

*from the editors of*

**ADDITUDE**

# Mindfulness & Other Natural Treatments

**How to treat ADHD symptoms with  
mindfulness, yoga, breathing  
techniques, exercise, and green time**



# ADDITUDE

## Strategies and Support for ADHD & LD

A trusted source of advice and information for families touched by attention-deficit disorder—  
and a voice of inspiration to help people with ADHD find success at home, at school, and on the job.

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# Introduction

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Mindfulness has been called a superpower. A therapy for depression. A secret weapon among the Silicon Valley elite. And perhaps the key to finding calm in a sea of ADHD-fueled distress. But what is mindfulness, exactly? Is it a type of meditation? Do you need to pay someone to teach it to you? And — most importantly — can it really improve your focus and organization?

In this comprehensive ebook, you'll learn exactly what mindfulness is, how to start practicing it today, and how it can help you or your child better manage the symptoms of attention deficit. Plus, we address your questions about other all-natural treatments, including yoga, deep breathing, exercise, and green time.

The best part about these natural treatments? Most are completely free, and you can practice them wherever — and whenever — you want. Combined with therapy, medication, or a healthy diet, they can round out your treatment plan — giving you the tools you need to thrive with ADHD.

Sincerely  
The editors of *ADDitude*

Mindfulness &  
Other Natural  
Treatments

**ADDITUDE**  
Strategies and Support for ADHD & LD

# Mindfulness & Other Natural Treatments

Reviewed by Mark Bertin, M.D.

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# Mindfulness: Why and How to Practice It

What exactly is mindfulness, also called mindful awareness? To put it simply: living life as it is in real time, with mental clarity, emotional openness, and patient resolve. The basic instruction in mindfulness practice is to pay attention, and to avoid trying to control anything, which is a stress-producing habit for many of us. Mindfulness can improve attention and executive function, and help regulate emotions and manage stress.

Mindfulness isn't a holistic, stand-alone ADHD treatment — in most cases, it is used in conjunction with other forms of treatment like Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) or medication. However, proper and consistent use of mindfulness techniques can decrease some patients' need for medication as they learn other ways to manage ADHD symptoms.

Several studies suggest that mindfulness can help with negative self-assessment and worry, which adversely affect stress, happiness, and a person's academic and social performance. The physical and mental benefits are clear, but the concept is somewhat daunting and foreign to most of us. Following is a guide that shows how — and why — to get started with mindfulness.

## How to Practice Mindfulness

“Meditation” can be a loaded word, especially for people with ADHD. Who among us can imagine sitting still for hours (much less minutes) at a time? Meditation comes across as boring, and some may associate it with a “spiritual” lifestyle. While meditation does have roots in many Eastern spiritual traditions, you don't have to be a Buddhist — or even religious at all — to benefit from meditation. It's been used in clinical studies for decades, and mindfulness itself is not a spiritual practice. It's important for people with ADHD to know that the practice of mindfulness doesn't require a totally still mind — or even a totally still body.

Mindfulness is a very user-friendly form of meditation — it's versatile, flexible, and you can be creative in how you apply it to your own life. If you choose to take a class to learn mindfulness, it most likely will be a formal meditation practice. However, you can easily apply informal practices outside of class — these involve becoming purposefully aware of how you're doing and what you're feeling during everyday activities.

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These moments of awareness can be brief, but if repeated consistently throughout the day, they can add up — and the effects can be very powerful. Informal practices — as well as shorter formal practice regimens — take less focus and time to get started, making them especially helpful for those with ADHD. Turning to mindfulness practices in the middle of other activities (working, taking a walk, or playing with your children) can be great for people with ADHD to get quick bursts of practice.

You can even practice mindfulness right now, while reading this ebook — by purposefully bringing your attention to what your body is feeling, your posture, or your breathing. By taking a moment to bring attention to the present moment in a very specific way — which isn't something that happens often in our busy world — you practice mindfulness.

## How to Start: Stop Thinking, Start Breathing

Our natural state includes thinking, planning, and reacting to the world around us. Sometimes that is useful; often times it is not. Mindfulness invites us to guide our attention from that busy state of thinking and planning, and instead bring it to what is happening in the present moment. There are lots of things in the present moment to which you can bring your attention, but initial mindfulness practices focus on paying attention to sensory input.

“Breath focus” is one example. Learning to move your attention to your breathing is difficult for everyone. When you start out, you'll likely be shocked at how quickly your attention moves away from your breathing and on to something else. This happens to everyone, even those who have practiced mindfulness for years. The goal is to work with your own natural tendencies and gently return your focus to your breathing again and again. By doing this, you strengthen your attention muscle. In that way, meditation practices are just like physical training — they rely on repetition.

Many mindfulness experts recommend that you put your hand on your belly while breathing to really get in touch with the motion of your breath. Having input from your hand — as it moves up and down — makes it easier to pay attention and focus deeply on your breathing. Even the most experienced practitioner will tell you the mind always remains busy — and that's fine.

Mindful eating is another example of a beginner's exercise that teaches you to slow down while you eat and immerse yourself in the sensations, textures, and experience of eating and tasting food. Walking, yoga, focusing on sensations in the body and many other approaches are common mindfulness exercises.

*“Meditation practices are just like physical training — they rely on repetition.”*

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This may all seem maddeningly simple, and you may doubt that mindfulness can help with ADHD symptoms. But really what you're doing is practicing to redirect and build your ability to attend. If you try to focus only on what you're eating, for example, you may find that your mind wanders. So you come back to focus on your food more often than otherwise. Over time (and with a lot of practice!) you'll be able to attend more to other parts of your life, like work or school.

## Why to Practice Mindfulness

### 1. Stress and Anxiety Relief

Mindfulness practice is often used to decrease stress. It goes back to the idea of a “self-regulation tank,” a term coined by ADHD expert Russell Barkley, Ph.D. According to Dr. Barkley, self-regulation is a limited resource. He likes to think of it as a “tank” that is slowly depleted throughout the day. Every time we have to self-regulate — maybe by stopping ourselves from blurting out something rude, or by focusing long enough to complete a difficult task — we use a little bit of fuel from our self-regulation tank.

Other things, like stress or anxiety, can deplete our already diminished self-regulation tank. If we want to be successful and motivated, we need to look for ways to replenish that tank or strengthen its ability to withstand more stressors.

Mindfulness can be a proactive way of counteracting the physiological acts of stress. When we're stressed, anxious, or just generally emotional, focusing a few minutes on your breathing, eating, walking, or sensations in your body may give yourself a chance to settle.

Mindfulness's stress-relief properties aren't just anecdotal — they've been studied in research labs around the world. A [2014 study](#) done at Carnegie Mellon University compared the effects of mindfulness training to standard cognitive training, finding that subjects who meditated reported significantly less stress and better coping mechanisms than did the control group.

### 2. Stronger Self-Esteem

Mindfulness isn't just for stress relief. It also trains the brain to “step back” from being so reactive in life, making us better at observing our patterns of thought and our emotions. This fosters self-compassion, makes us more willing to stick with “unpleasant” experiences that have a long-term reward, and — ultimately — increases our self-esteem.

Growing up with ADHD exposes us to a lot of criticism — from ourselves and from those around us. We're constantly told that we're not as reliable,

*“ADHD is actually SRDD (self-regulation deficit disorder).”*

*— Russell Barkley, Ph.D.*

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or we're not as proactive, or we're not as capable. This can lead us to feel demoralized and develop a negative inner voice, constantly whispering in our ear: "What's wrong with you? Why can't you do this? You're so lazy." Many people with ADHD think that their negative inner voice "motivates" them, but in reality it tends to diminish self-esteem over time, eroding our ability to feel confident, encouraged, and resilient. If left unchecked, it can lead to depression and anxiety.

Mindfulness, on the other hand, allows you to chart your "inner landscape," and see where your negative inner voice drags you down. As you practice, you can start to also take note of your thoughts, feelings, and habits in any given situation. By being open and curious about these patterns — without judging them — you can develop a greater sense of what your typical reactions are.

Once you have that awareness, you can use it to develop a more positive inner voice. This more helpful voice should be encouraging, informed about ADHD, and motivating. Instead of getting angry at yourself for losing your cool when your child acts up, your inner voice can say, "OK, clearly I need a break. I got wrapped up in my emotions and reacted negatively to my child's behavior." Or, "I am sensing my urge to interrupt my spouse right now, but instead I'll take a deeper breath and pause for a moment before speaking."

This mindful "self-coaching" will help you not only accept what you're thinking and feeling (instead of scolding yourself for feeling a certain way) it can also help you change negative patterns and develop new habits. By regulating your emotions and striving to constantly change your behavior for the better, you'll loosen the grip ADHD has over your life — boosting your self-esteem as you move past difficulties.

### 3. School and Social Skills

**A recent study** published in the journal *Developmental Psychology* suggests that mindfulness techniques can be used to improve everything from social skills to math scores — in kids as young as 9, with or without ADHD. After a four-month mindfulness intervention, fourth graders in British Columbia had a 15 percent increase in math scores, showed 24 percent more healthy social behaviors, and were 24 percent less aggressive.

More research is needed, but the study's authors think that these results are promising. "Doing these kinds of programs in school does not take away from academics," says study co-author Kimberly A. Schonert-Reichl. "It adds to a growing research literature that's showing, actually, these kinds of

*"Many people with ADHD think that their negative inner voice 'motivates' them, but in reality it tends to diminish self-esteem over time."*

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programs and practices increase academic gains.” Plus, teachers who participate in the program reported feeling less stressed — adding up to an overall calm and successful classroom environment.

## Where and When to Practice Mindfulness

If you want to practice mindfulness in an informal setting, all you have to do is follow these four steps:

**S: STOP!** Take a pause and say to yourself, “What can I be mindful of right now?” or “Can I be more aware of what’s going on right now?”

**T: TAKE A BREATH.** Take a big deep breath, then another. Breathing is a way to disengage from your body a little and drop the stresses of the day.

**O: OBSERVE.** While you’re breathing, observe what’s happening to yourself in a non-judgmental and compassionate way. Ask, “What’s happening to me? What’s happening around me? What’s happening inside of me?” Notice your body — particularly any areas of tension — and take note of your thoughts and feelings in that moment. It’s important that you don’t criticize your thoughts or ask, “Why am I feeling X? I should be feeling Y.” At this step, it’s important that you observe in a neutral way, without passing self-judgment.

**P: PROCEED.** Continue what you were doing before you took this mindfulness break — but with more awareness. This might mean a change in your course of action. You may decide, “I’m tense right now and I want to lash out. Instead, I’m going to take a walk to cool down.” Or “If I send this email, there may be repercussions. Perhaps I should wait until the morning to see if it still feels like a good idea.”

When you develop this practice over time, you can shift your patterns of thought and — in the long run — make better choices and react more positively to negative events.

## Final Notes About Mindfulness

To round out your mindfulness experience, follow these additional tips:

1) Get comfortable. Many meditation books warn you to avoid getting too comfortable, because you might fall asleep. Our thought is that if you fall asleep, you probably need to sleep. If you got relaxed enough to fall asleep...terrific! If you are concerned that you will sleep the day away and miss work, set an alarm.

*“It’s important that you don’t criticize your thoughts or ask, ‘Why am I feeling X? I should be feeling Y.’”*

- 2) Find your own comfort zone. Getting comfortable for you might involve standing on your head or lying in your bed or even walking — you are the best judge of what works for you. On one hand, mindfulness practice encourages self-care and making adjustments and being comfortable. On the other hand, no meditator needs the additional distraction of physical discomfort. Still, part of mindfulness practice is learning to be restless or fidgety — *without* acting on every impulse.
- 3) Take slow, even breaths. Don't try to control anything. Notice your breathing and don't actively try to make it happen.
- 4) If you are in full, high-speed adrenaline mode, you may not be able to stop on a dime and change gears to do mindfulness meditation. Settle down in any way that comes naturally to you.
- 5) If it helps, try using a visual focus. Closing your eyes is probably the easiest. Some people keep their eyes open and look down at the floor.
- 6) You can also use music as your focus, although most mindfulness programs do not use it. If you do, we recommend that you choose an instrumental piece .
- 7) Don't "should" yourself. Some people with ADHD do fine sitting or lying down, but many of us get unbearably restless when we are required to be still for any length of time. If you have a higher need for activity than someone else, work with it. There's no "perfect" or "right" way to practice mindfulness.
- 8) Moving meditation is as good as the sitting variety. We recommend that the activity you choose for mindfulness meditation be something simple and repetitive, like walking. You can focus on your breath or body sensations as you go!
- 9) Stick with it. Mindfulness will get easier as you go along. The key to success is to take it in small bites.
- 10) Remind yourself why you have chosen to pursue mindfulness. It is not to clear your mind, but to step back from the noise and pay more attention to real life, in productive and compassionate ways.
- 11) You may need to medicate before you meditate. The right dose of stimulant medicine can turn the brain noise down to acceptable levels.

*“There’s no ‘perfect’ or ‘right’ way to practice mindfulness.”*

## Not Mindfulness, But Helpful

Hypnosis is often mentioned in the same breath as mindfulness and meditation, but it's far from the same thing. For one, it isn't usually self-directed; someone else — often a trained hypnotherapist — works with patients to achieve the right mindset. For another, hypnosis is more than mindfulness. If done correctly, it's a fully altered state of mind where you're hyper-relaxed and susceptible to suggestion.

There is no scientific evidence supporting hypnotherapy as a treatment for symptoms of ADHD like inattention, impulsivity, and hyperactivity. Still, hypnosis might merit a slot in your treatment strategies, especially if you experience anxiety and sleep problems, as many people with ADHD do. Clinical studies suggest that this long-accepted therapy can be useful in managing these symptoms — as well as offering overall relaxation.

The power of hypnosis lies in the patient's heightened responsiveness to suggestions by their hypnotherapist. For example: If you have trouble turning off the computer at 10 o'clock each night, so you can get to bed, a hypnotherapist might suggest that, in the future, you will be able to do that. (Contrary to all comedians' portrayal of hypnosis, you retain free will while you're under, so don't worry about involuntary chicken-squawking.)

"Hypnosis can give a person with ADHD the feeling of being in charge of his behavior," says Anna Baumgaertel, M.D., a developmental-behavioral pediatrician with The Bridge, a clinic outside of Philadelphia. By planting positive suggestions in your mind at a time when your brain is open to accepting them, hypnotherapists can steer you in the right direction — without forcing you to do anything against your will.

If you're interested in pursuing hypnosis, it's best to work with a trained hypnotherapist. You can find one at the [American Society of Clinical Hypnosis](#).

*"You retain free will while you're under, so don't worry about involuntary chicken squawking."*

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# Mindfulness and Breathing Techniques for Children

How can you teach your climbing-the-walls kid to be mindfully aware? If parents practice mindfulness techniques consistently and learn how to proactively apply them to their day-to-day interactions, children will eventually learn from their example. Beyond that, there are classroom-based mindfulness programs you can try — Mindful Schools ([mindfulschools.org](http://mindfulschools.org)) is a good one — or you can look into psychologists who are familiar with the technique. Parents can use the books *The Mindful Child*, *Child's Mind*, and *Still Quiet Place* to teach mindfulness to their kids.

Remember that the goal with mindfulness is not to get your kids to meditate but to cultivate certain traits. You're trying to build attention, responsiveness, emotional awareness, and compassion. Practicing mindfulness for children is all about play, discussion, and adapting mindfulness practices to their age. Preschoolers can do some of the mindfulness practices, and teens can approach it the way adults do — translated into their own vernacular, of course.

However, mindfulness does require some maturity. It takes a more developed mind to pause and examine itself thoroughly! If your child is too young to really practice the techniques, don't worry — he still may be able to benefit from some simple deep breathing techniques.

“Several studies show that rhythmic, paced breathing balances the autonomic nervous system,” says Richard Brown, M.D., associate clinical professor of psychiatry at Columbia University College of Physicians and Surgeons. What does that mean for your child? Simple — learning to control her breathing can help her become more attentive and more relaxed.

Many of Brown's patients have benefited from something called “coherent breathing” — a term coined by yoga specialist and author Stephen Elliott because the techniques synchronizes the heart, lungs, and brain. One benefit of coherent breathing, says Brown, is that it's portable and accessible. Your child can practice it anywhere — at school, at home, or even on the bus.

## How Does Coherent Breathing Work?

The autonomic nervous system (ANS) has two components: a stress response and a recharge response. People with ADHD have nervous systems

### ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

**[The Mindful Child: How to Help Your Child Manage Stress and Become Happier, Kinder, and More Compassionate](#)** by Susan Kaiser Greenland (Atria Books, 2004)

**[Child's Mind: Mindfulness Practices to Help Our Children Be More Focused, Calm, and Relaxed](#)** by Christopher Willard (Parallax Press, 2010)

**[A Still Quiet Place: A Mindfulness Program for Teaching Children and Adolescents to Ease Stress and Difficult Emotions Paperback](#)** by Amy Saltzman MD (New Harbinger Publications, 2014)

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that are out of whack: Most of the time the stress and recharge responses are under-active. But when an ADHD stress response kicks in, it goes into high gear, compared to those who don't have the condition. For your child's brain to work better — and for her to be less impulsive and hyperactive — both components of the ANS need to work optimally and in the right balance. Coherent breathing can help accomplish these goals.

“Amazing things happen in the body and brain when you slow down your breathing to five or six full breaths a minute,” says Brown, who teaches a weekend course in coherent breathing ([breath-body-mind.com](http://breath-body-mind.com)). The heart, lungs, and blood vessels work more efficiently, delivering more oxygen to the body's tissues and the brain. Parts of the brain that deal with complex problems begin to function better. Typically, you see a big change in brain-wave patterns — meaning more healthy alpha waves and fewer sleepy delta waves. What does that all mean? Essentially, says Brown, “People with ADHD feel a lot calmer, are better able to make good judgments, and are less easily frustrated.”

## Learn — and Teach — the Technique

For people with ADHD to master coherent breathing, it's best to have some instruction. “An instructor can tell you whether your muscles are relaxed, and whether you're breathing too deeply,” says Brown. “You can learn the technique in a weekend. The key is to practice at home for 10 to 20 minutes a day” — until it becomes an automatic response to stress and hyperactivity.

To teach your child coherent breathing techniques, it may be best for you to learn them first. If you can't find an instructor, it is possible to do it yourself. First, find a quiet place to sit where you won't be interrupted. Close your eyes, relax your eyes, neck, hands, and feet, and complete five or six full breaths in a minute, keeping your awareness on the breath moving inside of you. ([Respire 1](#), a CD by Stephen Elliott, is helpful, prompting you to inhale and exhale at set intervals. It is available at [coherence.com](http://coherence.com).) Once you're confident in your own ability to keep the pace, get your child involved.

One note: Practice coherent breathing with your child when you're both calm. A lot of people say, “Oh, I'll do it when I get stressed.” “That's like waiting to brush your teeth after they've fallen out,” says Brown. When your child gets upset with a friend, or when he loses his homework, he'll have a head start at getting his calm and focus back if he's practiced. “The technique becomes an almost automatic response when you find yourself in stressful situations,” says Brown.

*“Amazing things happen in the body and brain when you slow down your breathing to five or six full breaths a minute.”*

—Richard Brown, M.D.

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# Yoga

Yoga has been around for thousands of years, but only recently has it taken hold in Western culture as both a stress reliever and a new fitness regimen. Now, it may be the next step in ADHD treatment, calming racing minds and releasing brain chemicals that promote focus. Yoga is typically part of mindfulness classes. Here's how to make yoga work for you.

## Try Restorative Poses

For someone with ADHD, the thought of spreading your body on the floor to “become one” with a yoga pose may seem like torture. But when you find the right poses that work for your body and mind, you may find that yoga calms your nervous system, lowers your blood pressure, and regulates your heart rate.

Restorative yoga — a form of slow, passive yoga done with props to prevent strain — may be best for people with ADHD: it's calming, easy to learn, and can be done with or without a teacher. Learn restorative yoga poses when you are feeling calm, focusing on poses that allow you to stretch your muscles gently and that you find comforting. If done correctly, restorative yoga can help you let go of anxious thoughts and experience a peaceful state of deep relaxation.

## Yoga Poses for Beginners

- 1) **Viparita Karani (Legs-Up-The-Wall Pose)** — This pose is just what it sounds like: practitioners lay on the floor at the base of the wall, putting their legs up on the wall so the body forms a right angle. If it feels uncomfortable, try moving your body farther away from the wall, or placing a folded blanket under your lower back for support.
- 2) **Savasana (Corpse Pose)** — Scary name, right? Don't worry — this is actually one of the easiest and most relaxing yoga poses. Lay on your back with your legs slightly spread, palms up. Breathing deeply and releasing all your muscles to the floor, hold the pose for at least 5 minutes. You'll come out of it feeling more relaxed than ever!
- 3) **Supta Virasana (Reclining Hero Pose)** — This pose begins in standard Hero Pose — start in a kneeling position, then separate your feet

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and gently move your buttocks to the ground. Once you're seated fully on the floor, move to Reclining Hero Pose by reclining your torso backwards — either all the way down to the floor or onto a pillow or folded blanket. Be prepared: this is a slightly more advanced pose, and you shouldn't perform it if you can't easily place your buttocks on the floor between your feet. If you're concerned, consider consulting a yoga professional for tips.

## Yoga for Kids

Yoga may seem like an adult pastime (even a kid without ADHD might not be eager to sit in elaborate poses for an hour), but the benefits aren't just for adults! Here, yoga instructor and adult with ADHD Stacey Turis lays out the pros of junior yoga, and highlights some poses you and your child can do together:

**1) Breathing deeply.** Most of us take shallow breaths, so when we concentrate on taking nice deep breaths, the extra oxygen gives our bodies a kick in the backside. Some of the benefits include a sense of well-being, increased energy levels (the good kind), anxiety reduction, and less irritability.

My son used to hold his breath during tantrums, which resulted in a red face, bulging eyes, and an unimpressed mother. Now my kids practice deep breathing any time they feel their bodies or emotions getting away from them. It brings them back to a nice calm state. OK, calm-ish.

**Deep Breathing Exercise:** Take five slow, deep breaths through the nostrils, rest for five regular breaths, then take five more deep breaths. Repeat as necessary.

**2) Concentration.** Yoga — and mindfulness— improves concentration and attention span, while teaching focus. When kids concentrate on their breath or feel a stretch in their arms, they learn body awareness. This teaches them to keep their minds in one place, instead of all over the place. The self-control eventually spills over to the classroom and home, where they can enjoy the benefits of less stressful homework and classroom time, not getting yelled at (as much) for leaving the house key in the front door, and remembering to take home their moldy lunch box from their locker.

**Mountain Pose:** Stand up straight with feet together. Spread the toes and straighten the legs without locking the knees. Ground down by pushing through the feet and lift through the head, making sure to face forward, keeping your head level. Hold for 10 deep breaths.

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3) **Confidence.** Kids gain confidence by trying new poses and developing new skills. By learning self-control and self-calming techniques, they are likely to grow confident in interacting with other children.

My daughter is a perfectionist. She would rather not try anything at all than fail at it. Once she started her yoga practice and tried new poses, falling (not failing) and succeeding, her newfound confidence led her to tackle roller-skating with her friends. Of course, she came out of the house with a pillow duct-taped around her bottom, but I still couldn't have been more proud.

**Roaring Lion Pose:** Kids love this pose because they get to make a funny face and roar like they own the jungle. Talk about confidence! Kneeling on the floor with their bottom resting on their calves, have them place their hands on the knees and sit up straight. Open the mouth, close the eyes, wrinkle the nose and extend the tongue as far out and down as possible. Inhale and then breathe out with a forceful ROARRRRR. Repeat five times.

4) **Calmness.** The routine of yoga can be calming to kids, especially when they practice the same postures and become confident doing them. Once my kids get on the mat, they are focused on their breathing and what their bodies are doing. Holding a pose is hard work, both mentally and physically, so any funny business is tough to pencil in. Start with deep breathing and then pick eight or 10 postures to practice. Once your kids get those down, replace a couple of the postures with new ones. If possible, practice the postures in the same order every time for consistency.

**Child's Pose:** Kneel down and sit on the feet with the knees separated. Place the forehead on the ground in front of the knees, curving the spine. Arms can extend forward or be placed back beside the body. Keep those hips down! Relax and breathe deeply for two to five minutes.

Do yourself and your kids a favor — slot in some yoga into your life. You'll be proud when you see your mini-yogi drop down and start breathing deeply instead of holding her breath, hissy-fit style. And those skin-wings under your arms may even hit the road, too!

*“Holding a pose is hard work, both mentally and physically, so any funny business is tough to pencil in.”*

—Stacey Turis

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# Green Time

Time spent in natural settings — so called “green time” — has been shown in several studies to measurably reduce inattentiveness in children, and anecdotal evidence suggests that adults with ADHD benefit from it as well.

Andrea Faber Taylor, Ph.D., a behavior researcher at the [University of Illinois](#) at Urbana-Champaign, has studied the link between environment and the mind of someone with ADHD. Citing the work of Rachel and Stephen Kaplan from the [University of Michigan](#), Taylor delved into why nature has such a salutary effect on people with ADHD.

There are two types of attention, direct and involuntary, she explains. Direct attention is the forced attention we use every day to focus on housework, to complete homework, or to drive a car. Involuntary attention is effortless. “Some things naturally draw your attention, like a bird building a nest or beautiful foliage,” says Taylor. For those without ADHD, it is easy to use direct attention to complete a particular task. But for those with the condition, direct-attention reserves are smaller, she says, so they get depleted sooner.

It’s important to let people with ADHD recover from that fatigue, says Taylor. For parents, that means giving your child a break from attention-demanding tasks and letting her play outside in natural settings. For adults, it means taking a break from your busy schedule to walk in a park or go on a long hike. Time outside may be meandering, or it can be more structured, such as playing soccer in an open field. Green time is more than just taking a break from work; it’s the setting of that break that makes all the difference.

*“Some things naturally draw your attention, like a bird building a nest or beautiful foliage.”*

*—Andrea Faber Taylor, Ph.D.*

## The Science Behind Green Time

For a study published in *American Journal of Public Health*, Taylor and her colleague, Frances E. Kuo, Ph.D., surveyed over 400 families in the United States, each of which had at least one child with ADHD. Parents answered questions about their child’s behavior before and after participating in various activities in environments ranging from indoors to a cement-covered park to natural, wild areas. The results of the survey indicated that the children with ADHD who spent time in the most natural settings displayed less inattentiveness, regardless of whether they had the hyperactive or inattentive type of ADHD.

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## Benefits of Natural Outdoors vs. Suburban, Urban Settings

Taylor and Kuo conducted another study, four years later, which showed that children with ADHD demonstrated greater attention after a 20-minute walk in a park than after a similar walk in a downtown area or a residential neighborhood.

“From our previous research, we knew there might be a link between spending time in nature and reduced ADHD symptoms,” says Taylor. “So, to confirm that link, we conducted a study in which we took children on walks in three different settings — one especially ‘green’ and two less ‘green’ — and kept everything about the walks as similar as possible.”

Some children took the “green” walk first; others took it second or last. After each walk, a researcher, who didn’t know which walk the child had been on, tested their attention, using a standard neurocognitive test called Backward Digit Span, in which a series of numbers is said aloud and the child recites them backward. It’s a test in which practice doesn’t improve your score.

“We compared each child’s performance to his performance after different walks,” reports Taylor. “We found that, after the walk in the park, children generally concentrated better than they did after a walk in the downtown area or the neighborhood area. The greenest space was best at improving attention after exposure.”

When they see behavioral improvements in their kids after playing outside, many parents assume that their children are benefiting from “blowing off steam” or using up excess energy. However, the survey indicated that it’s not so simple. The results showed that there was no improvement in a child’s ADHD symptoms after playing indoors or in a constructed outdoor setting, such as a cement-filled playground or skate park.

The children who had access to open fields, wooded areas, or other natural environments seemed to have the greatest reduction in symptoms. Green time can easily be tried in conjunction with traditional medications or other alternative therapies. The side effects may be a few scrapes, bruises, or bug bites. And even if you live in the city, there are ways to incorporate green time into your child’s life.

“Anything outdoors is better than anything indoors,” says Taylor, “but it’s not enough to say, ‘Go play outside.’ Parents need to go outside, too, to show children how to enjoy nature. Point out details up close, and comment on

*“Anything outdoors is better than anything indoors.”*

— *Andrea Faber Taylor, Ph.D.*

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sounds, patterns, and phenomena. As children become familiar with their nearby natural areas, they will want to go back on their own.”

## **Do Adults Benefit from Getting Outdoors?**

While there haven't been formal studies on adults and green time as of yet, Taylor theorizes that the effects will be the same. “Everyone needs to do something restorative,” she says. Have you ever felt the need to take in some fresh air when you got stuck on a boring project? The whole family can benefit — and become closer — from a group outing or walk outside. “It's probably not a coincidence that adults seem to take vacations in natural settings,” adds Taylor.

## **How Can Green Time Benefit Students with ADHD?**

Green time should also be an integral part of your child's school day — and recess should never be taken away as a punishment. Studies have shown that children — with and without ADHD — have more trouble focusing when recess is taken away. If your child's teacher has a habit of doing this, call a meeting to discuss it with him. If he continues to take playtime away from your child, consider having it written into his IEP or 504 plan.

## **Outdoor Activities for People with ADHD**

With homework, social engagements, and other schedule-hoggers, free time is a finite resource for all of us — so use it wisely! Instead of the half-hour video-game break your child normally takes after school, direct her to an activity outside. Remember, don't force an activity on your child. Find one he loves, and make it part of your family's routine. If you're an adult with ADHD, don't turn on the TV the second you get home — instead, challenge yourself to spend half an hour outside before you watch a show. Here are some of Andrea Faber Taylor's green-time suggestions:

- Ride a bike on a breezy day.
- Join a local sports team.
- Roam in a wooded area.
- Go fishing.
- Set up a tent in the backyard for a night of camping.
- Jump on a trampoline in the backyard.

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- Visit a local park and stare at the clouds.
- Take a hike.
- Set up a bird feeder and watch the birds — from inside or outside.

### Cold-Weather Ideas

- Indoors, create natural moments by setting up a tabletop fountain, a fishtank with your favorite fish, or a terrarium, preferably with small pets (hermit crabs or turtles).
- Look for tracks of animals on snowy fields or paths.
- Throw pinecones or rocks on a frozen lake.
- Build a snow fort.

### Readers Sound Off

We asked real *ADDitude* readers how green time affected them or their child, as well as their favorite outdoor activities. Here's what they said:

“We live near woods, and when my son doesn't take medication (usually on the weekends), we hike in the woods. He hugs trees, watches for wildlife, and just relaxes. My creative, interesting child comes alive and shines!” —*Amy, Maryland*

“We recently took a trip to a secluded mountain cabin, with nothing but raw nature around us. It was the best, symptom-free week we have ever had.” —*Lemelia Bonner, North Carolina*

“I'm an adult with ADHD and an ecology buff. I love nature, so I created my own backyard Eden. Beautiful spaces reduce the clutter in my mind and spark my creativity.” —*Alice Chandler, Arlington, Texas*

“People with ADHD are the uberhunters of the human world. We feel at home in natural environments.” —*Andrew Kinsella, Melbourne, Australia*

“The more time I spend in my garden, the more I slow down.” —*Anne Kelly, Waterloo, Canada*

“Walking in the country has always helped me. The combination of exercise, the calming effect of nature, and freedom from man-made distractions has a positive impact on symptoms. I feel in control.” —*Carrie, Alaska*

*“My creative, interesting child comes alive and shines!”*

—*Amy, an ADDitude reader*

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“I am an adult with ADHD, and I love mowing the lawn and walking, alone and with my dog, on quiet country roads. I can focus after I have spent time in the natural world. It sparks my creativity and spontaneity. It feels as if my ADHD medication is working twice as well as it normally does.” —*K.J., Indiana*

“My garden is my heaven, and unlike my friends and family, it doesn’t get angry when I get distracted or lose interest in it.” —*Susan Polden, Mountain View, California*

“We are fortunate to live on a lake in a rural area. The kids can sail or kayak or just soak up the quiet. They don’t see the effect nature has on them...but I sure do!” —*Rita Bristol, Connecticut*

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# Exercise

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Exercise is essentially another form of meditation — it reduces stress, improves focus, and is free. For most people with ADHD, taking meds along with exercise can improve your mood and is a great one-two combination for managing symptoms

Most of us think of exercise as a way to trim our waistlines, and while it does help with that, it also firms up the brain. Recent studies have even suggested that it helps people push past failure by reducing “learned helplessness.”

## How Does It Work?

When you walk, run, or kick a soccer ball around, your brain is hard at work — and releasing some very important chemicals. Endorphins, in particular, come out in droves when you exercise. Endorphins are hormone-like compounds that regulate mood, pleasure, and pain — explaining why you may feel particularly happy after a good workout.

Exercise releases dopamine, norepinephrine, and serotonin, brain chemicals that affect focus and attention. Increasing dopamine — especially in an ADHD brain — increases the brain’s ability to be regular and consistent, improving focus along the way. Plus, exercise stimulates production of a substance known as brain-derived neurotrophic factor (BDNF), which promotes growth of new brain cells (neurons) — meaning your brain is literally growing when you work up a sweat!

Exercise also has a positive effect on the limbic system, because it helps regulate the amygdala. In the context of ADHD, the amygdala blunts the hair-trigger responsiveness a lot of people experience, and evens out the reaction to a new source of stimulus — so we don’t go overboard and scream at another driver in a fit of road rage, for example.

To the extent that ADHD is a lack of control — of impulses and attention — the performance of the prefrontal cortex is critical. A seminal study, from Arthur Kramer, Ph.D., of the [University of Illinois](#), used MRI scans to show that walking as few as three days a week for six months increased the volume of the prefrontal cortex in older adults.

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And when Kramer tested aspects of their executive function, the subjects showed improvement in working memory, smoothly switching between tasks and screening out irrelevant stimuli. Kramer wasn't on the trail of ADHD, but his findings illustrate another way exercise might help.

Everyone agrees that exercise boosts levels of dopamine and norepinephrine. One of the intracellular effects of these neurotransmitters, according to [Yale University](#) neurobiologist Amy Arnsten, Ph.D., is to improve the prefrontal cortex's signal-to-noise ratio. Arnsten has found that norepinephrine improves the signal quality of synaptic transmission, while dopamine decreases the noise, or static, of undirected neuron chatter. This prevents the receiving cell from processing irrelevant signals.

Arnsten also suggests that neurotransmitter levels follow an upside-down U pattern, meaning that increasing them helps to a point, after which there's a negative effect. As with every other part of the brain, the neurological soup needs to stay at optimum levels. Exercise is the best recipe.

## Sweat Strategies

You don't have to run a 10K every day — far from it. In fact, something as simple as walking for 30 minutes a day, four times a week, can give the brain-boosting benefits you're looking for. Individual sports, like ballet, gymnastics, and tae kwon do — where participants focus on the body as well as the mind — have additional benefits for people with ADHD. Team sports work too, while bolstering social skills for children and adults. If your child plays sports for the school, talk to his coaches about reducing or eliminating punishments for poor academic performance — they may only make the problem worse.

More schools are including exercise in their daily curricula to help students do better in the classroom. One school in Colorado starts off students' days with 20 minutes of fast-paced exercise. Then, if a student acts up in class, he's not given extra homework — instead, he's assigned to ride a stationary bike for 10 minutes to get his focus back under control. “The result is that kids realize they can regulate their mood and attention through exercise,” says John Ratey, M.D. “That's empowering.”

### 9 Quick and Easy Exercises:

1. **Home gym** — Keep a set of dumbbells in your kitchen cabinet or pantry, and do a few shoulder presses or bicep curls while dinner is in the oven. Use a stability ball as a desk chair to work your abs at the computer. Keep a yoga mat under your bed, and pull it out for some quick sun salutations every morning.

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2. **Date night in sneakers** — Forget dinner and a movie! Change up your dating routine by asking your partner to go with you on a long walk, or go out bowling or dancing.
3. **Get a dog** — A recent Canadian study showed that dog owners spend about 300 minutes — or approximately 5 hours — a week doing dog-related physical activities. This includes walks, playing tug-of-war, or going to the dog park.
4. **Legwork** — Take the stairs instead of the elevator whenever you can. Park far from the mall entrance and walk to the stores. Get off the subway a stop or two early. Get creative!
5. **Don't outsource** — Shovel your own driveway and mow your own lawn. You'll save money — and burn calories.
6. **Step aerobics** — Wear a pedometer or FitBit and track how many steps you take each day. Try to increase the number by setting goals — experts suggest you aim for 10,000 steps a day!
7. **Short and sweet** — No time to workout? Experts agree that doing short, intense bursts of exercise can have as much benefit as longer, slower workouts. Instead of running 10 miles, do a series of sprints down your block.
8. **As seen on TV** — If there are shows you never miss, schedule your exercise during those times — either at the gym or at home. You'll be so focused on your favorite show you won't even notice your workout!
9. **Hey Coach** — Volunteer to manage your child's sports team. Chasing kids around a soccer field or running drills with Little Leaguers is a great way to get your own heart pumping.

## Keeping Up With Exercise

Sometimes, knowing the benefits is only half the battle. How can people with ADHD fit exercise into a busy schedule — and stick with it when things get tough? Follow these simple tips to get a gym habit started and keep it going:

✓ **SET UP A SCHEDULE.** Schedule gym time like you would any other activity — don't count on yourself to go whenever you "have a free moment." Build set days and times for working out into your life routine. If you link it to something you do on a regular basis, you'll have a greater chance for success. For example, if the gym is right by your work, schedule it right after work.

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✓ **REMINDE YOURSELF.** Tie a string around your finger, program a reminder into your calendar, or stick a post-it note on your mirror — whatever it takes to get you to remember to pack your bag and head to the gym.

✓ **BUDDY UP.** Having a friend as a workout buddy increases the chance that you'll follow through on a workout schedule. A partner can provide reminders, encouragement, and accountability — all key components to a successful gym routine.

✓ **TRACK YOUR PROGRESS.** Take notes on what you do each day so you can see how you're improving. Having concrete numbers can really boost self-esteem if you're feeling unmotivated!

✓ **JOIN A CLASS.** If you're not sure what to do, most gyms have a wide variety of fitness classes for all skill levels. Let the teacher call the shots — you'll most likely find a new interest or make some new friends in the process.

✓ **ENLIST A TRAINER.** If you can afford it, consider hiring a personal trainer, at least to get you started. Trainers are highly qualified and bring structure, support, and a wealth of knowledge to your workout routine. Plus, they can help you understand the club environment and any unspoken rules or etiquette it may have.

*“A partner can provide reminders, encouragement, and accountability — all key components to a successful gym routine.”*

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# Personal Experiences

People with ADHD from all walks of life share how mindfulness and other all-natural techniques helped calm their racing brains when things got rough.

## On Prayer

### *Are You There, God? It's Me, Bill.*

Meditation and prayer are a challenge for my ADHD brain. How do you find the focus and self-awareness to make a higher connection?

*By Bill D.*

My wife came back from a weekend trip to Arizona with loads of goodies for the kids — t-shirts, cacti seeds, and lollipops with dead scorpions embedded in them — cool stuff. She got me a gift too, which is an answer to prayer in and of itself for a guy whose alcoholic bottom almost drove her away.

It was not the manliest looking gift. It was a small box with tiny, pink fabric flowers on top. Inside was a votive candle holder with a Bible verse etched into the side. It was perfect.

Her gift showed that she knows a couple of important things about what is challenging me lately. The first is that for my recovery from addiction, I need to make an effort to connect with my Higher Power. The second is that prayer and meditation are really difficult for me.

When I try to sit quietly and pray, my ADHD brain starts to wander. Instead of calming myself and connecting with my Higher Power, I wind up writing blog posts in my head, imagining winning arguments and witty comebacks I wished I would have made earlier in the day, plotting the next five years of my life or nursing hurt feelings and resentment over slights real or imagined.

I'm sure the quiet posture of prayer is a challenge for most people, but in coming to terms with my ADHD, I realized a source of that struggle. It is not willful rebellion or apathy. It's just focus. And, in coming to terms with my addiction, I know that a spiritual connection is crucial.

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The twelve steps are a spiritual program. The spiritual aspect is a hurdle for some. I didn't think it would be for me, at least not intellectually. I know there's a God — and I'm not it. The connection was the problem.

So, what I've been trying is a makeshift form of contemplative prayer. I pick a word or short phrase, for example, from the edge of my new candle holder, "love always hopes" to use as the basis for meditation. I use that phrase to bring myself back when my mind starts to wander. I also light a candle — hence the thoughtfulness of the gift — to mark my time and keep me from getting distracted.

It's been helpful so far though I'm still new at developing this habit. I am grateful to my wife for the gift. It was small, unexpected and reminded me that I'm known and loved which is, in my experience, often the way an answered prayer should work.

## On Gardening

### *I Cultivate My Garden — And My Inner Peace*

In my garden, I grow vegetables. I also grow serene.

*By Linda Roggli, PCC*

My love affair with all things dirt-y blossomed on a steep hill that backed up to a golf course in my tiny Louisville, Kentucky, yard. I'd aced "Horticulture for Non-Majors" at Michigan State, which had hooked me on growing indoor plants. But I'd never planted so much as a zinnia in that skinny little layer of the Earth's crust that encircles our planet.

My mother-in-law at the time was emphatic that the hill was a perfect place for spring bulbs. So I obliged by ordering a beginner's package of daffodils, tulips, grape hyacinths and crocuses. On a warm October afternoon, I tucked them deeply into the rocky, clay soil and promptly ignored them. And I fell back instantly into the daily demands of caring for an infant son and a toddler.

In early February, the first purple crocus surprised me by popping through the snow. Color in the dead of winter! When the bright red tulips and flashy narcissi exploded with blooms a few weeks later, I was hooked for the second time. I've been gardening ever since.

Although I love the beauty of flowers, my passion is vegetables — vegetable gardening, to be specific. Every year since then, I have poked seeds and plants into the soil and watched in awe as they sprout, unfold, flower, and

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bear fruit. That's more than 30 years of homegrown tomatoes and an equal amount of time finding snippets of peace.

Research shows that ADHD brains are better able to pay attention, focus, and stay on track when they slow down a bit — be more mindful of the moment. There is no place more mindful for me than my veggie garden.

It is usually quiet in my garden. No insistent cell phone interrupts the silence; birds and the occasional airplane droning overhead are the only sounds. But my ADHD brain is oblivious to them. I am intent on caring for my plants. There are many tasks to be completed: weeding, fertilizing, watering when the rain stays away, checking for those pesky pests. I spend time organizing my garden shed, which often falls into disarray much as my office does.

In another setting, I might feel pressured by these unending tasks, but here, in my garden, the plants never complain. They are grateful for my attention. That's probably the reason my ADHD brain loves gardening: There is no judgment inside my garden gate. If I do it wrong (and I have killed a lot of plants with too much or too little care), there is always another chance at redemption. There is another bed to plant, another variety of green beans with which to experiment, another year to do it right.

Most people measure the success of their vegetable garden by its bounty. When my father-in-law was alive, he weighed his harvest each day using a rusty balance scale. My garden is not the “measuring” kind. It is the soul-satisfying kind. Am I frustrated by the sequential onslaught of tomato hornworms, slugs and snails, bean beetles, thieving raccoons and careless squirrels? Of course. Yet I never walk away in despair. The garden is forgiving even when I neglect it and I have to play catch-up on harvesting, weeding, and nourishing the raised beds.

When my days are full to bursting with “gotta-do” items, and I don't have a second to spare, I know I need to take 30 minutes to work in my garden. It is not time wasted. It is time well spent, an investment in my day that will allow me to be more productive and focused on the “gotta-do's.”

I know a lot of people with ADHD are fearful of gardening, certain that they don't have a green thumb. But you don't need a green thumb, or purple or pink, to experience the ADHD zen of gardening. Just a little bit of dirt (even in a pot on your patio), a few seeds or plants, and a willingness to make mistakes can set you on the path to serenity and mindfulness.

*“There is no judgement inside my garden gate.”*

—Linda Roggli, PCC

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# On Tai Chi and Aikido

## *Black-Belt Therapy*

The search for composure and concentration in tai chi can provide concrete — and frequently elusive — focus to people with ADHD.

*By Bill Mehlman*

I tend to be contrarian, but not dogmatically so. For example, I'm totally in accord with the notion that appropriately vigorous exercise is an unmitigated positive for everyone. Furthermore, I think that it's essential for people with ADHD.

Name your game: cycling, swimming, soccer, jogging, anything that gets you to break a sweat and burn off some of those heebie-jeebies. (As much as I love a good game of nine-ball, time spent in the pool hall doesn't count.) I think that martial arts fulfill this requirement, and bring an additional, specific set of benefits to us.

The martial arts I'm going to talk about are the "soft" or "internal" disciplines. Those of you devoted to shotokan karate, taekwando or capoeira or any of the other more aggressive forms, knock yourselves out, so to speak. All aspiring writers are taught to write what they know, and my experience in this area is limited to tai chi chuan and aikido.

"Soft" should not be construed as "wimpy" or "ineffective." Advanced — and I use that adjective deliberately — students of tai chi frequently win competitions open to all martial artists. Friends of mine, undercover cops, who find themselves in distinctly non-dojos situations, advocate aikido as the most practical, efficient form of self-defense in the street. Aikido students may not be able to break cement blocks. Wrist and legs, yes, but not cement blocks; personally, I've never been threatened by a cement block.

Tai chi comes in many flavors. For those who are resolutely non-violent, there are forms, such as Taoist tai chi, that eschew any and all combative activity, concentrating on the spiritual and health benefits of the art. At the other end of the spectrum, you can find instruction in weapons forms and tai chi boxing, which will definitely satisfy your aggressive instincts. And, while aikido claims to have no, none, zilch, offensive moves, the defensive moves will deter pretty much any aggressor, unless he likes being bounced off the sidewalk, very hard.

Both of these forms emphasize balance, both physical and emotional, and some notion that developing one's inner strength is more critical than any bodybuilding routine. This search for composure and concentration can

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provide concrete, and frequently elusive, focus to those of us in the ADHD community.

## ***Uke and Nage***

Got dojo? Aikido teaches self-control, concentration, and calm in the face of frustration. Sound like anything you could use?

*By Bill Mehlman*

Unlike many of the martial arts, which struggle to trace their roots back to an itinerant monk who got the idea from watching a lizard fight a crane, aikido has an unquestioned provenance. The form was developed in the early 1930s by Morihei Ueshiba, known to students as “O-sensei,” the Great Teacher. Regarding the nature of the art, he said, “To control aggression without inflicting injury is the Art of Peace.” Which isn’t to say that those skilled in the art can’t kick ass (see Seagal, Steven, who was a seventh-dan black belt and teacher — in Japan — before going Hollywood).

Like many of the martial arts, aikido depends upon inner focus, self-control and cultivation of one’s ki (in Chinese, chi or qi), which translates roughly as one’s life force. Any of this sound familiar? If I had little children, with ADHD or not, they’d be taking classes in aikido. It’s not a panacea, but its principles and practices seem to mesh perfectly with the needs of a child who has issues with impulse control and concentration.

In a properly run dojo, respect and calm are taught before the actual physical training. I’ve seen a shihan (master, also referred to as a sifu or sensei) have young students help sweep the mats or check the locker area for trash. There is no subservience or exploitation implied in this; students do it to demonstrate respect and to maintain a clean and orderly facility. Don’t get me wrong. There’s no life-and-death tooth-gritting here. Aikido is one of the most cooperative, communal enterprises I’ve ever seen.

Beginning akidokata may find themselves working with senior students. Aikido students practice in pairs, alternating between the roles of uke and nage, which are, in the simplest terms, the attacker and the attacked, a system that seems to minimize the overly-aggressive tendencies cultivated by some other forms. The cornerstone of learning the art is to learn to be calm at all times, and even calmer when attacked. Again, ADHD or no, couldn’t all of us profit from learning to deal with a stressful situation by relaxing and examining it rather than getting frantic and unproductive?.

*“Couldn’t all of us profit from learning to deal with a stressful situation by relaxing rather than getting frantic?”*

*—Bill Mehlman*

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I would be remiss, not to say disrespectful, not to mention the dojo at which I attempted (and, with more determination, could have continued) to learn aikido. **The New York Aikikai** is a non-profit organization serving as the headquarters of the United States Aikido Federation (USAF). The guiding spirit is Yoshimitsu Yamada Sensei, one of the most revered teachers in the world, and chairman of the board of the USAF. If you wish to see the personification of this wonderful art, he's the man. If you're interested, it would probably be an excellent idea to find a dojo through the USAF, rather than go to the one with the biggest ad in the Yellow Pages.

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# Additional Resources

## Q&A with Lidia Zylowska, M.D.

*Lidia Zylowska is the head of the ADHD program at the UCLA Mindful Awareness Research Center. Recently, she spoke to ADDitude to answer a few questions about mindfulness.*

### How can mindfulness help people with ADHD?

It improves your ability to control your attention. In other words, it teaches you to pay attention to paying attention. Mindful awareness can also make people more aware of their emotional state, so they won't react impulsively. That's often a real problem for people with ADHD.

Researchers have talked about using mindfulness for ADHD for some time, but the question was always whether people with ADHD could really do it, especially if they're hyperactive.

### Can I learn to practice mindfulness on my own?

Yes, the basic practice is very simple. Just sit down in a comfortable place where you won't be disturbed and spend five minutes focusing on the sensation of breathing in and breathing out — pay attention to how it feels when your stomach rises and falls. Soon, you may notice that you're thinking of something else — your job or some noise you just heard or your plans for later in the day. Label these thoughts as "thinking," and refocus your attention on your breath.

Do this daily. Every couple of weeks, increase the length of time you spend on the exercise — 10 minutes, 15, up to 20 or more if you feel you can. Try the same thing throughout each day, focusing on your breath for a few minutes as you walk from place to place, or when you're stopped at a red light or sitting at the computer.

### What if you just can't keep your mind focused? Will the exercise still do any good?

It's the nature of the mind to be distracted. Mindful awareness isn't about staying with the breath, but about returning to the breath. That's what enhances your ability to focus.

*“Mindful awareness isn't about staying with the breath, but about returning to the breath.”*

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And this emphasis on re-shifting your attention, of outwitting the mind's natural tendency to wander, is what makes us think this technique could be especially helpful to someone who has ADHD.

### **It sounds logical, but just how effective is it?**

We just completed a study involving 25 adults and eight adolescents, half of whom had the combined [both inattentive and hyperactive] form of ADHD, and the results were very promising. We observed significant improvements in both inattention and hyperactivity.

In cognitive tests, the participants got better at staying focused, even when different things were competing for their attention. Many of them also felt less anxious and depressed by the end of study.

But keep in mind that this study is only a first step into understanding the effectiveness of this approach. More research is still needed to confirm these early findings.

### **Can children practice mindful awareness?**

There seems to be a growing consensus that that's the case, although the program would have to be modified for young children. In fact, there is one mindfulness program — called Inner Kids — that's designed just for preschool and elementary school children, and it has been quite successful. The program has yet to be used specifically for children who have ADHD, but we plan to do future studies with them, and with adolescents and adults with ADHD.

### **What did the study participants think of mindful awareness? Did they think it worked?**

Most stuck with the program, and, when asked to rate their overall satisfaction with it, they rated it an average of nine out of 10. And the participants' comments were mostly positive. Adults said things like, "I feel that I better understand what goes on in my head, and I'm less critical of myself, less reactive, and more forgiving of myself."

One teenager said, "Now, whenever I feel my mind wandering, I'm able to realize that it's wandering. I can let go of the feeling and stop giving in to distractions."

### **Does scientific evidence support the effect of mindful awareness on the brain?**

Researchers have shown that, compared with people who don't meditate, long-time meditators have different EEG and MRI patterns, particularly in the brain's frontal region — the region that is involved with ADHD. Another study found a rise in the level of the neurotransmitter dopamine during meditative states. Lowered levels of dopamine have been found regularly in people with ADHD.

*"Now, whenever I feel my mind wandering, I'm able to realize that it's wandering."*

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## Is there any evidence that mindfulness can reduce one's need for ADHD medication?

We didn't specifically measure this effect in our study because we did not manage our participants' medications. Only about half of our participants were taking stimulant medication, and the benefits they reported were similar to those reported by participants who were not taking stimulants. We hope that, by practicing mindfulness, one can learn to better self-regulate and, over time, lower the need for medication. But we need to study this question further.

## Where can I learn more about mindful awareness?

If you'd like an expert to guide you through the process, visit the "Free Guided Meditations" page at [marc.ucla.edu](http://marc.ucla.edu). There, you can download three mp3s recorded by Diana Winston, the mindfulness trainer from our program. In each, she'll lead you through a mindful awareness exercise.

There are also several good books on mindfulness meditation. I recommend [\*Tibetan Wisdom for Western Life\*](#), by Joseph Arpaia, M.D., and Lobsang Rapgay, Ph.D., (Beyond Words Publishing) and [\*Full Catastrophe Living\*](#), by Jon Kabat-Zinn (Piatkus Books).

### APPS, BOOKS, AND WEBSITES

[\*\*Mindfulness for Adults Living with ADHD\*\*](#) — Expert Webinar from *ADDitude*

[\*\*Headspace\*\*](#) — An app that guides you through a step-by-step mindfulness and meditation practice that you can use anywhere, anytime.

[\*\*Developmental Doctor\*\*](#) — The website of Mark Bertin, M.D., a doctor who specializes in managing ADHD with mindfulness. Find guided meditations and mindfulness courses being taught in your area.

[\*\*Healthy Mother, Healthy Child\*\*](#) — This book is a good introduction for parents who are looking to teach self-calming techniques to their child, but aren't quite sure to start. It covers yoga, deep breathing, and general healthy living — perfect for parents who want to encourage wellness in every aspect of life.

[\*\*Restorative Yoga Teachers Directory\*\*](#) — Looking to find a restorative yoga teacher in your area? Here's where to start.

[\*\*Relax and Renew: Restful Yoga for Stressful Times\*\*](#) — This in-depth book by Judith Hanson Laseter, a renowned yogi, explores how busy adults can incorporate the benefits of yoga into their daily routine.

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## **ADDitude Special Reports Available Now**

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### **ADHD Medication and Treatment**

**The latest information on managing medication, starting behavior therapy, evaluating alternative treatments, and more.**

You're relieved to know, finally, that your or your child's symptoms are due to ADHD. But now, you have questions — on everything from which medications are available to how to tell if they're working properly. In this comprehensive special report, you'll learn how to seek an accurate diagnosis and plan a treatment plan that's right for you or your child.

>> Learn More About This Special Report: <http://additu.de/treatment>

### **ADHD 101**

**A complete overview of ADHD, outlining every step from diagnosis to treatment — all the way to living successfully with attention deficit.**

From the moment you suspect ADHD in yourself or your child, you have hundreds of questions. Which doctors can evaluate symptoms? What medication side effects should you be prepared for? Can diet help? This comprehensive eBook has over 100 pages of expert advice, personal stories, and more to help you become an ADHD expert.

>> Learn more about this special report: <http://additu.de/adhd-101>

### **A Parent's Guide to ADHD, Diet, and Nutrition**

**A Parent's Guide to ADHD, Diet, and Nutrition**

**The foods, vitamins, minerals, supplements, and herbs that can help your child manage symptoms.**

What is a good ADHD diet? Is sugar the enemy? What about gluten? Dairy? In this comprehensive special report, we detail the connection between the food your child eats and the severity of his hyperactivity, inattention, and impulsivity, covering topics from artificial dyes and flavors to the right amount of protein.

>> Learn more about this special report: <http://additu.de/nutrition>

## **More ADDitude Downloadable Booklets**

### **Mobile Apps for Better Sleep**

Easy-to-use resources to overcome common ADHD sleep challenges.

### **11 ADHD Coping Mechanisms**

Dr. William Dodson's 11 ADHD-tested treatment strategies that really work..

### **Secrets of the ADHD Brain**

Learn why we think, act, and feel the way we do.

### **Music for Healthy ADHD Brains**

8 of the best songs to help you focus.

### **ADHD Vitamins and Supplements**

Find out which herbs, vitamins, and nutritional supplements may help control some symptoms of ADHD.

### **9 Foods to Eat (And Avoid) for Improved ADHD Symptoms**

Your guide to a high-protein, low-sugar, no additive diet.

### **It's Not ADHD: 3 Common Diagnosis Mistakes**

Doctors are sometimes too quick to diagnose ADHD. Read up on common misdiagnoses.

**Find these and many more free ADHD resources online at:**  
[www.additudemag.com/download/](http://www.additudemag.com/download/)

## **ADHD Webinar Replays from ADDitude:**

### **Survival Strategies for Moms with ADHD**

>> <http://additu.de/adhd-moms>

Mothers with ADHD, especially those parenting children with ADHD, often put the needs of others before themselves. Despite good intentions, when moms leave their own ADHD untreated, the whole family can suffer. In this webinar, hosted by Ellen Littman, Ph.D., learn to let go of society's expectations of being "perfect" and focus on your own accomplishments.

### **Why People with ADHD Can't Sleep**

>> <http://additu.de/adhd-sleep>

Not only is skimping on sleep bad for your overall health and well-being, it can also exacerbate ADHD symptoms. Rest assured — there are numerous ways to improve your sleep hygiene! In this audio and slide presentation, hosted by Roberto Olivardia, Ph.D., learn the science behind ADHD sleep problems and get tips for revamping your circadian rhythm.

### **Sound Medicine for Your Child's ADHD Brain**

>> <http://additu.de/sound>

Music can be a powerful catalyst for learning in children with ADHD or LD — but most parents aren't sure how to harness it. In this expert webinar, with Sharlene Habermeyer, M.A., learn how music develops three key areas of the brain, how music can improve your child's reading and math skills, and which songs work best.

### **Healing the ADHD Brain: Interventions and Strategies that Work**

>> <http://additu.de/healing>

There's no one-size-fits-all approach for treating ADHD. Here, Daniel G. Amen, M.D., explains treatment options ranging from medication and supplements to diet and exercise.

### **ADHD-Friendly Nutrition Strategies for Your Child & Teen**

>> <http://additu.de/nutrition-strategies>

In this expert webinar, learn how artificial food colors can affect your child, how to test for some of the most common food sensitivities, the pros and cons of the Feingold Diet, and more — with Laura Stevens, M.S.

## **FREE ADHD Newsletters from ADDitude**

**Sign up to receive critical news and information about ADHD diagnosis and treatment, plus strategies for school, parenting, and living better with ADHD:**  
[www.additudemag.com/adhd-newsletters/](http://www.additudemag.com/adhd-newsletters/)

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Expert advice on managing your household, time, money, career, and relationships

### **Parenting Children with ADHD**

Behavior and discipline, time management, disorganization, making friends, and more critical strategies for parents

### **ADHD at School**

How to get classroom accommodations, finish homework, work with teachers, find the right schools, and much more

### **Diagnosing & Treating ADHD**

Treatment options including medications, food, supplements, brain training, mindfulness and other alternative therapies