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MINDSET 101: *Learning to Manage Your Stress*



By Margaret Fletcher



About the Author

Margaret Fletcher is co-founder and senior teacher-trainer at East Coast Mindfulness. She was a founding member of the Anticancer Lifestyle Program team and created the Mindfulness/Stress Reduction curriculum pillar of the Anticancer Lifestyle Program's online course.

Margaret has taught mindfulness and trained mindfulness teachers at the Center for Mindfulness located at the University of Massachusetts Medical School and at Lesley University. She is certified to teach MBSR (Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction) and is a contributing author to the Mindfulness-Based Interventions Teaching Assessment Criteria. Margaret holds a Master's degree in Mindfulness Studies from Lesley University, and a Bachelor of Arts degree from Dartmouth College.

This ebook will introduce you to some simple yet powerful ways to cultivate an Anticancer mindset.

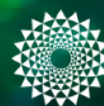
You will learn:

- About the mind-body connection: the way your mental state affects your body, and how your physical state affects your mind
- Which kinds of stress are harmful
- How chronic stress affects health
- Mindfulness tips and techniques that will help you reduce stress



At the core of mindset training is the practice of mindfulness, which is the ability to be fully present, without judgment, for what is going on within you and around you.

The benefits of mindfulness are now supported by an extensive body of research showing its positive impact on health and an overall sense of well-being. Those who apply themselves to the practice describe an array of benefits¹, such as feeling less overtaken by negative emotions², and an increase in the ability to cope with chronic pain³. Many who practice mindfulness regularly report the ability to make new choices that seemed previously beyond reach, such as improvements in communication skills, and more control over knee-jerk reactions to life's challenges.



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When you practice mindfulness, you set aside judgments and instead bring a sense of curiosity and openness to your life. You strengthen your understanding of how your body, mind, and emotions are interconnected and interact.

People are often skeptical, or even resistant, to the idea that mindfulness practices can make a difference in their lives. But, if you are willing to try some of the methods you'll learn in this ebook, you might be surprised! **These practices can help you manage stress and bring your focus to what's important to you.**



Why It's Important To Manage Your Stress

Developing a healthy mindset through mindfulness practice can be as important a lifestyle change as any other changes you may be inclined to make — such as in your diet or fitness level. **Your ability to make and maintain lifestyle choices that promote health and well-being starts with learning to manage your stress.**

Stress is defined as a state of mental or emotional strain or tension caused by demanding circumstances. Everyone experiences stress.

Of course, not all stress is bad! Sometimes stress can motivate you to solve problems, and reach for new goals. **Problems start to show up when too many stressors pile up and you lack the means of coping with them,** and the ability to put things in perspective. This can create feelings of helplessness or despair.

Your body is programmed to respond to stress. Any stressful situation, like worrying about losing a job, waiting for that scan result, or running into a rattlesnake, can trigger the amygdala — the part of your brain that helps to detect threats and tells your body to release hormones in response to stress.

When stress-related hormones — such as cortisol and adrenaline — are released into your bloodstream, your heart may pound, and you may begin to sweat. You get a surge of energy and your mind becomes hyper-focused. Sight, hearing, and other senses become sharper. It can take anywhere from half an hour to several hours to return to your normal resting state⁴.



This reaction is known as the “fight or flight or freeze” response.

Humans rely on this automatic response to get out of danger. This reaction evolved from an early survival mechanism that allowed humans to respond quickly when faced with life-threatening situations. If a predator such as a bear appeared, the fight or flight response allowed humans to act quickly. They could either run away, hide, or freeze until the animal was gone, or fight off the predator. This response is normal. **It happens automatically, and is useful during life-or-death emergencies.** By raising your blood pressure and your heart rate, your body is preparing your muscles to get ready to fight or to run away.

As your stress hormone levels go up, your body starts to turn off or slow down the body parts that aren't immediately needed during an emergency. This process causes more energy to flow to the parts of your body that allow you to fight or take flight — including your lungs, and leg and arm muscles.



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Your immune system function is one of the body systems that can slow down when stress-related hormones like cortisol are released. Cortisol can also impair 'executive functioning', which is your ability to make complex, reasoned decisions.

This all makes sense, if you think about it. If you spent too much time thinking about what to do when you saw a bear, you wouldn't react in time to avoid being attacked.

Your body is very good at turning on your fight or flight response when you're in danger. **However, your body isn't always able to determine which stressful events are truly dangerous and which are just part of living in today's fast-paced world.** In fact, there's a good chance that most of the stress you experience is not actually related to life-threatening situations. **The stress you feel when you are stuck in traffic may cause your body to have the same type of response — an increase in stress hormones — as if you were being chased by a bear.**



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Frequently-repeated stress responses,
or long periods of stress, can cause your
body to be in a state of chronic stress reaction
that will affect your health over time.



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Stress can cause us to sabotage our best intentions to live a healthier life. That's why, at the Anticancer Lifestyle Program, we consider stress management foundational to creating lifestyle change.

When your fight or flight reaction is automatically triggered over and over again — that is, when your stress reaction becomes chronic — your risk goes up for unhealthy coping behaviors that are self-destructive, addictive, numbing, or distracting — everything from excess drinking to aggressive driving to downing a few donuts at work. These are behaviors that, in the short-term, help to dull or distract you from your stress.

The destructive behaviors that can result from chronic stress also trigger an inflammatory response in the body. Prolonged inflammation can have a wide range of physical effects such as fatigue, joint or abdominal pain, mouth sores, as well as mental and emotional consequences, such as depression. In a chronic stress situation, you are also at greater risk of sleeplessness and exhaustion, depression, heart attack, and even cancer.

Depending on your current health situation, you may have persistent feelings of helplessness, hopelessness, loneliness, fear, or anger. While these feelings are natural, if they continue for a long time, your constant stress can result in chronic inflammation that can create an unhealthy physical and emotional state.

There is a growing body of animal and in vitro research that links chronic stress with tumor growth and spread⁵. Continuous release of stress hormones, such as norepinephrine and cortisol, can create an inflammatory terrain in your body for cancer cells to thrive.

In summary, chronic inflammation can increase your risk of many different illnesses and diseases. **Reducing the physical and emotional impact of stress helps strengthen your immune system.**





Mind and Body

The dialogue between the mind and the body is a two-way conversation.

When you feel exhausted or somewhat physically ill, you may find that your mood and pattern of thinking is changed, mirroring the discomfort in your body. Illness can cause increased mental stress, which can lead to anxiety and depression. When you improve your physical health through exercising and eating nutritious foods, your energy levels will increase and the chemicals in your brain that trigger positive feelings — including serotonin and endorphins — will also go up.

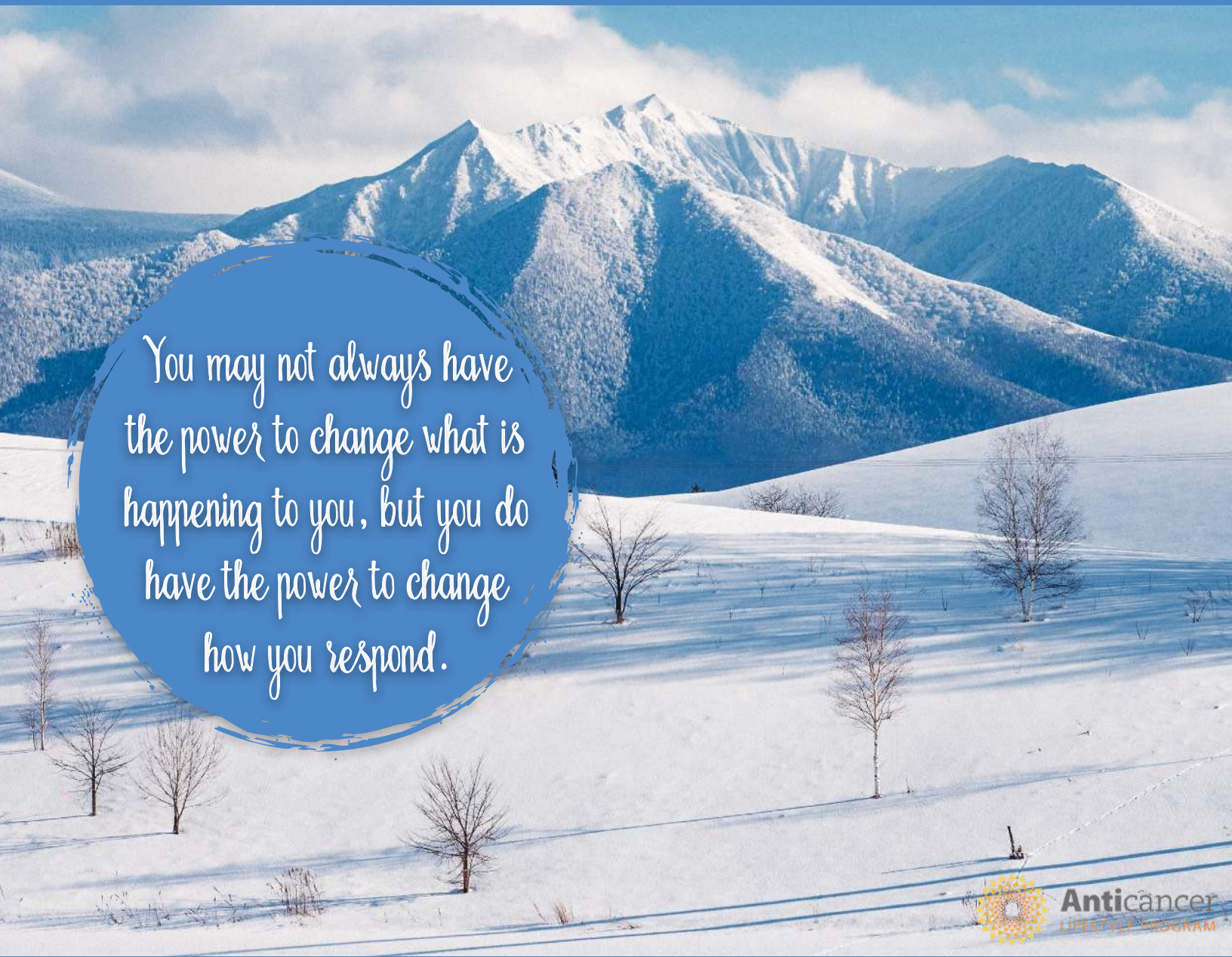
When your mind is unable to successfully sort through thoughts and emotions, you can feel a sense of distress. Over time, if you don't take deliberate steps to resolve these emotions, **episodes of distress can turn into chronic stress. When this happens, the so-called “diseases of adaptation” begin to show up:** physical reactions such as stomach upset and muscle tension. If you are unable to cope effectively with your emotions, or resolve the problems that are causing them, then over time, these harmful effects on the body will build and could lead to chronic illness.



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If you take some time to create your own “toolbox” of techniques to reduce your stress, you’ll not only become more aware of increased stress as you are experiencing it, but you’ll have the means to calm both body and mind.

With awareness, you can change your whole experience of the day. Mindset is fluid in this way. **What defines the Anticancer mindset is this ability to come into the present, to realize the true nature of what is going on, and to think and act — and react — in ways that are useful and productive.** Being aware of what’s happening in you, to you and around you gives you the power to soothe your feelings and to adjust your response to them.



You may not always have the power to change what is happening to you, but you do have the power to change how you respond.





If you are feeling helpless or hopeless, try to identify just what is causing those feelings. Do you have any control over these situations? If not, do you have any control over your feelings about them? Is there another way to look at them, and to respond to them?

Awareness of what is happening in the present moment allows you to interrupt the automatic stress response and use the higher reasoning centers of your brain. **You become more able to thoughtfully “respond”, rather than quickly “react”.** You will become aware that you actually have many choices for how to respond to a particular situation. **The knowledge that you have choice, and therefore some control, will produce a healthier and calmer state of mind.**



Remember, all feelings are OK, whether they are positive or negative. Developing an Anticancer mindset doesn't mean that you will always view things positively. It's about becoming aware of your emotions and training yourself to handle them in a skillful manner. It's about learning to nurture feelings of respect, joy, thankfulness and appreciation for what you have in your life here and now. **An Anticancer mindset allows you to create health, sometimes in spite of disease.**

Some of the more common techniques people use to calm their bodies and minds are:

- ❖ Deep diaphragmatic breathing
- ❖ Gratitude practice
- ❖ Mindfulness techniques
- ❖ Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT)
- ❖ Meditation and movement meditations
- ❖ Being in nature
- ❖ Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR)

Now let's look at each of these techniques in more detail.



1. Deep diaphragmatic breathing - Many of us are in the habit of breathing shallowly. Deep diaphragmatic breathing is a very specific technique for slowing and deepening the breath into the full lung capacity. It has the effect of slowing and calming both the mind and the body. This is an easy, calming practice.

- ❖ Sit or lie down in a comfortable place and relax your shoulders.
- ❖ Place one hand on or below your ribcage on the top part of your belly.
- ❖ Breathe in a full, relaxed breath through your nose, so that your hand feels your belly rise.
- ❖ Exhale slowly and fully through your mouth.



After a few cycles of breathing, experiment with holding for a moment after inhaling and with lengthening the time of the exhale. Try doing this several times in a row, keeping your in-breath steady and your out-breath comfortably elongated. If you feel light-headed, be sure to stop the exercise.

If you practice this just a few minutes each day, you may notice that you're automatically breathing more deeply and slowly, and feeling improvement in your general mood.



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To do this effectively, pause the action of the day and focus on the process of breathing. You might notice changing temperatures inside your nose and throat. Let your attention rest on the simple, flowing sensations of the breath entering and leaving your body, staying with yourself for the time it takes three breath cycles to come and go.

Practicing in this way, you begin to identify the breath as being right here for you, always available as an anchor in the present moment. And if you notice your mind wandering away after even half a breath, this isn't a problem. It's quite normal, and by coming back to the breath you are in fact training yourself to return to the present.

Think of this process as a muscle you are making stronger. **We all have “monkey minds” — minds that jump around from thoughts about the past and the future, to-do lists, worries, plans.** When your mind goes to those thoughts, just say to yourself, “thinking”, without judgment, and return to your breath. **The practice of learning to return to the breath is a powerful foundation of mindfulness meditation.**

At first, you can try to do this briefly three times a day, maybe for 1-2 minutes in the morning, afternoon, and evening. And then if you like, you can slowly increase the time you spend with this simple practice each day, to see what happens for you by tuning in to your breath and your life.

And remember, you can do this practice anywhere — sitting in your doctor's waiting room (especially if you're having a little bit of anxious white coat syndrome), or before a big meeting or important phone call, or even at a stop light.





STOP: *A quick mindfulness reset*

This brief practice, called STOP, can quickly bring your attention back to the here and now. It can be used at any time and in any place. “STOP” is an acronym that also usefully makes you think of a stop sign.

S: Stop what you're doing. Bring some stillness to your body.

T: Take a breath. Just notice your breathing.

O: Open and Observe. Open to what's happening in and around you: the sensations in the body or the thoughts and feelings in your mind; the people, objects and sounds in the room.

P: Proceed. Go ahead and proceed with your day.

- 2. Gratitude practice** - Research has shown that this practice reduces depression, improves sleep quality, reduces inflammation, and lowers the level of the stress hormone cortisol.

This is a simple activity that you can do anytime, anywhere. **All you need to do is to take a few moments to think about what you are grateful for in your life.** It can be simple things you are grateful for right in this moment — like having a steaming cup of tea or a good pair of gloves to warm your hands on a cold winter's day. Or it can be something bigger — like appreciation for a friend or family member you can confide in.

You can think of these things, say them out loud, or write them down. Take a moment now to write at least three things for which you are grateful. Writing down these thoughts gives you the opportunity to go back to review, remember, and reflect on them. If you'd like a document to help you do this, Please see our **Gratitude Practice Worksheet**.



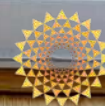


3. Mindfulness techniques -

As mentioned earlier, mindfulness is the process of bringing one's attention to experiences happening in the present moment, while recognizing and accepting one's feelings, thoughts, and bodily sensations. There is no right or wrong way to feel about a particular sensation, thought or emotion.



When being mindful, you bring your awareness to what you are experiencing right now, in this moment, rather than rehashing the past or imagining the future. You consider whatever is happening – physically and emotionally – without judgment, but rather with a sense of curiosity and interest.



As stated earlier, mindfulness training helps develop the flexibility to make choices that may better fit your situation, instead of reacting to a challenge in an unconscious and habitual way — which you may later regret. Instead of lashing out in anger, you may decide instead to step away for a time, to calmly state why you are upset, or ask questions to better understand the situation.

Another benefit of mindfulness is its potential to lower stress.

When you are able to pay more attention to what you are experiencing in the moment, you are less likely to dwell on regrets about the past, or fears about the future.

One example of this comes from a study of women with multiple sclerosis⁶. In this study, patients were randomly assigned to either take the 8-week Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction course along with treatment or to receive treatment only. This study showed that MBSR training can reduce depression, anxiety and stress scores in patients with MS.



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Another example comes from a study of men with prostate cancer⁷. Researchers measured the stress levels of those men who had decided on “watchful waiting” for their cancer, instead of immediate treatment. Simply waiting, versus taking immediate action, can be anxiety-provoking. However, researchers found that the men who practiced mindfulness regularly were better able to cope with the anxiety of watchful waiting compared to men who did not.

In addition to lowering stress levels, mindfulness — especially the practice of meditation — can be a powerful solution to insomnia. Many studies have shown meditation to be an effective tool for both falling and staying asleep.

Sleep and mindfulness meditation have an interesting reciprocal relationship. Meditation can help us sleep better, and a good night of sleep can enable mindful behavior. Research also shows that a lack of sleep challenges our ability to act mindfully since fatigue can inflame anxiety, stress, mood fluctuations and depressive symptoms. (For some tips on getting better sleep, [see our blog post](#)).

4. **Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT)** - Cognitive Behavioral Therapy is a way of working with thoughts and behaviors to develop self-understanding, self-compassion and lifestyle change. It is a solution-focused approach that involves a therapist helping the client to understand the root of their undesirable behaviors and to help change them. Many studies offer evidence supporting the health benefits of CBT. For example, one randomized trial⁸ showed that women with breast cancer who were given skills to manage stress using CBT early in their breast cancer treatment lived longer and enjoyed a longer period of being disease-free.




- 5. Meditation** - Meditation is a word used to describe a broad range of methods for training the mind, emotions, and body. Meditation has many benefits. It can improve the ability to concentrate⁹ and increase emotional stability¹⁰. Regular meditation can decrease the risk of falling into chronic depression^{6, 11}. Research shows that regular meditation improves immune function¹², hormonal function¹³, and even how our genes behave!¹⁴



Most people are familiar with traditional **seated meditations**, where the focus is on the breath or a mantra. (A mantra is simply a repetitive sound, or a significant word or phrase used to anchor your attention.) In **guided imagery** meditation, the mantra is replaced by a series of evocative, positive mental images to help direct your imagination toward a relaxed, focused state. Many people use apps for guided meditations. (Please see [our blog](#) listing our favorite meditation apps). If you'd like to sample a guided meditation, click [here](#) for one that I lead.

There are also different types of **movement meditations, such as qi gong, t'ai chi, and yoga**. These practices use movement as a form of meditation and as a way to increase body awareness. They are especially useful for those who find the stillness of traditional meditation too challenging. (Please see [our webinar](#) on the healing benefits of qi gong and t'ai chi)



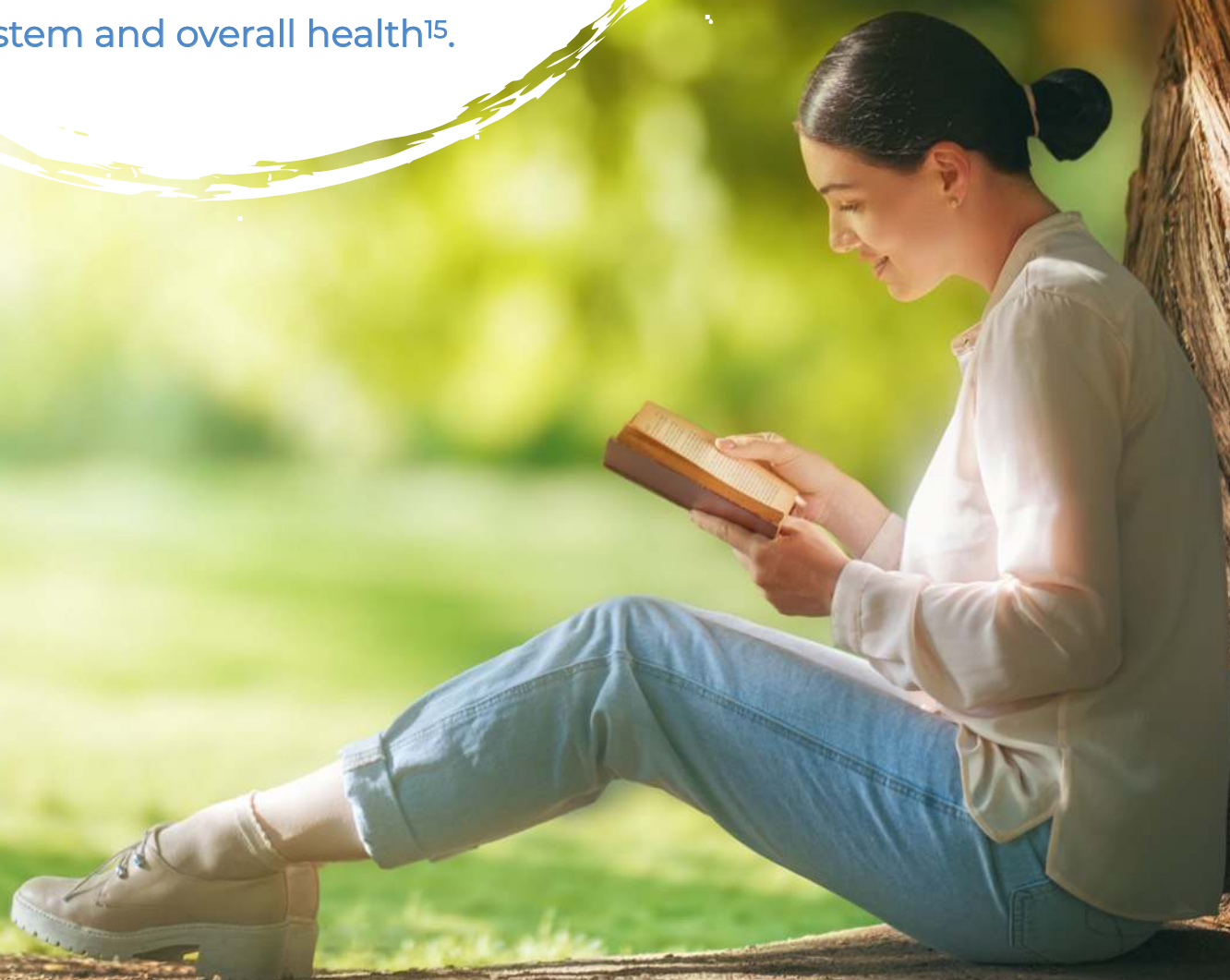


Most of us have many opportunities to walk every day. The practice of **walking meditation** is useful to connect your mind and body in one focused activity.

As you start to walk, pay attention step-by- step. Take this time to feel the connection between your feet and the ground. Feel your breath and smell the world around you, feel the wind caressing your skin, listen to birdsong, or children playing, or the honks and shouts of the city. Listen to the sound of your own breath. Look around and really notice all the little details of the world you live in. All your other thoughts can wait. Allow yourself to be completely present.



6. Being in nature - Simply spending time outdoors, in the fresh air and sunshine, in a natural setting such as a forest or by the ocean or a stream, is beginning to be recognized for its powerful health benefits. Early research shows that spending time in nature, allowing the five senses to be immersed in the natural world, away from technology and the noises and distractions of modern life, can have positive effects on the immune system and overall health¹⁵.





7. Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction, or MBSR, is an 8-week, intensive group education and training course for developing mindfulness and learning about its effects on our moment-to-moment lives. In an MBSR course, you practice awareness of your thoughts, emotions, and bodily sensations, and learn to pay greater attention to what's happening around you. This helps the learner access inner resources for healing and stress management.

MBSR has an emphasis on exploring modes of perception, the mind-body connection, stress, and ways to cope and thrive in the midst of a stressful world. You are asked to consider how you relate with yourself as well as other people in your life. MBSR courses, which meet weekly for 8 weeks, are widely available in the United States, and can also be taken online. (To learn more about taking MBSR online, please see [my website](#).)

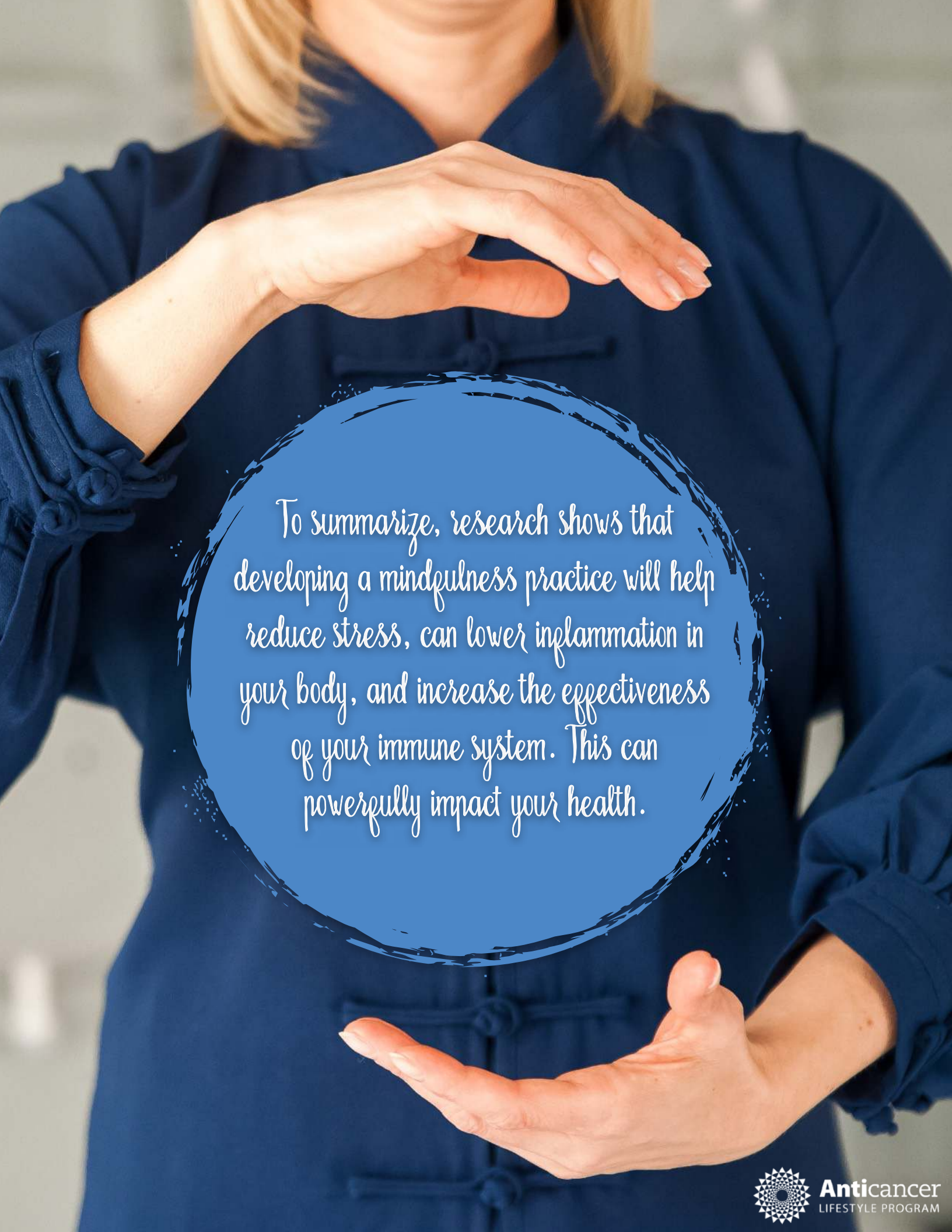


Bringing mindful awareness to daily life

Now that you've learned some of the steps you can take to become more mindful, let's take a look at some daily activities that will reinforce that training.

Well, we all have to eat! **Mindful eating** is a wonderful way to develop present moment awareness. It can help us to slow down and become more aware of the portion sizes we're consuming. It can also help us to break negative, automatic food habits, such as overeating while watching a favorite TV show. Mindful eating is useful if you've lost track of your sensations of hunger or fullness, which can become warped or dulled by large restaurant portions, fad diets, or comfort eating. **Mindful eating helps us to tune into our body's cues, so that we can know when to start and when to stop eating, instead of "eating our emotions" by reacting to harmful food-related impulses that may temporarily fill a psychological need.**

(We have many helpful resources about mindful eating: Click [here](#) for a mindful eating exercise that I guide. See also our [blog on mindful eating tips](#), and see [here](#) for our eBook: Food and You: Gaining Control Over Out-of-Control Eating.)

A person with blonde hair, wearing a dark blue traditional Chinese garment with decorative knots on the sleeves, is shown from the chest up. Their hands are positioned in a Tai Chi-like gesture, with the right hand held above the left. A large, semi-transparent blue circle with a hand-painted, textured border is centered over the person's torso. Inside this circle, white text is written in a cursive script. The background is a soft, out-of-focus grey.

To summarize, research shows that developing a mindfulness practice will help reduce stress, can lower inflammation in your body, and increase the effectiveness of your immune system. This can powerfully impact your health.



If you are interested in learning more about mindfulness training, search for mindful yoga, tai chi, Qi gong, meditation, mindfulness, and/or MBSR courses in your local area. It's important to try out a few teachers and methods, if available, until you find a community and teacher who fits your needs and style. For movement-related practices, it's best to begin with mindful or "beginner-friendly" yoga. Online videos and DVDs are also plentiful, but if these practices are new to you, it would be ideal to join a class first. **Always check with your physician before beginning a new movement discipline.**

Reflecting on what you have learned in this eBook, which benefits of mindfulness do you think would be helpful to you based on your current life situation? Are you hoping to decrease your stress reactions at work, or maybe with a family member? Would you like to be more mindful about what you're buying or eating? Would you like to worry less about your health or other things in your life? Think about the many ways that mindfulness can be a useful tool in improving your life. Take some time to write down some thoughts on our [Mindfulness Worksheet](#).



Here are five simple “Mindset Keys” to keep in mind each day:

1. Pause frequently to take three conscious breaths.
2. Practice being silent and simply aware for a few minutes each day.
3. Observe yourself and others with compassion and without judgment.
4. With practice, you can experience any activity mindfully.
5. Success is doing the practice, no matter what you experience on a given day.

As you continue your mindfulness practice, accept that mindfulness practice is not aimed at changing *what* you experience, rather it is aimed at changing *how* you experience it.

Mindset training is the first step towards beginning a way of life guided by your Anticancer mindset. Try these different practices, and use any and all that work for you.

Continuing to develop your Anticancer mindset will help you as you move forward on making lifestyle changes.



Mindfulness may be a new skill for you. It might feel awkward at first. **In fact, discomfort is not necessarily a sign that this practice is not for you. It may instead actually highlight your need for this practice.** As you continue to practice, it will feel more natural and less forced, and you'll get better and better at it.

You will notice soon enough that it's working! Your practice is paying off! You will begin to notice a change in your reactions to things that used to cause you anxiety or frustration. You will find that your patience, compassion, and awareness levels have increased.

Try to invite an Anticancer mindset into your everyday life. Remember to view your practice with compassion for yourself because no one will ever do all of this perfectly. Don't beat yourself up if you experience setbacks. Learning from these is actually an important part of the process. In fact, the realization that you can make thoughtful choices and responses each hour of the day is bound to empower you in countless ways.



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