



Try This Meditation Technique to Quiet Your Inner Critic

Practicing loving-kindness can help you become kinder to yourself. *Here's how to get started.*

Want to develop more kindness for yourself, for your loved ones, even for people you don't get along with? Starting a practice of loving-kindness (known in the Buddhist tradition as metta) can help. The good news is, you don't have to be an expert meditator to try it. You can add it to your existing routine or use it as an entry point into a new practice.

What is loving-kindness?

According to expert Sharon Salzberg, co-founder of the esteemed Insight Meditation Society in Barre, Massachusetts, and the best-selling author of many books, including *Lovingkindness*, "To be mindful means to have a kind of interested, balanced awareness of what's happening to us. But because our inner critic may be very strong, mindfulness is not that easy to accomplish. For a lot of people, doing a practice like loving-kindness can change our default response from one of self-judgment, fear or anger to a sense of connection and greater spaciousness, and it can form a foundation for being able to practice mindfulness. It's a great experiment to try."



Start off with basic meditation.

Start by finding a quiet place to sit, closing your eyes and drawing your awareness to the sensations in your body. You might feel your feet touching the floor, or your legs against the chair. Next, bring your attention to the in-and-out flow of your breathing at one spot. That could be the feeling of your belly rising and falling with each breath, or the sensation of air flowing through your nose. As you direct your attention to your breath, your mind will inevitably wander. When it does, simply notice it doing so and, without judgment, bring your attention back to your breathing. Try doing this for a few minutes to start, and gradually extend the length of your sessions until you can sit for 20 or so minutes at a time. It takes practice, but over time, you'll begin to notice you feel calmer, more focused and more aware of your moment-to-moment experience.



Try This Meditation Technique to Quiet Your Inner Critic *(continued)*

Then add these phrases.

Once you get the hang of basic meditation, you can add loving-kindness by saying the following phrases quietly to yourself or in your head:

*“May I be happy of heart.
May I be free from suffering.
May I be healthy and strong.
May I live with ease.”*

You might even place your hand gently on your chest to invoke a connection to your heart.

Direct them at a loved one.

Next, say the same four phrases again, this time directed toward a loved one, friend or benefactor:

*“May you be happy of heart.
May you be free from suffering...”*

Extend it to a neutral person.

Then try saying them for someone who you don't know well but who is a part of your daily life, someone toward whom you have a neutral feeling. “Many of us are in the habit of going into that grocery store and looking right through the clerk instead of at him, even if you've seen him a million times,” Salzberg explains. “We often objectify people so they become like pieces of furniture to us, but through the offering of the phrases [to a neutral person] we're learning to pay full attention to someone, rather than discounting them.”

Now say the phrases for someone you have difficulty with.

If you're having trouble really feeling loving-kindness for someone you don't consider a friend, you can also try picturing them as a baby, or in an unusual setting. Salzberg explains: “Although the phrases can be helpful in building a base of concentration, loving-kindness is also a practice that engages our creative imagination. The truth is that we were all infants once, and were so helpless and subject to the actions around us.”

Finally, say the phrases again for all living creatures everywhere:

*“May all beings be happy of heart.
May all beings be free from suffering...”*

Now try it.

When you're ready to give it a try, work it into your next meditation session. Salzberg says you can do it right when you sit down to meditate, or toward the end of a sitting.

“Some people like it at the beginning because it creates a kind of warm environment so that you can go on to practicing mindfulness with a little more kindness toward yourself,” she explains. “Most people like to do it at the end, because it's a reminder that the inner work we do when we meditate is not really just for ourselves, but it's also about how we are with our families and friends and communities. It can serve as a really nice bridge between the inner life and actual life.”