

Can You Beat Stress in Five Minutes?

FOR AN INTERVIEW REQUEST OR
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Psychiatrist Jeffrey Brantley says you can and he should know. He's the founder and director of the Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction Program at Duke University's Center for Integrative Medicine.

In *Five Good Minutes: 100 Morning Practices to Help You Stay Calm & Focused All Day Long* (April 2005) he gives you five-minute exercises that you can use everyday to:

- Increase mindfulness and stay in the present moment;
- Keep focused on what really matters;
- Develop self-nurturing skills that you can use anytime anywhere;
- Stop minor annoyances from creating major stress;
- Limit your reaction to stress-triggers.

Why five minutes in the morning?

"The morning is the best time to break away from old habits of thinking and feeling and to set a new direction for yourself and how you will be in your day," says Brantley. For many of us, our minds and spirits are clouded by worries within minutes after waking and it seems as though the tone of our day is set shortly after our eyes open. In *Five Good Minutes* you'll learn that your mood doesn't have to be governed by worries and anxieties. By taking just five minutes in the morning to do one of the exercises you can change course and infuse clarity and calm into your day.

Mindfulness and why it's so important.

"Mindfulness is an awareness that is not thinking. It is awareness that is capable of recognizing thoughts and emotions as they occur and does not identify with them. Mindfulness is a friendly, nonjudging, allowing, present-moment awareness," says Brantley. For over two-thousand years mindfulness has been a key component of Buddhist practice and thought. Now, its made its way from the monastery to the therapist's office because research shows that it's effective in relieving the anxiety and stress that plague us an unprecedented rate. In *Five Good Minutes*, Dr. Brantley offers mindfulness exercises that draw from ancient spiritual practices and have the imprimatur of modern science.

Set your intention, without adding to your to-do list.

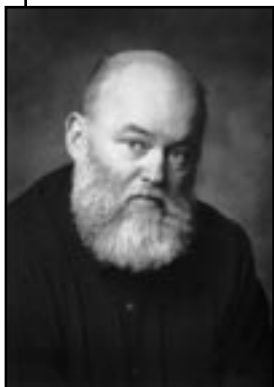
1. Pick up dry cleaning
2. Finish expense report
3. Achieve inner peace

Making an important and life-changing intention just another item on your to-do list is a common pitfall to achieving it. In *Five Good Minutes*, Brantley shows you how to *skillfully* set an intention. This means declaring your intention to move toward an important value or goal and making a commitment to maintain a nurturing attitude as you work toward it. When you set an intention skillfully you don't sacrifice temporary joy in the present for everlasting peace in the future.

Five Good Minutes: 100 Morning Practices to Help You Stay Calm & Focused All Day Long
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800-748-6273, www.newharbinger.com

About the Authors of *Five Good Minutes*

Jeffrey Brantley, MD, is board-certified psychiatrist whose meditation teachers include Jon Kabat-Zinn (*Wherever You Go, There You Are*), Thich Nhat Hanh (*The Miracle of Mindfulness*), Christopher Titmuss (*Transforming Our Terror*), Joan Halifax, Ph.D., and Christine Feldman. He has served as Clinical Director for the Durham County Mental Health Center and was Chief Resident in Psychiatry at the Long Beach Veterans Medical Center. He is also the author of the best-selling, *Calming Your Anxious Mind*.



In 1998 Dr. Brantley was invited to start the mindfulness-based stress reduction program as part of the developing initiative for integrative medicine in the Duke Health System. There are now over 1,000 graduates of the program and participants include patients, physicians, and medical students. He is currently the director of the mindfulness-based stress reduction program at Duke.

Brantley's use of mindfulness techniques puts him at the vanguard of modern psychiatry. He is a sought-after lecturer and teacher who has worked with diverse populations and brings a unique understanding of the connection between being present and being healthy to his practice.

He lives in Durham, North Carolina with Mary Matthews, his wife of over twenty years.

Wendy Millstine is a Bay-Area-based freelance writer, published poet, and performance artist.

Q & A with Jeffrey Brantley, MD

Q. Let's start with the question everyone asks when they hear about Five Good Minutes: How in the world can only five minutes in the morning help someone who's overwhelmed by stress?

A. In mindfulness-based stress reduction classes, we like to say, "It's not the stress but how you handle the stress that makes all the difference." People often handle their stress ineffectively in ways they do not even realize. One of the results of stress is that the stress reaction in the body becomes activated. The familiar elements of this reaction include a general state of hyper-arousal, racing heart, tightening muscles, and increased blood pressure.

When stress reactivity becomes chronic—frequently arising over extended periods of time—then the person experiences this hyper-arousal as distressing and usually develops ways to deal with the distress they feel. They might say they are "stressed out" or feel "overwhelmed by stress." They look for ways to reduce the feelings of distress they feel, both consciously and unconsciously. Unfortunately, many of the ways of coping with chronic stress that people exhibit actually become harmful over time. These ways frequently involve habits of inattention to what is present, denial of feelings, seeking distraction, and engaging in destructive compulsive behaviors (such as substance abuse, overeating, or doing MORE work!). Because the experience of stress reactivity is felt in the body and emotionally and cognitively as well, then the means of coping may target all of these dimensions of oneself. Increased susceptibility to stress-related illness, and vulnerability to addictive behaviors are common examples of the cost of not coping successfully with stress.

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This is where even five minutes can make a difference. By stopping and becoming present through mindful breathing, setting intention, and acting wholeheartedly to practice ease, relaxation, awareness, joy, connection, or any of the other subjects in *Five Good Minutes*, one actually interrupts the unconscious patterns of reacting to stress and tastes a different way of being in the world and in one's own life. Of course, the old habits are strong. But, if one has had a personal taste of something different, if they have had a direct personal experience of ease or connection, for example, then the truth of this experience can be a catalyst for change in how they approach other moments of life. The practice they do for five good minutes can be a seed that becomes a beautiful flower in their life if they can learn to cultivate it.

Q. How did a conventional doctor, a psychiatrist, get so involved with practices that have historically found a home in monasteries, not in hospitals?

A. I was fortunate that during my psychiatry residency at the University of California at Irvine Medical Center, there were opportunities to explore what have now come to be known as mind-body practices. Mind-body simply means any method that takes advantage of the connection between mind (including brain and nervous system) and the organ systems and functional elements of the body. Examples of mind-body methods include practices such as imagery, clinical hypnosis, and, of course, meditation, including mindfulness meditation.

In the last twenty-five to thirty years or so, Western medical science has come to recognize increasingly the power of mind-body methods in an overall approach to health care. One of the most important aspects of mind-body medicine, at least for many of us in the field, is the fact that when a person takes up a mind-body method, they are taking increased responsibility for their own health, and are more empowered in that direction. So, in response to your question, I could say that I was fortunate to be in the right place at the right time! I was exposed to mind-body methods, including meditation, at a time when Western medicine was becoming interested in the subject.

Q. The subtitle of your book promises increased calm and focus. How do they influence each other?

A. Focus here refers to directing attention. Where is attention “focused?” What interferes with focusing attention? What supports focused attention? Without realizing it, many people are actually training themselves not to have sustained focus of attention. Their attention moves rapidly and habitually from one object to another. Often, there is an underlying sense of urgency or even distress driving this movement of attention.

The exercises in this book call for focusing attention during the “five good minutes” on the experience itself. Focus here actually supports acting wholeheartedly. When attention is focused it can actually lead to increased feelings of calm and ease (as when the “relaxation response” is activated in mind and body). Or, when one is relatively calm (not agitated), then the ability to focus is usually stronger.

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Q. One of the practices in *Five Good Minutes* is called “license to do nothing.” For many Americans that’s like saying license to be lazy, after all we’re steeped in the Protestant work ethic. Do you see this attitude in people you work with and how do you respond to it?

A. I don’t think the issue is so much about being lazy, as it is about the importance of practicing self-care. I see many people with significant health issues related to stress who work heavy schedules, but who do little to manage the stress or to bring balance and support into their lives. Unfortunately, many people have come to believe that the only time they can be relaxed is when they are sleeping! We live in an over-stimulated, hyperactive culture where doing, doing, doing seems to have become the standard of behavior. If activity does not produce measurable, “billable” results, then somehow it is not deemed worthy. Health consequences of such busyness abound. They include all the signs of stress, such as irritability, fatigue, poor sleep, poor concentration, increased vulnerability to infections and colds, and impact upon a variety of illnesses including hypertension, diabetes, allergies, and even cancer.

Being willing to stop and to make time for oneself is not being lazy or selfish, it is simply being smart. I like to think of making time for oneself this way as *practicing* self-care. Of course, one could be selfish about self-care, but in my experience, most people err way too far the other way. That is, they more often tend to neglect their own interests related to health and well-being. People do NOT tend to neglect their obligations in favor of excessive self-care! Taking the time to do any of the 100 exercises in *Five Good Minutes* is one way to practice self-care. There are many other ways as well. The important thing is actually to begin some form of self-care. Self-care is closely related to values, and the sense of meaning, and purpose in life. Self-care includes taking time to inquire: what is important in your life? What are your deepest values? How are they being served, or not served? Once in the habit of doing some self-care, it is easier to look more broadly at the demands in one’s life. Then, wherever and whenever necessary, the work of restoring and maintaining a more balanced approach to work, life, family, and personal needs can happen.

Suggested Interview Questions for Jeffrey Brantley, MD

1. The subtitle of *Five Good Minutes* is *100 Morning Practices to Help You Stay Calm & Focused All Day Long*. Why is it important to do these practices in the morning?
2. You talk a lot about setting intentions in *Five Good Minutes*. When most of us hear this we think it means setting a goal and working hard to achieve it, yet this is not quite how you define setting an intention. Can you talk a little about this?
3. Why do you think stress levels are at an all-time high in this country?
4. You emphasize the importance of mindfulness in your book. What does it mean to be mindful?
5. In the last few years traditionally trained psychologists have started incorporating mindfulness techniques into their treatment plans. Why?

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6. Can you walk us through a mindful breathing exercise?
7. Meditation is a key route to mindfulness, yet for many of us sitting still and “just being” for even five minutes is difficult. What do you say to people who are having trouble with this?
8. What is the “temporary” button?
9. Why is compassion so important in achieving and maintaining mindfulness and serenity?
10. What are a few common myths people have about mindfulness and meditation and how do you counter them?

5 Sample Exercises from *Five Good Minutes*

The Life Inside of You

Despite its richness, the inner life—with its thoughts, feelings, and sensations—often goes unnoticed. Yet these same thoughts, feelings, and sensations drive and shape much of your experience, unconsciously, moment by moment. To make your thoughts, feelings, and sensations more conscious in the present moment is to become empowered. The following meditation practice offers you a means of recognizing and discerning more clearly the events and flow of your inner life.

1. Breathe mindfully for about a minute.
2. Set your intention. For example, “May this practice of inner awareness bring me health and wisdom.”
3. Continue mindful breathing.
4. When you notice your attention leaving your breath, going to thoughts or to sounds, for instance, name where it went, quietly to yourself.
5. For the next few minutes simply sit, notice, and name the places in your inner world where your attention goes.
6. End by opening your eyes and moving gently.

The Perfect Escape

During times of fear and panic, it can be helpful to conjure up a special place that you know will interrupt your train of thought. Take a few minutes to rehearse a visualization of a place that you can evoke effortlessly and readily at any time. Your special place could be the following:

- an exciting cruise to an exotic country
- a day at the beach, waves splashing on the shore
- an exhilarating sexual fantasy

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- a daydream that you are canoeing down a gentle stream with colorful fish gliding alongside you.
- Imagine that you are having the time of your life—laughing, smiling, enjoying the company of loved ones, eating good food, and feeling relaxed.

You are free to return to this special place whenever you need to instill a calming sense of well-being.

A Dose of Admiration

While you're still lying in bed, take five minutes to acknowledge the people who have been most influential or inspiring in your life. Take this time to acknowledge that you have a blessed life. Life is a gift. People have been generous and changed your life. Consider the following questions:

- Whom do you admire?
- What qualities do you admire in them?
- What was the best advice that you ever receive from them?
- How could you embody the qualities that you admire the most in others?

Sit with these answers and acknowledge what feelings surface for you. Take the time to nurture these endearing qualities in yourself throughout the day.

Find Life in Death

Death is unavoidable. And the exact time and circumstances of when you will die are unknown. Rather than fear or attempt to deny these facts, you can use them as a basis for inquiry and as a guide for skillful living. The following meditative exercise should be done with a spirit of curiosity and with a sense of kindness and compassion for yourself and your life.

1. Breathe mindfully for about a minute.
2. Set your intention. For example, "May this practice enable me to feel more peace and to meet life's challenges more wisely and kindly."
3. Continue mindful breathing.
4. When you feel centered, as if tossing a pebble into a still pond, deliberately ask yourself the question, "Knowing that my life will end, what is my deepest value?" Or, "Knowing that my life will end, what is most important to me?"
5. Listen respectfully for the answer from within. It may be a word, a phrase, an image, or something else.
6. Repeat your question and listen for as long as you like. End by opening your eyes and moving gently.

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Wish Yourself Safety

The feeling of safety is priceless and often elusive. Even the possibility of safety may at times seem unreachable. There is profound power in the simple gesture of wishing safety for yourself. As a meditation, this practice is done in the same spirit of a parent holding a frightened child and lovingly whispering soothing words.

1. Breathe mindfully for about a minute.
2. Set your intention. For example, "May this practice support a deeper peace and ease in me."
3. Relax, let your eyes close, and imagine a picture of yourself.
4. Bring compassionate attention to yourself, as a parent would to a child.
5. For the next few minutes, imagine speaking directly to yourself, whispering a phrase like "May I be safe from all harm," or, "May I be protected from all inner and outer harm." Wish yourself safety with the same spirit you would wish a dear friend a safe trip.
6. End by opening your eyes and moving gently.

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