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The best mindfulness apps, according to experts

From general self-betterment to stress relief and a better night's sleep, mindfulness apps can be used by anyone interested in their mental wellbeing. We ask the experts which mindfulness apps they recommend to their own clients, and explore the benefits and limitations of each app.

What is mindfulness?

Mindfulness may feel like a modern buzzword in Western culture, but this psychological practice dates back thousands of years. This concept has roots in Eastern traditions – such as Buddhism and **yoga** – and has grown in popularity, becoming a psychotherapy technique used around the world. Mindfulness helps people improve their mental health and wellbeing.

How do the experts describe mindfulness?

"Mindfulness is a concept that is part of some psychotherapy training, as it can support clients by regulating their nervous system and helping them with wider holistic tools to support their recovery from mental health issues," says UKCP psychotherapist Melissa Cliffe.

For Judy Cloughton, BSOM accredited meditation teacher at BalanceTime, the simplest definition is that: "Mindfulness is a way of focusing your attention on what is happening in each moment and being present to the thoughts and feelings that rise and fall. The challenging part of mindfulness is then letting these thoughts and feelings pass with a sense of gratitude and composure."

If you're thinking this sounds the same as **meditation**, you're not wrong. Cloughton adds that meditation practice is best understood as an exercise that you can use in your daily life to help reach a space of mindful awareness. But this isn't the only way to practise mindfulness:

"There are many ways of practising mindfulness," adds Dr Syed Azmatullah, Chair and psychotherapist of UKCP. "You can do it washing up dishes or sweeping up leaves on the garden path. The important thing is that your awareness is fully with the experience of what you are doing and feeling. When you feel your mind wandering, the idea is that you gently, and without judgement, re-direct your awareness back to experiencing what you are doing.

Benefits of mindfulness

Focusing on the present and calmly managing straying thoughts isn't an easy thing to do. However, the idea is that you will retrain your brain by practising mindfulness; Cloughton describes mindfulness as practising the mental shift from your "active" brain wave (beta) to the "day-dreaming" wave (alpha), the "deeply relaxing" wave (theta), and the brain wave that helps you to sleep (delta).

This may sound a little complicated, but it will start to feel more natural the more you practise. If you ever feel disheartened, it can help to think of the many possible benefits.

One of the most common reasons people take up mindfulness is to better cope with [stress](#) and/or [anxiety](#). Azmatullah explains that, by developing the ability to "witness" your thoughts, rather than being captivated by them, you develop the ability to put anxious and negative thoughts into context and to balance them with "in the moment experiences".

"Mindfulness has a host of proven benefits, from helping to regulate stress and reduce anxiety, to increasing creativity." Cloughton explains. "It can also boost your immune system, help improve the [quality of your sleep](#), help regulate blood sugar levels, and support recovery from physical and mental illness."

As well as a useful tool to help calm mental and emotional struggles, studies have also found a positive association between practising mindfulness and personal accomplishments, getting good quality sleep, self-compassion, and relaxation¹.

This means that anyone may practise and benefit from mindfulness – not just those who are struggling with mental or physical health problems.

The best mindfulness apps

As more people have become aware of the benefits of mindfulness, there has been an increasing appetite for mindfulness and meditation apps. In fact, more than 2,500 mindfulness apps have launched since 2015², and the market is predicted to reach \$2.1 billion (US dollars) by 2025³.

Siobhan McGee, UKCP psychotherapist and director and tutor at the Karuna Institute, believes mindfulness apps can be helpful if someone isn't plugged into a regular mindfulness practice or a meditation group. "It can also support people in between [therapy sessions](#), helping to remind them and encourage them to practice mindfulness."

Cliffe agrees that these apps can enhance the work that therapists do in their sessions. She highlights that there is the added benefit of convenience; "whether someone can devote three minutes or half an hour to the practice, they can find something that suits them."

Which particular mindfulness apps do our experts recommend to their clients? We've summarised their pros and cons:

Calm – a "freemium" experience

You may have already heard of [Calm](#), an app which often tops the most popular free mindfulness apps list in Apple iTunes⁴. Many of our experts are also fans who regularly recommend their clients use Calm in between sessions as part of a "holistic approach to mental wellness", according to Cliffe.

With the free version of the app, you can select from a range of different goals that mindfulness can help with – such as improving your sleep quality or improving your focus – before being directed to the most relevant resources.

Pros

- Daily unguided meditations.
- Some guided meditations.
- Breathing exercises.

- Sleep stories recorded by celebrities.
- Relaxing music and real-life nature sounds.
- A kids section.
- A personalised experience and ability to track statistics, including a mood tracker.

Cons

- There is so much content that new users may find it a little difficult to navigate.
- Some users may find the nature sounds distracting.

The paid version of the app includes access to more than 100 guided meditations, 200 sleep stories, masterclasses featuring world-renowned mindfulness experts, and extra music tracks.

Headspace – easy to use

[Headspace](#) is another competitor for the best mindfulness app crown, and another clear favourite with our experts. Despite containing a lot of content, people frequently rate this app more organised, clearly structured, and easier to use than Calm.

After the seven-day or 14-day free trial, users usually have to subscribe and pay to keep the app features unlocked. This said, in the spirit of their mission to: "Improve the health and happiness of the world." Headspace offers free access to:

- [NHS staff](#) – in recognition of their stressful working conditions.
- [Primary and secondary school staff](#) – who can use the app to help their students build healthy mindfulness habits.

Headspace no longer offers free access to students, but they can still get a discount [when they subscribe through the website](#).

Pros

- Well-organised library of meditations – up to 30 minutes each.

- Daily personalised to-do lists.
- Group sessions to connect with others.
- Animations to explain concepts.
- Kids section.
- Content is clearly labelled and simple to navigate.

Cons

- No free content, except for NHS staff and educators.
- As meditations are up to 30 minutes this may feel limiting for more advanced practitioners looking for deeper practice.

InsightTimer – biggest free library

Craughton's favourite is [InsightTimer](#), a mindfulness app that prides itself on having 130,000 guided meditations available on the free version of the app – the largest library of its kind.

Pros

- Thousands of guided meditations.
- A timer you can set for your sessions of mindfulness practice.
- Mentors available.
- Relaxing music.
- Sleep stories.
- Community hub to connect with people.
- Everything is ad-free.

Cons

- The large meditation library may feel overwhelming when you first join.
- A lot of the meditation courses appear to target more advanced practitioners.

A premium subscription will unlock more resources to help you take your practice to the next level, including hundreds of teacher-led courses, an advanced audio player, and a handy offline listening feature. You can try the paid version with a seven-day free trial.

Are there downsides to mindfulness apps?

Apps are not a "fix all" solution

"The danger with mindfulness apps is people can see them as a fix all, which is not what they are designed to do," Craughton warns. While they can help you start developing useful mindfulness skills, you may need wider support and a space where you can deep-dive into your mental health with a therapist.

The risk of scrolling and social media rabbit holes

As with many activities on our phones, it's all too easy to become distracted by mindless scrolling and disappear down [social media rabbit holes](#).

"That's where a class or working directly with a teacher really makes a difference to building a mindfulness practice," adds Craughton.

Not all of them offer free access

There are several alternative free resources to subscription mindfulness apps, including free [Spotify mindfulness podcasts](#) and other resources on YouTube, Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok. This said, apps offer large amounts of content all in one place, which can help to take the effort out of regularly sourcing new content by yourself.

Remember, whether you're experiencing anxiety, low mood, intrusive thoughts, or something else, negative emotions should not be affecting your everyday life. While mindfulness apps can be a positive first step for many people, it's also important that you speak to a friend, your GP, or a mental health expert if you feel overwhelmed. There are several support services and options that are worth exploring.

Further reading

1. [Janssen et al: Effects of mindfulness-based stress reduction on employees' mental health: A systematic review.](#)
2. [USA Today Tech.](#)
3. [Finances Online: 50 essential meditation statistics for 2022: benefits, technology & practice data.](#)
4. [Giacobbi: Efficacy of the mindfulness meditation mobile app, Calm, to reduce stress among college students: randomized controlled trial.](#)

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