



Activities for Balancing the Mind

Hobbies

Hobbies are more than just a way to fill time. Hobbies can enhance balance by creating:

- An outlet for creativity.
- A method to exercise the body and the mind.
- An opportunity to explore new interests.
- A chance to reconnect with something you used to enjoy.
- A stress break.
- A way to meet new people.
- Time alone.
- Increased self-esteem.

Trying to find more balance in your life? Consider the following questions:

- What did you enjoy doing as a child?
- What have you always wanted to try but never did?
- Do you like to be physically active?
- Would you like your mind to be challenged?
- What kinds of books/magazines are you drawn to?
- Do you like to spend time indoors or outdoors?
- Do you like to be a social person?
- Do you need time to think on your own?
- Do you like animals?
- Do you like art?
- If you already have a hobby, do you need to update it or try something new?
- If you like to read, could you try a new genre (a new category of reading material)?
- If you enjoy sports, might you enjoy playing in a league?
- If you like cooking, have you tried a cooking class? Making desserts?



Meditation and Mindfulness

Meditation and **mindfulness** have become popular lately. However, the practices of meditating and mindfulness are not new. **Meditation** is a naturally-occurring state of resting while remaining awake and alert. **Mindfulness** is a technique in which a person becomes **intentionally** aware of thoughts and actions in the present moment in a nonjudgmental way. You do not have to be religious or spiritual to practice these techniques. Research has shown that meditation and mindfulness can have a positive effect on health including:

- Treatment of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) symptoms.
- Improved mental health.
- Enhanced pain tolerance.
- Reduction in depressive symptoms.
- Reduction in stress.



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Meditation and Mindfulness (cont.)

Meditation comes in a variety of forms. One way to meditate is to silently label each in-breath and each out-breath while you're seated in a relaxed but awake position. Each time you breathe in, think "rising" or "breathing in," and each time you breathe out, think "falling" or "breathing out." Or you could think "accept" (in-breath) and "release" (out-breath), or "take in" (in-breath) and "let go" (out-breath). The exact words don't matter; by focusing this way on your breath you'll gently keep nudging your awareness back to the present moment. People who regularly meditate this way often find it easier to maintain balance in their lives.

Mindfulness is something you can practice any time, not only while meditating. You do not need to be seated to be mindful, or concentrate on your breath. To be "mindful" means simply to focus completely on what's happening right now, in this moment, while at the same time noticing your mind's usual "commentary." You can be mindful of the sensations you feel in your feet while you walk, of the sound of the wind in the trees, of the slippery feeling of soapy water on your hands while you do dishes. At the same time, you can become aware of your mind's ongoing chatter: "I wish I didn't have to walk so far" – "I bet that wind's gonna pick up before sunset" – "I wish washing dishes wasn't so boring." By becoming mindful of your thoughts – by recognizing the distinction between your thoughts, and you – you free yourself from them. You grow free to reframe your thoughts in more life-affirming ways: the walk too far can become a joyous stroll; the boring dish-washing can become a sensual caress. Through mindfulness you can choose to reframe something from a negative experience into a positive one. Two things to remember:



1. Any activity done mindfully is a form of meditation.
2. Mindfulness is possible throughout the day.

Try practicing meditation or mindfulness for just a few minutes per day. Pick a quiet place. Don't worry if it seems difficult at first. Your mind isn't used to being still. It may take a few weeks practice before you'll notice any benefits, but stick with it. The results are worth it!



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Journaling and Artistic Expression

Journaling is a great way to express feelings about life and your struggles with deployments. Sometimes it's hard to talk about the things you experienced while deployed, and writing about them can begin the healing process. There's a very real psychological benefit from putting thoughts and feelings into words. People who journal often find that it reduces the intensity of their emotions (anger, fear, sadness, rage, etc.). Many find that writing quiets their emotions and

helps them to better connect with their feelings.

On the other hand, journaling isn't for everyone. Some people feel overwhelmed when they try to express their feelings through words. If this is true for you, try drawing pictures of your experiences – or try combining pictures and words into a collage. And if that doesn't work for you, try painting, sculpture or woodworking. Consider something you've never tried before. You may find that expressing yourself artistically helps heal your wounds in surprising ways.

Get Organized

If the spaces you live and work in are cluttered and disorganized, it's likely that you're going to feel disorganized too. Time spent organizing your home and office space can reduce personal feelings of disorganization, and can diminish your level of frustration. If it feels overwhelming to tackle everything all at once, try biting off a little bit at a time. Rather than tell yourself you have to do it all, right now, set easy goals: 10 minutes today, then again tomorrow, maybe starting with piles of old mail and paperwork. Once you've begun, you'll find it easier to continue – and before you know it, you'll be done. When everything has been organized, you'll find it easy to maintain order with just a few minutes every day.

Relationships

People are communal creatures, and belonging to a community can be both balancing and comforting. After returning from a deployment, it's important for Service Members to reconnect with the people who are significant to them. Reconnecting may take time, but it's worth the effort it takes to re-establish or re-energize your relationships.



You might also want to jot down a list of the people in your life who are closest to you – family, friends, co-workers, neighbors – and let them know you'd like their support. If you find that you're not getting the support you need from these people, explore new ways to make friends or consider seeking professional counseling.



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Take a Break! (cont.)

Yoga

Yoga has become much more popular over the past ten years. Many different types of yoga exist. Finding a reputable teacher and a type of yoga suited to your personal preferences are the keys to success. Some types of yoga are tied to a particular religious belief; however, most “Westernized” types of yoga focus on physical, mental, and emotional improvements. You do not have to be physically flexible to enjoy yoga or to achieve the benefits of yoga. Yoga provides benefits for men and women.

Yes, even men in the military do yoga! Yoga can be modified for children and for the elderly. Some individuals find that attending a class to learn basic poses (called *asanas*) is useful, while other individuals find that they can achieve benefits from instructional DVDs or books. In addition to physical movement, most types of yoga include attention to and instruction in breathing and/or mindfulness. Yoga can bring balance to your life by improving your physical health and enhancing your mental focus. Yoga can be practiced in formal classes or in your home or office.



Volunteering

Volunteering can be an important way to create balance. Donating some of your time and energy to others can give you a great sense of pride and accomplishment. There are many types of volunteer activities. Volunteering can be combined with physical fitness including walkathons, or serving as a youth activity instructor or hiking guide.

Career

Meaningful work can contribute to a balanced life, and it's possible to find meaning in all work (all work, no matter what it is, has its own inherent dignity and worth). If you like what you do, that's wonderful – and if you don't, maybe a job change is in order. If that's not possible, try focusing on the things in your work life that are positive; for example, great co-workers or a flexible schedule. And you can put some thought into ways to make your work life better. Ask yourself the following questions:

- Does my job have too much (or too little) responsibility?
- Is my job boring?
- Are there ways I could bring more creativity into my job?



Then schedule some time with your supervisor and share your thoughts and concerns in a positive way.



Activities for Balancing the Mind

Take a Break! (cont.)

Please note that while the *Balancing Your Life* “Just the Facts” sheets offer many ways to better balance your mind and body, we don’t suggest you tackle all the activities offered at once. Rather, take some time to find the activities and suggestions that most appeal to you, and start there.



Remember: Balance is not a static state, but something that changes over time. It might be said that it’s a path, not a destination. Walking that path is its own reward, forever challenging, yet always fulfilling. Your willingness to pursue a more balanced life will be ongoing, yet always rewarding.

The Mind

Add Enjoyment to your Daily Routine

What makes you happy? It’s common to go full speed ahead without thinking about favorite things to do. Schedules are hectic. Finding time for new activities or staying in touch with old enjoyable activities can be difficult. But it’s good to reconnect with true happiness by identifying the things that bring you joy. Here are some helpful tips:

- Write down the activities that bring pleasure, whether a past pleasure, a childhood pleasure, or a hoped-for future pleasure.
- Try a new activity.
- Recognize that it might take several tries to find the best solution. Sure, there may be some frustration with this trial and error process. But keep this in mind: along with feeling a sense of accomplishment, time spent involved in enjoyable activities can **increase life satisfaction**.

It might seem just about impossible to find time for yourself. You might wake up feeling tired and go to bed feeling the same way. How can there be any room for a rejuvenating activity? Although hours cannot be added to the day, changes can be made in **how** time is spent. Every individual has times in the day when they feel especially alert. Those alert times are the times to schedule challenging tasks. Write down important appointments and meetings so they won’t be forgotten. Meetings and appointments aren’t the only things to schedule—schedule pleasurable activities, too! In the same way that time is scheduled for other important tasks, learn to protect time to engage in enjoyable activities. Research suggests that it takes approximately one month to establish a new habit and make it part of a daily routine. Add fun activities such as “shoot hoops” or “take a bubble bath” to a daily planner. It may seem silly at first, but it will probably help to establish the habit.



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Positive Self-Talk and Assertiveness

Self-talk is an inner conversation that guides you through your daily activities. It is the voice that reminds you to stop at the post office or finish the project at work. Self-talk is a perfectly normal and natural activity. Much of the time, self-talk is on “autopilot,” meaning that you’re not noticing it. The ways that individuals think and talk to themselves can become a habit. Your self-talk shapes how you view the world and how you manage to get balance in your life. **Positive self-talk** means purposely providing yourself with positive reinforcement, motivation, and recognition—just as you would do for a friend. Self-talk can have a profound impact on self image, self esteem, and performance. Research indicates that a positive attitude can benefit many areas, including:

- Social relationships
- Reduced pain
- Reduced stress
- Healthy coping
- Reduced suicidal thoughts
- Healthy aging
- Healthy habits
- Recovery from surgery
- Increased immune response
- Less depression
- Survival from cancer treatment
- Lower risk of cardiovascular death
- Satisfaction with life

Keep self-talk positive. For example, say, “I did a good job on that project even though I was given a short amount of time to work on it,” rather than, “I should’ve done my work more thoroughly. I really didn’t live up to my full potential on this project.” Make positive communications a habit. Focus on the positive in goal statements, self-talk, and all communications. Use affirmation statements. Affirmative statements are positive self-statements or reminders that help achieve goals.



Learning to Say “No”

It might be necessary sometimes to say “No” to new opportunities, responsibilities, and activities. It can be very difficult to say “No,” especially when saying “Yes” to all requests has become an automatic response. Fear of disappointing friends, family or coworkers prevents many individuals from saying “No.” However, creating balance in life means protecting your personal time and energy, and sometimes this means politely saying, “No” to certain requests.

Learning to Say “Yes”

On the other hand, don’t be afraid to try something new because it is unfamiliar. Engaging in new activities can bring great joy, and learning a new skill is always a good thing. And keep in mind that no skill is required to simply enjoy an activity! Lastly, you will certainly benefit from the social connections you make while discovering personal likes and dislikes.



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Communication Types

There are three primary ways people tend to communicate:

1. Passively—Passive communication means sacrificing personal needs so other people will get their needs met. People who communicate passively will go along in order to avoid conflict or to avoid displeasing others. Because passive communicators don't stand up for their needs, they are likely to be taken advantage of.

2. Aggressively—People who communicate aggressively will be sure their needs are met without any consideration for others. Aggressive communicators let other people know how they feel but don't use tact or act respectfully. Aggression often stems from anger and results in conflict. Both aggressive behavior and assertive behavior involve direct communication, but assertive communication also involves being considerate of others.

3. Assertively—An assertive communicator uses an open, honest, and direct form of communication, but also maintains respect for others. The assertive communicator does not have a “people are out to get me” attitude; instead, assertive communicators remain objective and keep the best interest of both parties as a priority. If you imagine the qualities of communication represented on a scale with **Passive** on one end and **Aggressive** on the other, **Assertive** would fall right in the middle. To be assertive in your communication requires balance, particularly balance between being honest and being appropriate.



Being honest is relatively easy: just speak the truth, right? But being honest can sometimes mean saying things that contribute to someone else's pain, and that's usually not beneficial. Before speaking, it can be useful to ask yourself three questions:

1. “Is it true?”
2. “Is it kind?”
3. “Is it necessary (or appropriate)?”

If your answer to all three questions is “yes,” then say what you want to say: and if your answer to all three questions is “no,” you probably want to keep quiet. But if your statement is true but is also neither kind nor necessary, you'll want to think twice before speaking. That's where the balance between being honest and being appropriate comes in. To communicate assertively but not aggressively, you'll want to take care to make sure that your words are both honest and appropriate.



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Communication Types (cont.)

The Benefits of Being Assertive:

- Assertive communication respects both your thoughts and feelings and the thoughts and feelings of others.
- Most people respect the openness and honesty (as well as the effective communication) of an assertive individual.
- Assertiveness fosters stronger personal and professional relationships.
- People respect those who show respect for others.

Like anything new, learning to be assertive without being aggressive can be difficult. Many of us are used to acting on impulse or reacting to our emotions. But communicating assertively is a skill that can be learned, and over time becomes easier to practice.



There are 3 communication types

1. Passive
2. Aggressive
3. Assertive