutes for this visualisation, but you can repeat it for as long or as short as it feels good for, then open your eyes when you're ready to finish.

Start by visualising a place that gives you a sense of calmness and contentment.

You could visualise a calm classroom with all pupils engaged in their work. The class has answered the register and have been actively listening to your explanation of today's topic.

Or it doesn't have to be something related to work. Some people picture long sandy beaches with clear seas or snowy vistas across serene mountain peaks.

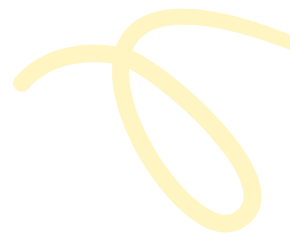
As long as it is something that brings calm to you, it can work.

Whatever you choose to picture, you might want to take a few moments before you start to feel your feet in contact with the ground, or your body in contact with the surface you're resting on. Once you're ready, close your eyes and visualise your chosen mental image; describing your imagined surroundings to yourself, in your mind, if this helps you.

For a free 10 minute guided visualisation check out this ['walk along a beach' guided visualisation](#) by NHS Fife. Why not try listening to it at the end of the work day, or before going to bed, to see if it works for you?



# Three **breathing** techniques from The Zen Project



## An energising breathing technique

### When to use it

- This technique may energise you if your energy is dipping
- Best to practise in the morning, maybe even instead of a coffee!

### How to do it

- Find a comfortable seat, sitting with a straight spine
- Gently close your eyes and begin to focus on your breathing
- Block off your left nostril and breathe only through your right nostril
- Continue for a few minutes



## A balancing breathing technique

### When to use it

- This technique may relax you if stressed or energise you if your energy is dipping
- Practise at any time of day

### How to do it

- Find a comfortable seat, sitting with a straight spine
- Gently close your eyes and begin to focus on your breathing
- Inhale steadily to a count of 4, exhale to a count of 4
- Continue for a few minutes, or as long as you like!



## A relaxing breathing technique

### When to use it

- Promotes calm and may stimulate the nervous system
- Ideal to practise before bed

### How to do it

- Find a comfortable seat, sitting with a straight spine
- Gently close your eyes and begin to focus on your breathing
- Block off your right nostril and breathe only through your left nostril
- Continue for a few minutes, or as long as you like!



Let us know how you got on! Did you have a favourite type of meditation?

Would you like more information? Let us know via Twitter or Instagram @EdSupportUK



# Where can I seek support if I am struggling?

If you are struggling with feelings of stress or any challenging emotions, don't suffer alone. Call our free, confidential helpline, staffed by qualified counsellors, available 24/7 on [08000 562 561](tel:08000562561).



## Sources:

1. Full Catastrophe Living: How to cope with stress, pain and illness using meditation, Jon Kabat-Zinn, 15th edition, 2007
2. Mindfulness Based Cognitive Therapy: Distinctive Features, 2nd Edition, Rebecca Crane, 2017
3. [How breathing can reduce stress and anxiety](#), NHS therapy in focus
4. [Breathing exercises to relieve stress](#), British Heart Foundation
5. Zen tips from The Zen Project, [zen tips pack](#)
6. Education Support's [Teacher Wellbeing Index](#)
7. Full list of sources [here](#)

