

# Meditation to Boost Willpower and Self Control

*Adapted from “Bulletproof Willpower: Surprising Ways to Boost Self-Control,” by John Williams, LMHC*

No matter how we describe willpower, we all want more of it. What would you strive to accomplish if you knew you had enough stick-to-itiveness to get it done?

The good news is that science has recently gained more concrete insights into the magic and mystery behind willpower. And it turns out that strengthening and conserving it is not necessarily as hard as we think, and there are unexpected strategies available to all of us to greatly boost our self-discipline and self-control.

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## Mindful Meditation

If you're like me, the idea of meditation as a willpower boosting strategy sounds like just about the most unlikely and at the same time, the most difficult technique you can think of. It's unlikely because meditation conjures up the thought of letting go, relaxation, thinking about nothing—the very opposite of the kind of teeth-clenching, strenuous effort that would seem to strengthen willpower. It's most difficult because it seems so contrary to the hyper-scheduled, multi-tasking lifestyle most of us have.

But it turns out that research confirms that a certain kind of simple meditation, even if done badly, is the number one most powerful practice for strengthening self-control. Specifically, it enhances self-awareness and focus, and helps us manage stress and impulsiveness. In fact, meditation measurably increases the grey matter of the part of the brain that we associate with rationality and decision making, the pre-frontal cortex. Ongoing practice



seems to continuously heighten blood flow and build it up over time, like a muscle.

And it does this relatively quickly. After about a month of daily practice, new neural pathways connect the relevant parts of the brain. Meditators notice clear improvement in their ability to choose more productive behavior and resist distractions. After two months, there is consistently more self-awareness, and thus more freedom to choose responses and build desired habits, rather than blindly reacting in unwanted ways.

This simple but powerful technique trains the mind to better deal with distractions from outside, like sights and sounds, and from inside, like worries and urges. It also enhances the capacity to cope with stress.

Here is how to do it:

### 1. Sitting still.

Sit cross legged on a cushion, or sit on a chair with feet flat on the ground. Sit up straight, with hands resting on your lap.

Let your gaze fall downward to some spot in front of you, and your chin likewise. You can let your eyes close if you like.

Sitting still is the physical side of the training. Avoid squirming and fidgeting. If you feel an itch or other discomfort, try crossing your legs differently or rearranging your arms; see if you can feel an urge or sensation but not give in to it.

This simple practice trains you to notice feelings and impulses from the body and brain but not necessarily follow them.



## 2. Focusing on the breath.

Close your eyes or focus them on a spot on a blank space in front of you. Bring your attention to your breathing. Silently say, “inhale” and “exhale,” as you breathe in and out.

After a while, you can drop the inner verbalizing and just notice the sensation of breathing, the air flowing in and out of your nose and mouth, and the expansion and contraction of your chest and diaphragm. When needed to keep focus, return to the recitation of “inhale” and “exhale.”

## 3. Bringing the mind back as it wanders.

Your mind will wander and when it does, just gently bring it back to focus on the breath.

This is the mental side of the training. The practice of repeatedly corralling the meandering mind by returning it to the here and now, the reality of the breath, is what dramatically strengthens the prefrontal cortex, which is the seat of willpower. This grounding practice weakens cravings and anxieties.

The simple act of noticing your mind getting off track and bringing it back is valuable training in self-awareness as well as self-control.



Do this for five minutes a day. You can gradually build up to 10 or 15 minutes, but the important thing is frequency—doing it daily or thereabouts—not duration. Try pairing it with another daily activity if you can, like before coffee or after a shower.

You may find that you seem to be bad at this, at least at first. Even while dutifully labeling your inhaling and exhaling, your thoughts may be everywhere else. That’s okay,

because it is still having a positive effect. The very act of noticing your wayward thoughts while being mindful of your breathing will help you better recognize what you are thinking and doing throughout the rest of your day. This will lead to making better decisions that align with your goals rather than letting impulses take over.

Kelly McConigal, PhD, shares this story in *The Willpower Instinct* about Andrew, who thought he was poor at meditation:

“Andrew found that even when his meditation felt distracted, he was more focused after practicing than if he skipped it. He also realized that what he was doing in meditation was exactly what he needed to do in real life: catch himself moving away from a goal and then point himself back at the goal (in this case, focusing on the breath).

The meditation was perfect practice for when he was just about to order something salty and deep-fried for lunch, and needed to stop and order something healthier. It was perfect practice for when he had a sarcastic comment on his lips and needed to pause and hold his tongue. And it was perfect practice for noticing when he was wasting time at work and needed to get back on track. All day long, self-control was a process of noticing that he was off-goal and redirecting himself to the goal.”

The purpose of this meditation is not to completely empty the mind, but to learn to notice where the body and mind are. To pause and more consciously respond to the moment rather than mindlessly reacting according to old patterns.

The intention is to train ourselves to be better able to choose what we want to think about and choose our behavior, so that they are in concert with our goals and values. This is the essence of willpower.

## Slow Breathing

A close cousin to this Meditation technique is that of slow breathing. This is simpler and less effective for willpower training, but it has the advantage of being useful at any time, as the occasion demands.

Both techniques practice the capacity for that vital pause that comes between trigger and reaction, that allows for the freedom to decide. The automatic stress response of the body is the well-known: “fight, flight or freeze.” These responses may be helpful during certain crises, but they are often excessive or useless in many ordinary situations at home or at work. For example, while being criticized by our boss, it’s probably unproductive to either fight back, flee or freeze up.

The better choice is to pause, assess the circumstance and choose a productive action.

Slowing down the breathing is a tangible way to let this happen. When anxious or stressed, the muscles tense and breathing often speeds up, along with heart rate, and many other physiological processes. If you feel your own heart racing, this in turn can crank up mental alarm— “Gee, my body is revved up, so this must be dangerous!”—in a vicious cycle. (The other extreme during stress is to hold your

breath which makes you feel weaker, which is also counterproductive for willpower.)

Taking a moment to deliberately decelerate the breathing sends the signal that the situation is not so bad, and this helps calm the body and mind. In fact, the body is incapable of breathing deeply and maintaining an anxious state.

This calming then creates the opportunity for greater control of cravings and urges, and responses to a challenge. It gives you a chance to consider, “What do I really need and want right now?” and to go for that instead of the counterproductive habit.



Here's how to do it:

### **1. Count to five.**

Practice slowing your breathing to a count of five seconds for the inhale, and five for the exhale, with a moment extra after the exhale. (The longer exhale than inhale prompts a greater relaxation effect.) Maintain this for several minutes.

If you want to be more precise, adjust your breathing rate down to four to six breaths a minute. Set your phone stopwatch to measure how many breaths per minute you normally take, and then work on slowing the pace. Any progress is good. Don't hold your breath; this only adds to the stress.

It takes a little patience, but the pleasant effects are immediate. You feel strong and calm.

## 2. Practice when stressed.

Next, practice this slow breathing in tense or tempting situations. At first, you will remember it afterwards. After some practice you'll find yourself doing it in the middle of your stress. Eventually you will recall it at the needed moment, before you start hyperventilating and tensing up. Your slower breathing will block these unhelpful automatic reactions, and you will find yourself able to keep a clear head and a sense of control. This gives you that needed moment to boost your willpower and plan your response.

## Questions to Discuss

1. What have you noticed about the connection between breathing and emotions like fear, anxiety, excitement, stress?
2. What is your experience with meditating of any kind?
3. After trying this, what did you notice about your thoughts? How long could you keep your attention on your breathing and your thoughts?
4. What experience do you have with keeping your awareness on your body sensations in some way for a period of time, and its calming effect?