

# 9 ways to make your workout more mindful


PUT SOME GENTLE MENTAL MUSCLE INTO  
YOUR SESSIONS TO SOOTHE BODY AND SOUL.

*By Megan McMorris*



*As humans in a natural world, we can't forget how interconnected we are with the Earth, sun, moon and elements. Being outside reinforces this lesson.*





*Open-water swimming takes more effort and focus than pool laps.*

**WHEN GYMNASTICS LEGEND SIMONE BILES SUDDENLY PULLED OUT OF THE TEAM** competition at the Tokyo Olympics, she was sending an important message about listening to yourself and trusting your body—and how the two are connected. But you don't have to be an elite athlete to appreciate the importance of tuning in while working out. "Mindfulness will take your workout to the next level," says Phoenix-based Lisa Pozzoni, owner of ChiRunning. (Created in 1999 by ultramarathoner and tai chi practitioner Danny Dreyer, ChiRunning blends the concepts of tai chi—mindfulness, breath work and ease of movement—with running to help prevent injuries and decrease recovery time.) "It means that you're in your body, so you can pay closer attention to what it's doing, and as a result your brain is actually changing," she says. "By being mindful, you'll also improve your body-sensing skills, which will help with your reaction time in your workouts and in daily life."



Exercise is one of the best complementary therapies around, since it can help prevent and treat disease. By flexing a little mental muscle during your workout, you can make “exercise as medicine” even more powerful for mind, body and spirit. Use the following tips to get more healing out of every session.

## 1 Take a “Bath”

The Japanese started the trend of forest bathing, essentially walking

*Some studies have shown just looking at images of nature can reduce stress.*



## fast fact

When researchers had people who weren't at the gym imagine lifting a weight, the muscle fibers still lit up.

*Get a buddy to join you in your outdoor adventures.*



mindfully in nature. Studies have found that spending time in the forest, even if it's just a 40-minute walk through the woods, can lower stress hormones, boost your mood and immune system, and increase creativity. “Your senses come alive when you step outside; it's stimulating and enlightening to be a part of nature rather than in artificial surroundings,” says Rissa Wray, LMT, owner of Moving Meditations in St. Petersburg, Florida. Swimming in open water, hiking on a rocky trail and biking outside also force

your mind to be on the alert to stay safe, says Wray.

## 2 Check Yourself

There's a reason gym walls are lined with mirrors—and it's not just for admiring your new tights. “Doing your workout in front of a mirror provides you with feedback about what your body is doing and helps you become more self-aware,” says Wray. If you're doing biceps curls, for example, focus (mentally and visually) on your upper arms during the move and then contract the muscle strongly at the top of the

curl. Keep that attention on your arms as you return to the starting position too.

## 3 Take Five

You start your workout and immediately pop in your earbuds to listen to your favorite podcast. Or maybe your mind just races from one distracting thought to the next—from the problem you had at work yesterday to what you're going to cook for dinner—the entire time. Meanwhile, your body is plodding along on autopilot with nobody paying attention. Next time, focus on engaging each of your five senses during your workout, suggests Pozzoni. As you're biking, notice how the breeze feels on your skin, the vibrant green of

the lawns or the smell of the grass. At the gym, hear the clanging of weights, feel the coolness of the metal barbells and watch your muscles flexing as you lift.

## 4 Breathe Deep

You're breathing hard but still may not even really be paying attention to your inhales and exhales while you're working out. Focusing on your breath helps channel your mental energy and can even boost your exercise bennies—think: increasing endurance or calming your brain. On your next run or jog, take two counts to inhale, matching each step, then two counts to exhale, matching your steps. So it's right, left (inhaling), right, left (exhaling). You can add steps to elongate each inhale and exhale as well. Some people find this technique helps them manage their energy better during exercise. In addition, *ujjayi*-style breathing in yoga class, where your mouth is closed and the breath is

“scraping” the back of the throat, is energizing and also stimulates the calming parasympathetic nervous system (via the vagus nerve).

## 5 Visualize This

Ski racers do it before launching themselves out of the gate. So do gymnasts. Seeing yourself performing before you break a sweat can prep your body for what's to come, whether you're lifting weights, doing a hilly ride or paddling on a lake. In one study, published in the *Strength and Conditioning Journal*, athletes who visualized their workout before a weight session increased their performance without creating additional strain on the muscles. Spend 5 minutes seeing yourself going through your workout—incorporating your senses as much as you can—and watch your performance improve.

## 6 Move Your Qi

Workouts like yoga, tai chi and even some martial arts have a mindfulness aspect built in (not to mention breath work). Adding these types of exercises to your routine helps you practice being present and in your body—and the benefits translate beyond the studio or dojo. (Turn to page 44 for some easy yoga moves and page 54 for more information on tai chi and qigong.)

## 7 Ramp It Up

You can't think about your lunch while you're

# People who walked in a forest for 20 minutes had 13% lower stress hormone (cortisol) levels than those who trekked in the city.

watching the clock tick down during intervals. You may be going full throttle during high-intensity interval training, where you alternate between vigorous exercise and recovery periods, but that doesn't mean it's all physical. You have to focus on what you're doing, where you are on your effort scale and how much time you have left, making this a hard, but in-the-moment, workout. Even metabolic finishers—high-intensity efforts at the end of your session—can

give you that calm exercise high afterward, like a mindful exclamation point on a workout.

## 8 Let Yourself Feel

One minute, you're doing Downward Dog and the next you're sobbing on the mat. It's not uncommon to have physical actions bring on strong emotions. “If a physical posture brings up emotions, pause and let yourself have that release,” says Wray, who also teaches yoga. “I'd come

from competitive sports where you can't stop and feel anything. When I found myself in the middle of yoga pose that made me feel like crying, my instructor told me it was OK to have that emotional release, and that has changed my life.”

## 9 Cut Yourself Some Slack

Perhaps the biggest lesson Biles showed us in Tokyo is not pushing your physical body at the expense of your mental state. “That's huge that she felt secure enough to prioritize self-kindness over another gold medal,” says Wray. You can do the same by paying attention to where you are mentally—low on energy, feeling scattered or maybe feeling entirely disconnected from your body—and adjust (or skip!) your workout accordingly. Sometimes a good nature walk is all you need.



## hot or cold?

Temperature can help your body prepare for and recover from exercise. While experts fall on both sides of the temperature fence, here's why—and when—to put hot or cold on your side.

**Team Heat** There's a reason they call it a warm-up: Heating up your muscles before a workout boosts blood flow and prepares your muscles for activity. Heat also helps if you have an injury—especially a chronic one—for that same reason. Increasing circulation to the area also brings in healing compounds and helps flush out damaged blood cells and other microscopic debris.

**Team Ice** Icing a muscle or joint after your workout, on the other hand, can slow blood flow and soothe pain and swelling. According to one study, dipping into an ice bath after a workout isn't just the newest fitness trend: It can also help you build muscle and recover faster after a strength workout (other research wasn't so conclusive). If you're injured, typically you only want to ice for the initial 24 to 48 hours, then switch to heat or try alternating ice and heat.

In the end, it comes down to preference and what makes your symptoms feel better or helps boost your performance.