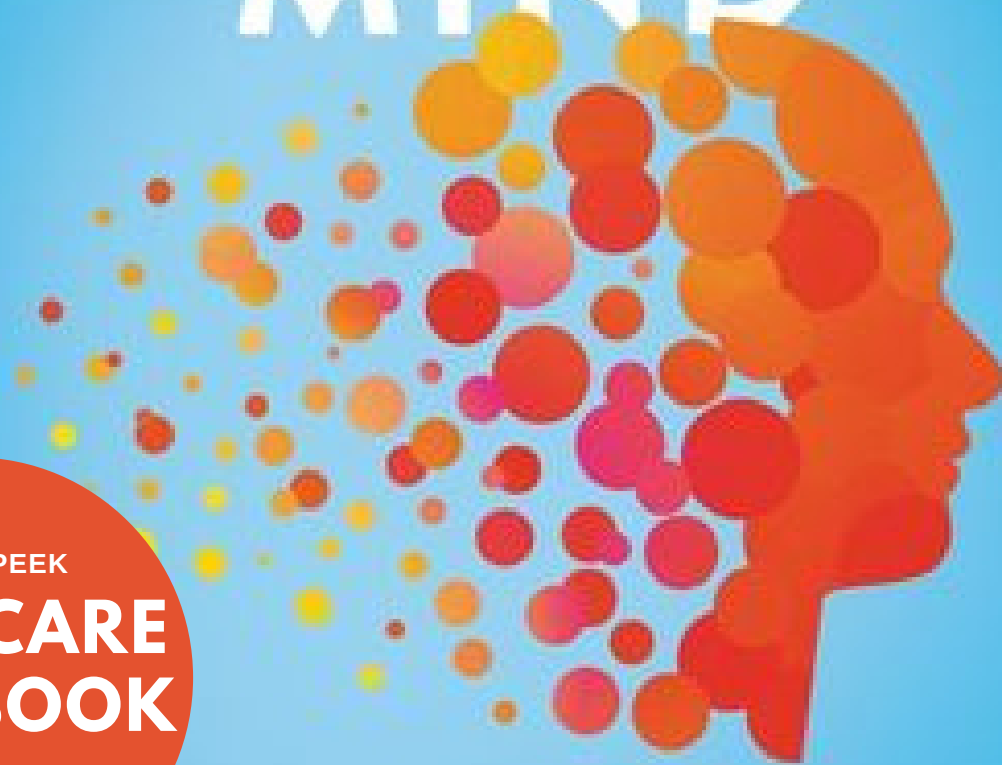


*The*  
**SELF-HEALING  
MIND**



SNEAK PEEK

**SELF-CARE  
PLAYBOOK**

EXCERPT

*An Essential Five-Step Practice  
for Overcoming Anxiety and  
Depression, and Revitalizing Your Life*

**GREGORY SCOTT BROWN, MD**

# YOUR SELF-CARE PLAYBOOK

# TESTED BREATHING TECHNIQUES TO CALM THE BODY AND MIND

You, too, can utilize your own breath as medicine. Different disciplines and practices have different methods to help you harness your breath for relaxation. These are techniques I recommend to my patients to help them better manage unwanted anxiety. Any of these methods, with regular practice, can help you reduce anxiety and stress and restore your body and mind to a calm state.

## **Coherent Breathing**

While this type of breathing can be done either seated or lying down, beginners will benefit from lying down in a private place. Close your eyes and let yourself feel the weight of your body pressing against the ground and the sensation of the ground pushing back. Position your feet hips' width apart and let your palms face upward. Then pick a point of focus to send your gaze.

Bring awareness to your focused gaze, your *drishti*. It can be a spot on the ceiling, a light fixture, or, if you are outside, a cloud in the sky. You can even close your eyes and imagine a focal point in your mind's eye. Once you have your gaze set, bring attention to your breath.

To help you focus on your breathing, place one hand on your belly, palm down, and the other on your heart. Feel the rise of your chest, your belly expanding, with each inhale. Experience the fall of your abdomen with your exhales. You don't want to breathe from your chest; this is a common rookie mistake that can lead to a gasping or choking sensation. Rather, let the air make its own space within your lungs, and pay close attention to your body as it brings in oxygen and then expels carbon dioxide, which will fuel your body and bring you peace.

While coherent breathing is not likely to extinguish severe anxiety or panic, it is an excellent place to start learning how to become aware of your breath and help ensure that you are not taking it for granted.

## **Resistance Breathing**

Once you've mastered coherent breathing, you can move on to resistance breathing. This is a popular approach in yoga, known as *ujjayi pranayama* (or victorious breath), and involves allowing a soft restriction at the back your throat to foster an audible breath. Place the tip of your tongue behind your teeth and slightly tense your glottis, the opening between your vocal cords. When you start, take a few inhales through your nose and then let them go through your mouth with a whispering sound. As you progress, seal your lips. Simply inhale and exhale through your nose.

Like with coherent breathing, it helps to focus on the rise and fall of the belly to keep you grounded as you master resistance breathing. The physical sensation of resistance breath is similar to the feeling of sucking in air through a straw. You'll know you are doing it right when you hear an ocean-like sound coming from your vocal cords as you exhale each breath. Think ocean waves crashing onshore or the wind whispering through the trees.

Yogis may use resistance breath as they move through different postures, but you can do this breathing technique while sitting in a chair or just finding a cross-legged position on the floor. It's entirely up to you. Sitting on the floor, however, especially when you make use of a meditation cushion, can help you maintain an open posture that also helps you breathe from the diaphragm in order to get the most out of these restricted breaths.

As you master this technique, the intention is to do no more than two to four sets of *ujjayi pranayama* per minute. You may find yourself getting a little dizzy at first because this type of breathing rushes oxygen into the lungs and brain. More quickly than you may realize, you'll find that this rush is accompanied by a distinct sense of calm thanks to vagal nerve stimulation.

When you create this kind of resistance in your breathing, you stimulate the vagus nerve, a vital cranial nerve that connects the base of the brain to important organ systems including the heart, lungs, and the gut. When you practice *ujjayi pranayama* breathing, you activate the parasympathetic nervous system, which, in turn, tells the nervous system to relax the body and mind. You don't have to practice resistance breathing long to feel a calming effect. I often set a timer for sixty seconds and incorporate a couple of sets of *ujjayi pranayama* breaths to give me a sense of peace—and the clarity I need to continue my day.

# OPTIMIZING SLEEP

Sleep is an essential bodily function, a restful state that helps to restore and recharge both the body and the mind. When you are not getting enough, it can have detrimental effects on your physical and emotional well-being. That's why managing sleep is such an important part of self-care. As people look to find ways to optimize their mental health, improving sleep, curiously, is often overlooked. Luckily, there are a variety of different ways you can put a premium on your downtime and help ensure your sleep schedule is set up to nurture your mind, body, and spirit.

## **Practice Good Sleep Hygiene**

Very few of us can go to sleep based solely on will alone. Most of us have to find a way to invite relaxation in, and then make it feel comfortable enough to stick around. We can do this by practicing good sleep hygiene, which means adjusting our behaviors and our environment to optimize sleep.

First, you'll want to take a good look at your bedroom. Then ask yourself: *How can I create an environment that is most conducive to relaxation and sleep?* That means turning off your screens an hour or so before bedtime, lowering the temperature in the bedroom to 65 to 67 degrees Fahrenheit, and turning off all lights. In fact, it doesn't hurt to put in some blackout shades if you need to so that you can make sure the room can be as dark as possible. When I talk to patients about sleep hygiene, I recommend removing televisions from the bedroom. Remember that exposure to blue and green light can interfere with sleep—also, watching television right before bed can amp you up when what you really need is a calm and relaxing environment. Use your bed for sleep and sex only. Your work laptop and any other hobby supplies can stay in the living room. Since you want to associate your bed with relaxation, remove anything that gets in the way of that.

If you're waking up multiple times every night to go to the bathroom, try to limit the amount of water you're drinking right before bed. Avoid long daytime naps if you can, so that you're tired at night. Make sure you have a comfortable mattress. If your bed partner snores like a bear, earplugs are effective, and they don't have the same side effects as Ambien. It's fun and informative to see how much control you have over your sleep environment—that's what sleep hygiene is all about. Improving sleep hygiene is the easiest self-care strategy to get better sleep and improve mental health.

## **Create a Bedtime Ritual**

We all have our rituals. Chances are, you already have a morning ritual, a series of regular habits or activities that help you start off the day right. Maybe you turn on the coffee maker, take a shower, or do a few push-ups straight out of bed to get your blood pumping.

Having that kind of ritual helps wake us up and gets us moving, especially on those mornings we'd prefer to hit the snooze button. When you consider your morning habits, it becomes easy to see why so many people benefit from creating a soothing bedtime ritual to end the day as well. Just as you need some time to get yourself going in the morning, you need time to relax at the end of the day.

Give yourself that time. For some, this bedtime ritual may include a nighttime meditation. Others may take a hot bath before bed. Still others might read a chapter from a printed book while sipping on a cup of caffeine-free herbal tea. Some might get a jump on the next day by setting out their clothes, preparing some breakfast, and doing whatever they need to do so they can ease into their morning (and make sure they aren't worrying about forgetting anything).

Your ritual should be what works for you and helps you wind down and set the mood for sleep. Whatever that ritual ends up being, make it part of your daily routine so it lets both your body and your mind know that it's time to wind down and prepare for rest.

# ACCESSING YOUR SPIRITUALITY

Many people rely on faith to guide almost every aspect of their life, but it's easy to consider the advantages that spirituality has to offer as limited to people who are religious. We are all spiritual, we just have to access our spiritual self so that we can harness its benefits for our mental health. Your spiritual self can be used to reduce stress, connect with people around you, and find purpose. Here are a few ways to tap into your spirituality for your best mental health.

## **A Beginner's Guide to Meditation**

Simply put, meditation is a practice to help transition your body and mind into a calm and relaxed state. The bells and whistles (or, if we are going to play true to stereotype, gongs and water fountains) that we often see in movies—or hear about in podcasts—are completely optional. All you really need is the ability to quiet your mind and focus so you can train yourself to be more mindful and aware.

I recommend starting out by sitting quietly in a room free of distractions. Sit in a chair or on the floor, you pick—but make sure your back is straight. Pick a point of focus, your *drishti*. Once again, it can be a spot on the wall or an imaginary star that you visualize with your eyes shut. When you are ready, close your eyes and sit in stillness, bringing attention to your breath. Eventually you may want to meditate on a meaningful manta—a word, sound, or phrase—that encourages you. To make sure my meditation is not just a gateway for a nap, I like to set a timer for several minutes so I can be intentional about my practice. If you feel like you need to be guided through your meditation, there are plenty of excellent apps you can download to help keep you focused and consciously aware during your meditation practice. That said, there's no one *right* way to meditate. The most important part is just allowing yourself the time and space to sit in stillness. That way, your parasympathetic nervous system can do its job by calming the body and the mind.

## **Connection**

Another benefit of adopting a spiritual practice is the community that comes along with it. Whether you belong to a church, an ashram, a meditation group, an outdoor meetup, or even a twelve-step program, being able to gather with others who share your beliefs can be a powerful way to buoy your mental health.

Like prayer, so much of finding a spiritual connection with others depends on your personal beliefs. Even if you may be more of a loner at heart, consider finding ways to share your practice with others—whether it's making the extra effort to get to the 11:00 a.m. Sunday service, signing up for a meditation workshop, or joining a local meetup group for a hike out in nature.

# TRIED-AND-TRUE WAYS TO NOURISH YOUR MENTAL HEALTH

Now that you understand the role food plays in nourishing your mental health, it is even more important to include nutrient-dense meals in your self-care playbook. As previously mentioned, there's no need for a complete overhaul of your diet; that's not what we're going for. Instead, look for small ways that you can add mood-boosting foods to what you already like to eat. That way, you can optimize your mental health and also have a little fun along the way.

## **Make the Trade**

As we talked about before, it's fairly simple to add nutrient-dense foods to your diet just by making some targeted substitutions. Instead of coffee every day, throw in an occasional cup of matcha tea; you'll get a burst of caffeine to help you wake up as well as a calming L-theanine boost. When it comes time to order takeout next time, consider going for a fish dish, or asking for some roasted veggies instead of French fries on the side. By making these little changes, you're putting yourself in the best position to eventually begin noticing big changes in the way you feel.

## **Leaf It Up**

There's a reason why so many health experts suggest eating a predominately plant-based diet. Fruits and veggies are loaded with phytonutrients that help fight inflammation and provide the building blocks for your brain. To get the most out of these nutrient-dense foods, add more leafy greens to your meals. You can toss some kale or spinach into your favorite chicken soup or stew, and red leaf lettuce tastes great in tacos and wraps. Incorporating more vegetables into your diet, even if you love meat, has evidence-based benefits for your physical and mental health.

## **Make Comfort Foods More Nutrient-Dense**

There's no reason for you to give up your favorite comfort foods, especially if you are dealing with depression or anxiety. Instead, make them the foundation to which you add more nutrient-dense foods. For instance, add sardines to your favorite pasta dish for an omega-3 fix. You can mix kale with your morning smoothie, or even add it to a rich, decadent mac and cheese dish. There's no need to give up the foods you love. Instead, think about ways you can augment them to better nourish your brain.



# STRATEGIES FOR MOVING YOUR BODY FOR YOUR MIND

Now that you understand how movement plays a vital role for your mental health, it's important to find ways to incorporate more physical activity into your daily life. Today, sedentary lifestyles are not uncommon, and that lack of movement has the power to affect both our physical and our mental health in detrimental ways. Move in ways you enjoy, and start a physical activity routine that you can build upon over time. Here are a few suggestions to help get you moving into mental health.

## **Move Mindfully**

Like with your breath, exercise is a place where having conscious awareness pays off. You need to pay attention to how you feel after you move in order to truly appreciate its many effects. After you decide how you'd like to get moving, start in whatever fashion you choose, but, most important, take time to evaluate your mood when you finish. Too often, we focus only on the physical sensations after physical activity. We pay attention to the soreness in our legs or how exhausted we feel. But it's also useful to check out what's going on with your mood, too. If you notice that you feel better—whether you're more upbeat or you're experiencing improved mental clarity—acknowledge that feeling. Make the connection that moving makes you feel good. In doing so, it will help motivate you to incorporate more movement, even on days when you don't feel like it.

As you know, I recommend yoga because of the mindfulness elements; however, there are other movement-based practices that also help you move in a more mindful way. Tai Chi, dance, and running all offer an opportunity for you to focus on your breath and pay attention to the way your body responds to your thoughts and feelings.

## **Develop a Routine**

Make movement nonnegotiable. The evidence is clear: Movement is medicine. It's important to treat it as such. So put your daily walk on your to-do list. Set some alerts on your phone to remind you to get up and move a little in between conference calls. Schedule your gym time or yoga classes in advance. Make movement, like taking your medications, something you *must* do for your overall health and well-being. When you treat it as a given, like brushing your teeth or taking a shower, you are much more likely to do it.

## **Add a Social Element**

Sometimes it can be hard to hold yourself accountable. If you are having an off day, it's all too easy to say you'll just skip whatever physical activity you might have had planned. When you add a social element to movement, whether you're going to a group class or just meeting some friends for a walk, it's harder to blow it off. People are counting on you to be there! Besides the accountability aspect, however, adding a social element to physical activity often makes it a lot more enjoyable and, as a consequence, gives you another reason to stick with it.

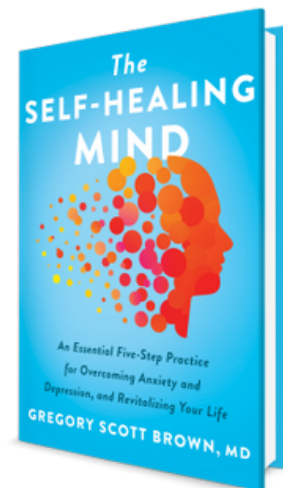
## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Gregory Scott Brown, MD is a board-certified psychiatrist and mental health writer. His writing and commentary have appeared in the *New York Times*, the *Huffington Post*, *Psychology Today*, on the *Today Show*, and on *NPR*. He is an advisory board member for *Men's Health* magazine, where he regularly contributes content for mental health stories. He co-hosts an Instagram Live Series for *Men's Health* with fellow psychiatrist and writer Dr. Drew Ramsey called Friday Session that focuses on candid conversations about mental health. Some of his guests have included Dan Harris, Ant Anstead, Dr. Christine Moutier, and Coach Shaka Smart. He has also interviewed Common, Don Lemon, and Lisa Ling about topics related to mental health. He lives in Houston, Texas. Follow him on social media @gregorysbrownmd.

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