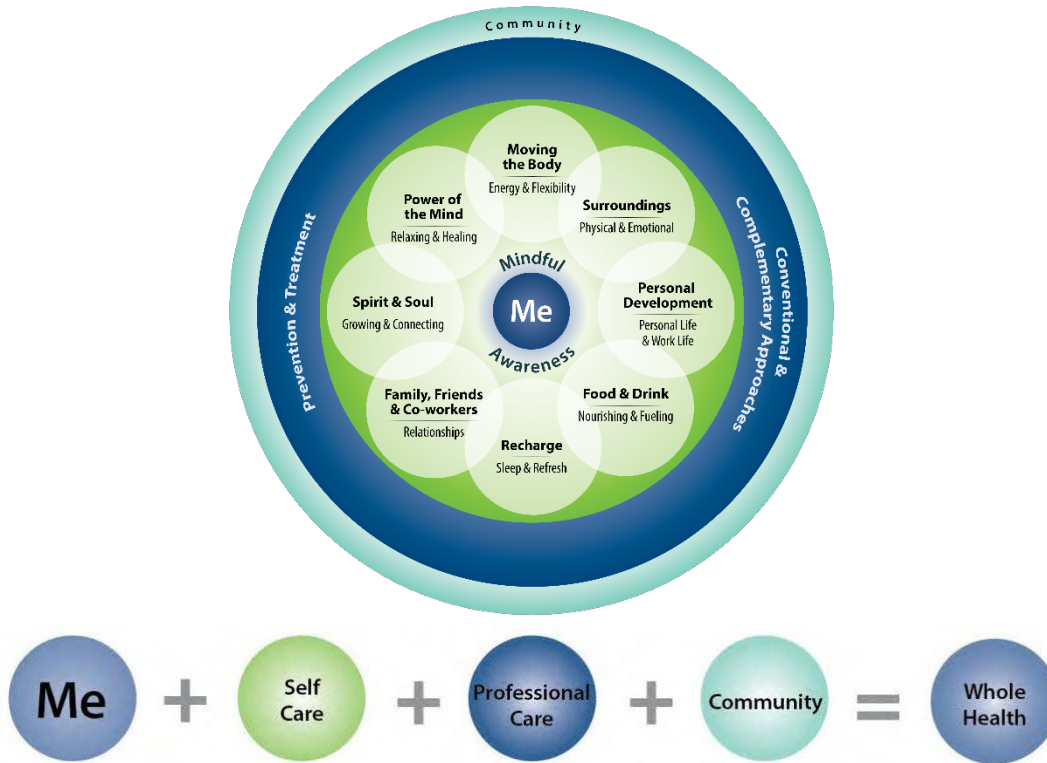


# WHOLE HEALTH: INFORMATION FOR VETERANS

## Mindful Awareness Practice in Daily Living



Whole Health is an approach to health care that empowers and enables YOU to take charge of your health and well-being and live your life to the fullest. It starts with YOU. It is fueled by the power of knowing yourself and what will really work for you in your life. Once you have some ideas about this, your team can help you with the skills, support, and follow up you need to reach your goals.

All resources provided in these handouts are reviewed by VHA clinicians and Veterans. No endorsement of any specific products is intended. Best wishes!

<https://www.va.gov/wholehealth/>

## Mindful Awareness Practice in Daily Living

Mindful awareness is at the heart of Whole Health. Perhaps you have read the Veteran handout “[An Introduction to Mindful Awareness](#).” It describes what mindful awareness is and how it can help improve your health and quality of life. The handout you are reading now includes two parts. First, on this page, you will learn some hints for practicing mindful awareness. The remaining pages describe four different ways that you can practice mindful awareness. As you read this handout, think about which of the four exercises you might want to explore and practice.

### What are some hints for practicing mindful awareness?

#### **Adopt a “beginner’s mind”**

Be curious and open to mindful awareness practice. Try not to let your assumptions or previous experiences color your present practice. As assumptions pop into your mind, note that it is an assumption. Then curiously explore the mindful practice with an open mind. This will help you stay grounded in each moment.

#### **Be flexible**

The exercises on the following pages are suggestions. Tailor them to your own needs to help you live mindfully each day.

#### **Allow enough time**

The best way to master mindful awareness is to practice each day. Consider starting with 8 minutes per day. Gradually increase your practice time. A good goal is 45 minutes per day. Many people prefer to practice for 20 minutes a day. Don’t worry if you cannot practice this long. Some practice time, even 5 minutes, may help you.

#### **Be patient**

Your mind will wander whether you are a beginner or even if you have practiced mindful awareness for a long time. This is normal and expected. When your attention wanders, simply take a deep breath. Note how it feels to breathe in and breathe out. There is no need to scold yourself. Just gently refocus your attention and continue your practice.

### How can I practice mindful awareness?

There are several ways to practice mindful awareness. Read through the four exercises that follow. Consider practicing one or more of them. You may also be interested in the Whole Health handout “[Mindful Eating](#).”

If you become very uncomfortable while you are practicing these exercises, reach out to your health care team. If you have a history of severe PTSD, schizophrenia, or other serious mental health concerns, speak to your health care team before you try these exercises.

## EXERCISE #1—BODY SCAN

(If you prefer, you can access an audio file to guide you through the body scan at <https://www.va.gov/WHOLEHEALTH/video/video-downloads.asp>. Click on “On Demand Audio Files (Podcasts) Mindfulness Series.” Then click on “Body Scan Meditation.”)

The body scan practice helps you become more aware of how all parts of your body are feeling. When you first start this practice, it may be helpful to go to a quiet location. As you gain experience, you can do the exercise anywhere and anytime. You can choose to do this exercise for five minutes or for more than an hour.

1. Find a comfortable position. The first few times you do this practice, try lying on your back with your eyes closed.
2. Take five breaths. Feel your belly rise as you breathe in. Feel your belly fall as you breathe out. Continue to breathe slowly throughout the exercise.
3. Note how your body feels as a whole. What information is your body giving you? Is there any area of tension?
4. Now begin to focus on each part of your body in order.
  - Begin with the toes of your left foot. What do you feel? Cool air? A soft blanket? A scratchy sock? A confining shoe? Perhaps you don't feel anything. **This is OK.** Take a deep breath and end your focus on your toes.
  - Next move to the sole of your left foot. Again, what do you feel? When ready, take a deep breath, and end your focus on your foot.
  - Continue to focus on each part of your body. Give each part your full attention in the order listed. (Go down the first column, starting with “top of the left foot” and then the second column. Thus, “left fingers” will follow “chest”). Once you finish with an area, take a breath and move on to the next area. When your mind wanders, be gentle with yourself, knowing that this is what minds do. Take a breath and refocus where you left off.

○ top of the left foot	○ left fingers
○ left ankle	○ then in order--your left hand, wrist, forearm, upper arm, shoulder
○ left shin	○ right hand and arm (as you did the left)
○ left calf	○ neck
○ left knee	○ face
○ left thigh	○ scalp
○ left hip	○ top of the head
○ pelvis	
○ right foot and leg (as you did the left)	
○ return to your pelvis	
○ belly	
○ back--lower, middle, and upper	
○ chest	
5. End the practice by returning to your breath. Take five breaths, noting the rise and fall of your belly.

## **EXERCISE #2—SEATED MEDITATION**

(You can access several audio files to guide you through meditation practice at <https://www.va.gov/WHOLEHEALTH/video/video-downloads.asp>.)

1. Go to a quiet place where you will not be disturbed.
2. Decide how long you want to practice. Do you want to start with two to five minutes? Consider setting a timer, so you know when the time is up without being distracted by looking at a clock.
3. Sit comfortably.
  - If you are in a chair, put both feet on the floor.
  - If you are sitting on a cushion, it is best to have your hips higher than your knees. Position yourself on the cushion so that your knees can rest on the floor. Or support your knees with a prop that keeps them lower than your hips.
  - Let your spine stretch up into a neutral spine position, lengthening out like a string of pearls.
  - Put your hands in a comfortable position.
4. Set an intention for this meditation. It may be as simple as “May I cultivate mindful awareness in my life.” Another example is “May I seek and practice the benefits of silence and stillness.”
5. Close your eyes and turn your attention inward, or gaze softly at the floor.
6. Focus on your breathing.
  - When you breathe in, is it fast, slow, noisy, quiet, easy, or difficult?
  - When you breathe out, is it fast, slow, noisy, quiet, easy, or difficult?
7. If your attention wanders, accept that it is normal. Then resume focusing on your breathing. Be kind to yourself. Minds wander; that is what they do. The key is to gently bring your awareness back to your breath when it wanders.
8. Continue to focus on your breath.
9. When the timer sounds, slowly open your eyes.
10. Think about your experience.
  - How did it feel to focus on breathing for this length of time?
  - Concentrating on your breath in this way can be challenging at first. It becomes much easier with practice.

### **EXERCISE #3—MINDFUL AWARENESS WHILE COMMUTING**

How do you usually spend the time as you move from one location to another? Often people are lost in thought. You can arrive without thinking how you got to your new location. Moving from point A to point B gives you an opportunity to practice mindful awareness. You can do this whether you walk, cycle, drive, or use public transportation.

Note: For safety reasons, it is best if you first become familiar with this mindful awareness practice while you are a passenger and not driving a car or riding a bike.

Try the following exercise during your daily travels.

1. Avoid distractions like a radio, headphones, phone, computer, print materials, eating and drinking.
2. What do you see? Look around you with fresh eyes. What colors, shapes, textures, sizes, and movements do you see? Try not to judge what you see. Use this as a time to simply see. Keep your awareness in the present moment, not the past or the future.
3. What do you hear? Are the sounds around you loud, soft, harsh, continuous, off-and-on, high-pitched, or low-pitched? What direction do the sounds come from?
4. What do you smell? Breathe your usual way through your nose. Pay attention to any smells you detect. Then take a deep breath through your nose. Do you detect any different smells?
5. What do you taste? Is your mouth open or closed? Are you aware of any taste?
6. What do you feel physically? (For example, do you feel your hands on a steering wheel? Your feet on bicycle pedals or a sidewalk? Your behind on a seat?) What are you aware of at these points of contact? (For example, do your feet hurt?) What are you aware of elsewhere in your body? Are your shoulders relaxed, tense, or neutral? What about your jaw, your neck, and your back? What emotions do you notice?
7. As you travel, continue to notice what you see, hear, smell, taste, and feel.
8. When you arrive at your new location, bring this same attention into the rest of your activities. This can make for a richer day.

#### **EXERCISE #4—MINDFUL MOVEMENT**

This practice can help you bring awareness to three places in your body where people often carry stress. Note how it feels to relax these areas of your body.

1. Find a comfortable seated position.
2. Take five breaths. Feel your belly rise as you breathe in. Feel your belly fall as you breathe out.
3. Notice your jaw.
  - Notice how the left side of your jaw feels. Is your jaw tense, relaxed, or neutral? Are you clenching your teeth together? If so, separate them to relax your jaw.
  - Now do the same with the right side of your jaw.
  - Take a slow, deep breath. How does it feel to have your teeth separated and your jaw relaxed?
4. Notice your neck.
  - Does your neck feel tense, relaxed, or neutral as if lengthened like a string of pearls?
  - Allow your neck to stretch out into a neutral position. Look straight ahead. Stretch the back of your neck. Tuck your chin slightly.
  - Mindfully note your neck. As you feel safe to do so, slowly turn your head to look toward your right shoulder. Do not force the motion, just let it flow and stop the turning where you feel safe.
  - Take a breath before returning to neutral.
  - Again mindfully note your neck. As you feel safe to do so, slowly turn your head to look toward your left shoulder. Do not force the motion, just let it flow and stop the turning where you feel safe.
  - Raise your chin so that you are looking where the wall in front of you meets the ceiling.
  - Take a breath before returning to neutral.
  - Lower your chin as far toward your chest as possible without straining.
  - Take a breath before returning to neutral.
  - Again mindfully note your neck. As you feel safe to do so, slowly bring your right ear down toward your right shoulder, keeping your shoulder relaxed. Do not force the motion, just let it flow and stop moving where you feel safe.
  - Take a breath before returning to neutral.
  - Again mindfully note your neck. As you feel safe to do so, slowly bring your left ear down toward your left shoulder, keeping your shoulder relaxed. Do not force the motion, just let it flow and stop moving where you feel safe.
  - Take a slow, deep breath. Notice how it feels to have your neck relaxed.
5. Notice your shoulders.
  - Focus on your shoulders. Do they feel tense, relaxed, or neutral?
  - Raise your shoulders toward your ears.
  - Breathe in deeply. Allow your shoulders to relax as you breathe out.
  - Roll your shoulders forward three times.
  - Roll your shoulders backward three times.
  - Allow your shoulders to come to rest in a relaxed, neutral position.

- Take a slow, deep breath. How does it feel to have your shoulders relaxed?
- 6. Take five breaths. Feel the rise of your belly as you breathe in. Feel your belly fall as you breathe out.
- 7. Maintain your awareness of the jaw, the neck, and the shoulders throughout your daily activities. Repeat this exercise whenever you feel tension building in these areas. This will help keep you tuned in to your body and help you release unnecessary tension.

**For you to consider:**

- Do you want to explore mindful awareness further? Is this something you want to work on?
- Are there one or more mindful awareness exercises that you want to practice?
- You are more likely to be successful if you set clear goals.
  - **Which** mindful awareness exercise or exercises will you practice?
  - **Where** will you practice?
  - **When** will you practice?
  - For **how long** will you practice?

The information in this handout is general. **Please work with your health care team to use the information in the best way possible to promote your health and happiness.**

**For more information:**

ORGANIZATION	RESOURCES	WEBSITE
Veterans Health Administration	A variety of Whole Health handouts on mindful awareness	<a href="https://www.va.gov/WHOLEHEALTH/veteran-handouts/index.asp">https://www.va.gov/WHOLEHEALTH/veteran-handouts/index.asp</a>
VA "Whole Health" website	Mindfulness: Embracing the Moment (Describes one Veteran's experience)	<a href="https://www.va.gov/WHOLEHEALTH/features/Mindfulness Embracing the Moment.asp">https://www.va.gov/WHOLEHEALTH/features/Mindfulness Embracing the Moment.asp</a>
VA "Whole Health" website "Circle of Health"	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Instructional videos on mindfulness</li> <li>• Audio files and podcasts on guided meditation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <a href="https://www.va.gov/WHOLEHEALTH/circle-of-health/mindfulness-awareness.asp">https://www.va.gov/WHOLEHEALTH/circle-of-health/mindfulness-awareness.asp</a></li> <li>• Click on "Video Resources"</li> <li>• Click on "Guided Meditation Audio Files"</li> </ul>
VA "The War Related Illness & Injury Study Center's STAR Well-Kit" website	In this video, Veteran Patrick Crehan discusses benefits of mindfulness meditation.	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ufbdtF5jbBs&amp;index=8&amp;list=PL3AQ_JVoBEyzic-3QwlrHbtQokOCRCEk4">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ufbdtF5jbBs&amp;index=8&amp;list=PL3AQ_JVoBEyzic-3QwlrHbtQokOCRCEk4</a>
VA website	Mindfulness Coach App (Designed to help Veterans, Service-members, and others learn to practice mindfulness.)	<a href="https://mobile.va.gov/app/mindfulness-coach">https://mobile.va.gov/app/mindfulness-coach</a>
VA "Health Services Research & Development" website	Evidence Map of Mindfulness (Written at a level for clinicians)	<a href="http://www.hsrd.research.va.gov/publications/esp/cam_mindfulness-REPORT.pdf">http://www.hsrd.research.va.gov/publications/esp/cam_mindfulness-REPORT.pdf</a>



## Mindful Awareness Practice in Daily Living

*This handout was written for the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) by Charlene Luchterhand MSSW, Education and Research Coordinator, Integrative Health Program, University of Wisconsin Department of Family Medicine and Community Health. It is based in part on a document for clinicians, Clinical Tool: Mindful Awareness Practice in Daily Living, written by Adrienne Hampton, MD. The handout was reviewed and edited by Veterans and VHA subject matter experts.*

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