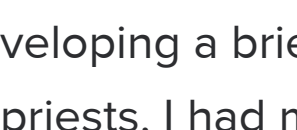


Donald Altman  
Practical Mindfulness

# 3-Minute Breathing Practice Lowers Stress and Blood Pressure

This proven practice can change how you feel almost instantly.

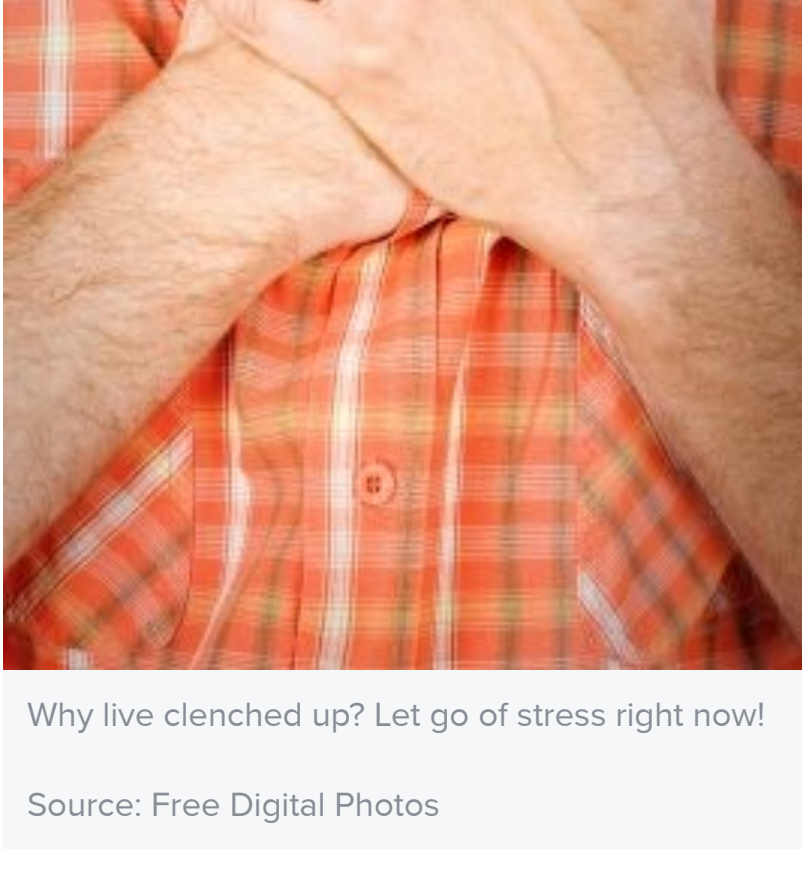
Posted September 4, 2019 | Reviewed by Gary Drevitch



When I was contacted by a nurse from the University of Portland about developing a brief mindfulness program for a research study to be used for priests, I had more than a moment's pause. My first question was, "Why do the priests need mindfulness?" Researcher and nurse Joy Mocerì, DNP, FNP-BC responded that the these clergy worked in impoverished parishes and were under a great deal of stress. In addition, several had been identified as having cardiovascular disease.

Already, there is much research about the benefits of mindfulness practices such as those offered through Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) programs. And so I wondered what this study was hoping to do differently. As I soon learned, the priests didn't have a lot of time to devote to MBSR training, which consisted of several weeks and long, daily practice sessions. Basically, I was asked if I could create a short, targeted program to achieve the same benefits of reducing stress and lowering blood pressure.

Adapting mindfulness to clients and various highly stressed populations is something I specialize in; it is a concept strongly emphasized in my teachings and workshops. This being the case, I told Joy I was excited to create a program to work within her parameters, but first, I needed time to think about how to make it work best for priests.



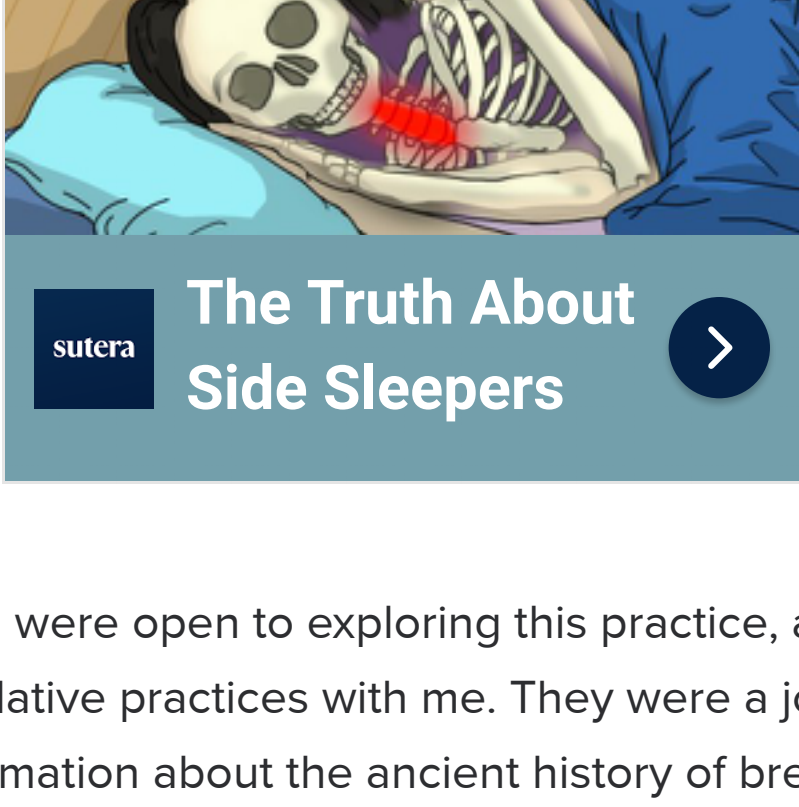
Why live clenched up? Let go of stress right now!  
Source: Free Digital Photos

For mindfulness to be effective, it needs to be tailored, in language and form, to meet the needs of those using it. When teaching in Hawaii, for example, I frame mindfulness through the native Hawaiian word "nalu," which translates as "in the flow, not too fast and not too slow." For young people who love technology, I may describe mindfulness using metaphors, such as "taking an inner selfie" or "rebooting" or "hitting the pause button." For the mindfulness training I conducted at Ft. Bragg, terms like "strategic breathing" and "tactical awareness" helped create a bridge to what mindfulness could offer.

For the priests, I decided to use the term "contemplative breathing." After learning more about them and their work demands, I decided on two hour-long trainings. I wrote up some handout material that they could refer to after the session.

The goal was to have them practice contemplative breathing three times a day, for three minutes each time. In total, that was just nine minutes of practice a day. During my first session, I taught five unique postures for helping turn on the parasympathetic nervous system, the body's natural relaxation system. Perhaps most important was taking the time to problem solve with them about what worked and what didn't.

This led to exploring topics related to using the breathing postures during prayer and while walking. No practice will be effective if it is not integrated into someone's daily routine. Without exploring how to integrate any practice, it is difficult to get compliance with any kind of mindfulness program.



Happily, the priests were open to exploring this practice, and in turn, shared their own contemplative practices with me. They were a joy to work with, and providing information about the ancient history of breath and contemplation with them, as I did during that first session, helped them grasp why the practice would be beneficial.

After being given the Perceived Stress Scale Inventory (PSS) and having their blood pressure taken, the priests began their practice. The eventual study, published in the June, 2019 issue of *The Journal for Nurse Practitioners*, showed significant clinical improvement on both measures after the intervention.

Even though the priests practiced for only 9 minutes a day, I'm a big believer that even a minute or two of parasympathetic breathing can profoundly shift how anyone feels. Here's how I'd like to frame it for you right now:

You do a lot of things for your physical hygiene each day, such as brush your teeth, comb your hair, take a shower, etc. **Are you worth three minutes a day to take care of your mental hygiene?** Here is a simple practice for you to undertake. Above all, think about how you can seamlessly make this part of your day:

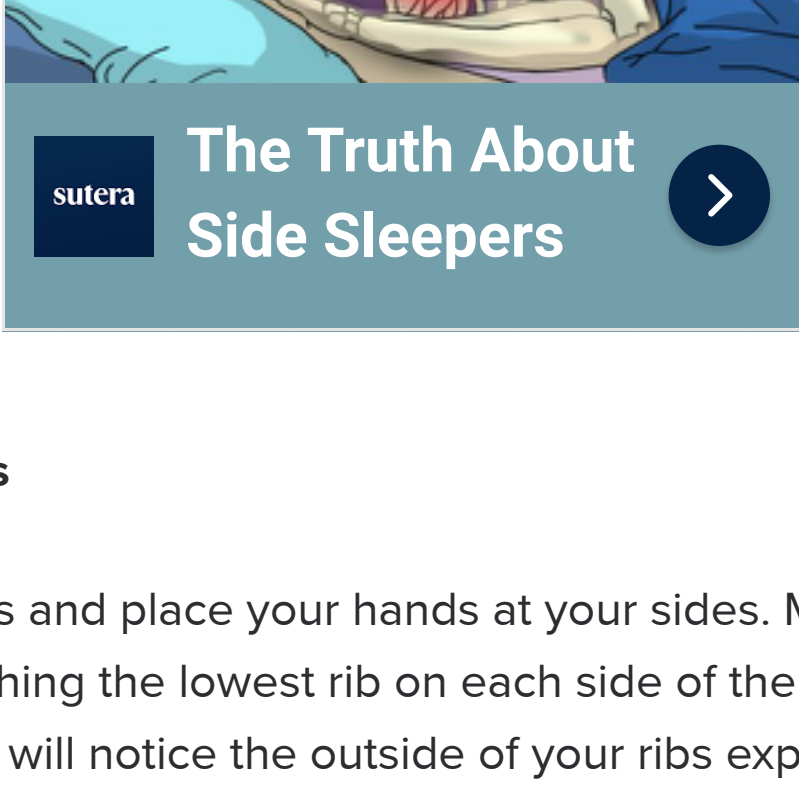
## Mindful Breathing Postures for Stress and Heart Health

Here are three ways to easily activate your body's natural "relaxation response." All of these postures stretch muscles that open the rib cage and make it easier to do diaphragmatic or belly breathing. The relaxation response slows everything down and helps you to get more present so you can attend to your day with greater clarity and purpose.

See which of these three postures gets your belly moving the most, or feels the best. You'll then use this for three minutes a day — one minute at a time or whenever you feel stressed.

### Hands Behind the Back

- Clasp your hands behind your back. You can do this standing up or sitting down. Take some normal breaths and notice if the belly is moving outward more. Don't force in too much air. Slowly exhale.



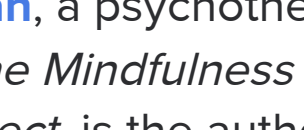
### Hands at the Sides

- Raise your arms and place your hands at your sides. Make sure your hands are touching the lowest rib on each side of the body. As you breathe in, you will notice the outside of your ribs expanding and moving your arms and hands slightly outward. Slowly exhale.

### Hands Behind the Head/Neck

- Clasp your hands behind your neck or the back of your head. As before, take normal breaths and notice if there is movement or expansion in the belly. Again, exhale slowly.

NOTE: If you feel dizzy or lightheaded you may be taking too deep a breath. Remember, this is just a normal breath, but a breath that is fuller and more three-dimensional. If you feel dizzy at all, you can stop, or take a shorter or smaller breath.



## About the Author

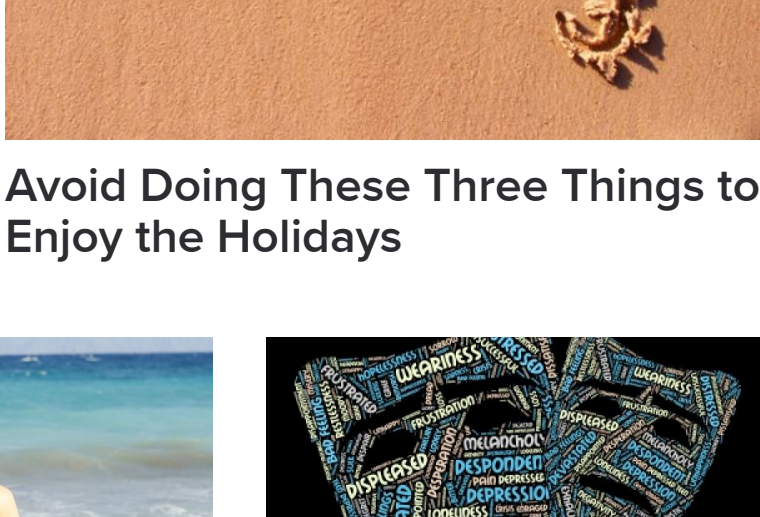


**Donald Altman**, a psychotherapist and former monk featured in *The Mindfulness Movie* and *Living Spiritual Teachers Project*, is the author of the new book, *Simply Mindful: A 7-Week Course and Personal Handbook for Mindful Living*.  
Online: MindfulPractices, Facebook, LinkedIn

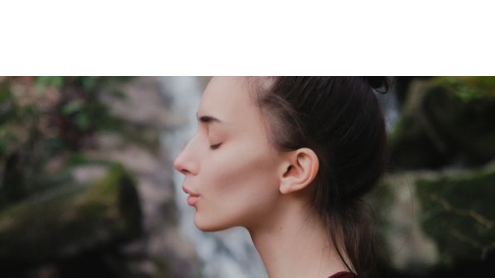
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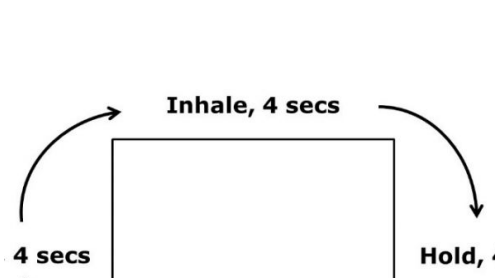
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