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Mindfulness and Sustainability: How to Practice for the Planet

Are mindfulness and sustainability connected? Mindfulness meditation is known for its mental benefits, but it can help the planet, too.

BY [KAT SMITH \(" ATTR\(HREF\) "\)](#)



Among the cycle of health and wellness trends that bombard our social media feeds, learning how to be more mindful appears to be one of those things that

actually works. In fact, evidence backs this up—meditation has enormous benefits, from helping to manage stress to sparking the imagination. A regular mindfulness practice can also inspire more eco-friendly habits—here’s how.

What Is Mindfulness?

We see it everywhere these days, but what does it mean to be mindful? According to the Mayo Clinic, the term stems from “mindfulness meditation.”

In this type of meditation, which has its roots in Buddhism, you focus on being aware of what you are thinking and feeling at the moment. Mindfulness meditation means feeling your feelings as they come, without judgment.

Mindfulness asks us to turn our attention inward and tune into the present moment. There is never a “right” or “wrong” way to feel at any given moment. In other words, feel your feelings—studies show that it can make you happier (["attr\(href\) "](#)).

Pairing mindfulness and sustainability could help people be better environmentalists. | Caroline Veronez / Unsplash

Mindfulness and Sustainability

Do people who are more mindful make better environmentalists? A recent [study](#) ("attr(href)") published in the journal *Environment and Behavior* found that mindfulness exercises lead to increased feelings of connectedness with nature and pro-environmental behavior.

This is because most neurotypical people are wired to perform our day-to-day activities, like grabbing a cup of coffee or ordering takeout, without much forethought, to conserve our cognitive energy for other tasks.

“Mindfulness is a state of awareness. It is paying attention, on purpose, to what is happening in the moment without trying to judge or change what is happening,” Scott M Pickett, PhD, CBSM, study co-author and Associate Professor at Florida State University College of Medicine, tells LIVEKINDLY.

He adds that mindfulness is linked to positive mental outcomes because it helps us *“manage our emotions and behaviors more effectively.”* This could extend to environmentally-friendly behavior, too.

The Study

Bringing a reusable coffee cup when we go out or choosing a plant-based menu option can easily slip our minds.

Because mindfulness asks us to be more conscious of ourselves, incorporating a practice into our daily routine can also make us more aware of our environmental impact.

Pickett explains that *“mindfulness strengthens attention and awareness, which may lead people to notice nature, the environment, and/or information about climate change.”*

“Mindfulness may also lead people to be more purposeful in their behaviors,” says Pickett. *“Which in many cases being environmentally-friendly requires engaging in behaviors that require more effort.”*

Participants in the study, undergraduates from a Midwestern university, partook in a four-week meditation program to examine its effects on behavior.

Participants engaged in 15-minute mindfulness meditation for five days a week over the course of the study.

Prior to the test, the students were asked to fill out a survey that asked questions related to their connection to nature or whether they think about their impact on the planet.

Questions were also related to energy and water use, waste behavior, transportation, and eco-friendly shopping. Participants answered that they were more likely to think about their environmental footprint and engage in eco-friendly behavior after the four-week program.

Pickett adds that traditional mindfulness practices *“focus on developing attitudes of kindness, compassion, and gratitude. Arguably, being more environmentally-friendly would be in line with these attitudes.”*



How to Meditate

In recent decades, mindfulness meditation has attracted attention from the scientific community. Studies have shown that it can benefit both physical and mental conditions, including anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, fibromyalgia, and psoriasis, per [The Harvard Gazette](#) (["attr\(href\) "](#)).

[Mindful](#) (["attr\(href\) "](#)), a platform centered around meditation, notes that *"Meditation is exploring. It's not a fixed destination. Your head doesn't become vacuumed free of thought, utterly undistracted. It's a special place where each and*

every moment is momentous.”

Meditation doesn't have to mean sitting in silence for an hour with the ebb and flow of your inner thoughts. Even those of us whose thoughts are always running a mile a minute can give it a go. Beginner practices can take as little as 10 minutes out of your day. If you need help staying focused, a guided meditation app like [Headspace](#) (" [attr\(href\) "](#)) can help.

Here's how to meditate:

1. Find a comfortable place. Sit somewhere that makes you feel at ease. You can do this on a yoga pillow, but a chair, your couch, or your bed will also suffice.
2. Notice your breath. Be conscious of the air as it fills your lungs.
3. Let your mind take you where it will. Then, when you notice that your thoughts have started to wander, concentrate on your breathing again.
4. Be kind to yourself as your mind wanders. Mindfulness meditation is about tuning into your emotions without holding judgement.

After your practice, give yourself a moment to come out of your head. Notice your surroundings and reflect on how you felt during the meditation. A meditation journal (this zero waste [Meisou journal](#) (" [attr\(href\) "](#)) is made from recycled paper and organic cotton) can help you keep track of the thoughts that came up during your practice. Repeat this however many times a week you need to.

3 Ways to Be More Mindful (For You and the Planet)

Every choice we have makes an impact. But living more sustainably isn't about being perfect. It's more about making better choices for the planet wherever you can. Here are some tips to get started:

Animal agriculture's negative impact on the planet is undeniable. | Unsplash

1 Eat Sustainably

According to a recent UN-backed [report \(" attr\(href\) "\)](#), food is the biggest driver of the destruction of the natural world. Agriculture is a major threat to biodiversity loss, directly linked to 86 percent of the 28,000 known species known to be at risk of extinction. The root cause? Animal agriculture.

Cattle, sheep, and other livestock have the biggest impact on the environment and occupy 80 percent of global farmland, but provide only 18 percent of calories

eaten. Agriculture accounts for 30 percent of greenhouse gas emissions, and livestock generate more than half of that. Raising animals as food also requires vast amounts of fresh water. It takes 2,500 gallons of water to produce one pound of beef. For that amount of water, you could take 135 showers.

The report highlights that a shift away from meat-heavy diets would help mitigate agriculture's impact on the environment. This tracks with a 2019 [report](#) (" [attr\(href\) "](#)") published in the journal *Science*, which found that without meat and dairy consumption, global farmland use could be reduced by more than 75 percent.

You don't have to quit animal products cold turkey (Or should I say, cold Tofurky? Thank you, I'm here all week.) to make an impact.

Eating as little as one plant-based meal a week or day is a great way to ease into vegan food. Try starting with simple swaps, like plant-based milk for your coffee or chickpea curry instead of chicken curry to get started. Not only is eating more plants better for the environment, but it's also healthier for your body.

Additional reading:

- [The 16 Best Sources of Plant Protein \(" attr\(href\) "\)](#)
- [Dairy-Free Milk: 8 Types, Ranked \(" attr\(href\) "\)](#)
- [Vegan Cookbooks: Top Picks for Your Home Kitchen \(" attr\(href\) "\)](#)
- [27 Easy Vegan Recipes for Any Time of Day \(" attr\(href\) "\)](#)
- [15 Vegan Batch Recipes That'll Last You All Week \(" attr\(href\) "\)](#)
- [31 Recipes That'll Make Your Fall in Love With Tofu \(" attr\(href\) "\)](#)
- [15 Recipes Packed With Plant Protein \(" attr\(href\) "\)](#)
- [How to Cook the Healthiest Legumes \(" attr\(href\) "\)](#)

Plastic waste is a global issue. | Pexels

2 Reduce, Reuse, Recycle

Plastic is ubiquitous in the modern world. Nearly every item we use in our daily lives, from the food we buy to our beauty products come packaged in plastic. The very first synthetic plastic, Bakelite, was invented in 1907 and was commercialized for use in packaging, jewelry, and more. But global plastic production really kicked off in the 1950s and rapidly accelerated from there.

Globally, we have generated 8.3 million tons of plastic, but only about 9 percent ("

[attr\(href\) "\)](#) of the plastic that has been made has been recycled, according to a study published in the journal *Science Advances*. Most of it—the remaining 79 percent—ends up in landfills and the oceans. Plastic can take up to 400 years to biodegrade and consequences range from microplastics in the ocean to [greenhouse gas emissions \(" attr\(href\) "\)](#) from production *and* from sitting in landfills.

According to a study published in the journal *Science* ([" attr\(href\) "\)](#), the amount of plastic trash that flows into the ocean is expected to nearly triple by 2040. But shifting toward a circular economy—one that reuses and recycles products—could reduce the annual flow of plastics into the ocean by 80 percent in two decades.

Effectively reducing plastic pollution requires a major, concerted effort on the part of major corporations. But there are small steps we can take to reduce our plastic waste, such as using reusable shopping bags, travel mugs, cutlery sets, and reusable straws. Plastic can't always be avoided—but if you do use it, it should be properly recycled. Here are a few more tips for reducing plastic in your life:

Additional reading:

- [How Important Is Recycling? \(" attr\(href\) "\)](#)
- [Is Paper More Sustainable Than Plastic? \(" attr\(href\) "\)](#)
- [How to Have a Plastic-Free Period \(" attr\(href\) "\)](#)
- [This Cleaning Brand Will Help You Break Up With Plastic \(" attr\(href\) "\)](#)
- [9 Zero-Waste Bathroom Ideas \(" attr\(href\) "\)](#)
- [The 10 Best Refillable Deodorants \(" attr\(href\) "\)](#)
- [The Ultimate Guide to Zero-Waste Travel \(" attr\(href\) "\)](#)
- [How to Make Your Hair Care Routine Zero-Waste \(" attr\(href\) "\)](#)

Buy less and shop with intention. | Charles Etoroma/Unsplash

3 Make Your Lifestyle Green(er)

As in everything else in life, there's no such thing as perfection when it comes to living "green" lifestyle. Nobody can go from 0 to 100, but we can always do our best by taking little steps to live more sustainably. Being more mindful of what you purchase, from your daily moisturizer and mascara to your leggings and sneakers is a step toward progress. Not-so-fun-fact, the global fashion industry, Americans throw away 8.5 billion pounds of clothing annually, according to a 2018 [study](#) ("attr(href)") in the journal *Environmental Health*. And much of that clothing is

made from fossil fuel-based fabrics, such as polyester or nylon, which can take up to 200 years to decompose.

This can also include behavioral changes. Before you throw something away, ask yourself if it's in good enough condition to be donated. If your clothing tears, can you fix it instead of replacing it? If a replacement is needed, is it something you could find secondhand? And if you do need to buy new, look for brands that use recycled or biodegradable fibers.

Additional reading:

- [How to Practice Sustainable Shopping \(" attr\(href\) "\)](#)
- [Everything You Need to Know About Greenwashing \(" attr\(href\) "\)](#)
- [The Complete Guide to Cruelty-Free Beauty \(" attr\(href\) "\)](#)
- [How to Develop a Sleep Routine That's Good for You and the Planet \(" attr\(href\) "\)](#)
- [Thrifting Tips: How to Build a Sustainable Wardrobe \(" attr\(href\) "\)](#)
- [What Is Biodegradable Fashion? \(" attr\(href\) "\)](#)
- [How Sustainable Is Organic Cotton? \(" attr\(href\) "\)](#)
- [Your Guide to Sustainable Athleisure \(" attr\(href\) "\)](#)
- [7 Sustainable Underwear Brands \(" attr\(href\) "\)](#)
- [How to Make Deodorant That Actually Works \(" attr\(href\) "\)](#)

Mindfulness is hardly new, but what it asks of us—to take stock of how you feel, and to embrace those feelings, even the messy ones, without judgment—is timeless. Not only does it foster self-compassion, but it can also give you new perspectives on how to be a better steward for the planet. It can't hurt to try.

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