

➔ The other day, my daughter's preschool teacher told me about a life-changing silent retreat she'd just returned from. Participants spent the weekend hiking up hills, chewing lentils and meditatively washing dishes. They drove hours into the mountains to escape e-mails and the Internet. They paid good money to get someone else to make them unplug, quit obsessing and just, you know, wash a dish.

It was all about staying in the moment—which is the definition of luxury these days. Most of us struggle to shut off the inner static long enough to complete a task, enjoy a conversation or write a single e-mail at a time. If we're not scanning the past for minefields (*Did I say the wrong thing last night?*), we're worried about what's up next (*job interview! Mammogram! Kid's birthday party!*) or scrambling to accomplish three things at once. Human beings evolved this way—to be productive and on high alert—for a reason, explains Gail Saltz, MD, associate clinical professor of psychiatry at New York–Presbyterian Hospital. “The brain's limbic system is wired to scan for danger signals, always focusing on warding off what *could* happen. When you think about that instead of what's going on right this second, your heart beats a bit faster and you might feel a little sweaty and tense.”

No wonder mindfulness has gone from being a fringe concept to a basic life skill, essential for worriers, perfectionists, caregivers, multitaskers—aka everyone living in 21st-century America. “It interrupts the anticipation reflex and brings you back to whatever is happening right here, right now,” Dr. Saltz says. Since nearly all our stress comes from anxiety about the past or future (*Waiting in this line is going to make me late!*), focusing your thoughts and senses reduces the odds that your mind will land on nagging concerns. This, in turn, lowers your body's production of stress hormones like cortisol, making you feel less

Tap all five senses to snap into the present.

Give Your Brain a Break!

If you've been stressing and multitasking for as long as you can remember, it's time to take a mental breather. Here's how to do it—no *oming* required.

By CARA BIRNBAUM

ragged. No wonder a 2010 Harvard University study found that folks centered on the present are happiest. Tuning in can also help you get things done quickly and correctly: Multitaskers perform worse than those who know how to go offline and just plain focus, says Diana Winston, director of mindfulness education at UCLA's Mindfulness Awareness Research Center and co-author of *Fully Present*.

All but the most dedicated Buddhist monk admit it's impossible—not to mention impractical—to live in the present every moment. But the more you practice, Dr. Saltz says, the sooner mindfulness will become a healthy habit you can call on when needed. And thankfully, mastering this skill doesn't require a weekend of silence or a complicated meditation technique. Whether you're panicking over work deadlines or distracted around the dinner table, there are straightforward ways to guide your mind gently back into the moment—an unexpectedly calm place to be.

when you're...

FIXATING ON THE TO-DO LISTS...

> **Unclench.** When she can't switch her mind off, Boston yoga instructor Sara DiVello, author of *Where in the Om Am I?*, centers herself with this do-anywhere trick: "Press the tip of your tongue to the mound of flesh behind your top two front teeth. Feel your forehead and the muscles between your eyes loosen, then feel your whole face go slack. Let that relaxation travel down your neck and into your shoulders."


> **Carve out stress time.** Since your brain is always at the ready

to anticipate threats, there is no point trying to suppress this instinct entirely. "I have my clients schedule designated worry time, just as they would lunch or a doctor's appointment," says Washington, D.C., psychologist Vinita Mehta, PhD, who suggests a 10- or 15-minute worry session during a daily commute. "That way, if they find themselves dedicating too much attention to an issue, they can remind themselves that they've allotted time to think about it later."

> **Wear a reminder.** "Slip a rubber

band over your wrist and give yourself a friendly snap when you catch yourself going into the to-do list or thinking of things you should have done," says Allison T. Moore, a life coach in Newark, Del.

> **Stop and smell the scented lotion.** OK, so it's a first-world problem, but most of us can't get through five minutes of a pedicure without checking our Twitter feed or returning a call. To make mani-pedis the mental break they *should* be, zero in on what you feel, smell, hear and see, advises Alice Domar, PhD, executive director of the Domar Center for Mind/Body Health in Waltham, Mass. Notice the warmth of the pedicurist's hands around your calves, the swirling water jets massaging your feet, the bright color lighting up your nails.



Spending time in nature may help you focus on the present, research shows.

THE SMARTPHONE APP THAT HELPS YOU SINGLE-TASK

>> **It's the timer.** Asked for the secret behind her laser-focused ability to spend an afternoon sorting through clients' clutter collections, Lisa Zaslow, founder and CEO of Gotham Organizers in New York City, credits her phone's stopwatch app. "I commit to purging—and doing nothing else—for five minutes," she says. "After five minutes, I take a break, then set the timer for 10." This helps whether you're intent on cleaning out your closet, doing your taxes or working on your abs.



CAN'T FOCUS? YOU MAY NEED TO PROCRASTINATE MORE

Saving tasks till the last minute helps a harried mind concentrate. "Pressure requires that your brain, body and senses be all in," says Janet Taylor, PhD, clinical instructor of psychiatry at Harlem Hospital. Permission to postpone, granted.

when you're...

BURIED IN WORK DEADLINES...

> **Call a time in.** In a work culture that rewards people for doing 12 things at once, it might feel risky to ask your boss, "Can I focus on this one project for the next two hours, and then move on to everything else?" But Alex Soojung-Kim Pang, PhD, author of *The Distraction Addiction*, says getting the OK to shut your office door and put unread e-mails on hold will help you attend to the job at hand, while illustrating to everyone around you that there's value in single-tasking.

> **Picture it.** Put a photo of your favorite landscape on your desk or upload it to your computer screen, recommends Nat Strand, MD, assistant professor of clinical anesthesiology at University of Southern California Keck School of Medicine. Don't stop there: "Take a moment to appreciate that photo and to remember all the details behind it. Images are the most powerful way to take a stress-reducing mental mini-vacation."

when you're...

UP TO HERE WITH WAITING...

> **Grab the wheel.** If standstill traffic has you road-raging, shift your brain into neutral by focusing on just this: your hands on the steering wheel. "Slowly run your fingertips over it, exploring the feel of every bump and ridge," says Winston. It works because you're distracting yourself. While you're at it—because Lord knows you have the time—move your awareness to the rest of you, she adds: "Notice your clenched stomach, your racing heart, the weight of your body in the driver's seat. Then allow everything to soften."

> **Be nice.** Next time you're tapping your foot in the supermarket check-out line, irritated at the woman in front of you with all those expired coupons, take note: The easiest way to calm yourself is also the kindest. "See if there's anything you can do to help her—or even make her smile," says Emma Seppala, PhD, associate director at Stanford University School of Medicine's Center for Compassion and Altruism Research and Education. "You'll begin to feel better and gain perspective."



Snack as if you're at an ice cream tasting, and you'll feel more satisfied with less.

MINDFUL WOMEN DON'T GET FAT

When you don't take in the taste and texture of your food, "you can't register fullness until you're too stuffed to button your pants," says Lisa Young, PhD, adjunct nutrition professor at New York University and author of *The Portion Teller Plan*. The latest in a slew of studies backing this up: Dutch researchers found that we tend to eat more when distracted. Thankfully, eating mindfully doesn't have to mean sitting down for three squares a day. Try these easy tricks for enjoying meals more—while scarfing down less.

Have slow-food Sunday.

Or Monday, or Tuesday—the point is to reserve one night for a lazy, sit-down meal. Grab your man or invite a few friends over, then dim the lights and add music. A glass of wine with food typically enhances the whole experience, Domar says, which may account for research showing that moderate drinkers are leaner.

Dress up leftovers.

Spooning last night's pad Thai into a pretty bowl and zapping it in the microwave doesn't take much more time than eating it cold over the sink. Warming food enhances its taste and smell, Young says. So does "putting down your fork between bites and taking the time to chew," she adds.

Own your splurge.

Eyeing the bread basket? Take a whole piece and put it on your plate rather than mindlessly picking off broken pieces.

Take a sweet vacation.

If polishing off a pint of fro-yo while doing the dinner dishes feels like a tease, wait until the kids are in bed, dish out a few tablespoons of full-fat ice cream and let it melt on your tongue without distraction.

when you're...

MISSING THE LITTLE STUFF—AND MAYBE A FEW BIG THINGS...

> Back away from the screen.

Cat Greenleaf, host of NBC's celeb interview show *Talk Stoop*, started a campaign called LUST—Look Up Stop Texting (lustbklyn.com), which invites us to reveal what we see when we put down our phones. One guy's response: "My baby's eyes looking at me." To get your family on board, Greenleaf suggests posing the question to them at dinner—or asking everyone about the silliest thing they did while distracted by texting.

> Switch your viewfinder.

Ever sit fourth row center at a Bruce Springsteen concert or your child's graduation—only to watch it through your smartphone screen? "You might fear you'll diminish its importance if you don't memorialize it," says New York City psychotherapist Halley Wolowiec. "Instead, you stir up anxiety and rob yourself of the full visceral experience, while rooting your focus in the future." ("*My cubemate will like this Badlands clip!*") Give your phone a rest and gobble up every delicious detail all for yourself. Rather than watching the moment, you might just find yourself *in* it. ■