

MINDFULNESS BREATHING AND MEDITATION

Description

In a world that centres around being busy, multi-tasking and high achievement, stress, anger, and anxiety can build up and weaken not only our health and relationships but our judgement and skills of attention. Research into mindfulness suggests that this is a popular and effective method of dealing with difficult feelings. "Mindfulness," is the ability to pay careful attention to what you're thinking, feeling, and sensing in the present moment without judging those thoughts and feelings as good or bad. A plethora of studies link mindfulness to better health, lower anxiety, and greater resilience to stress as well as improved concentration skills.

One way of developing the practice of mindfulness is to focus your attention on your own breathing—a practice called, quite simply, "mindful breathing."

After setting aside time to practise mindful breathing, you should find it easier to focus attention on your breath in your daily life. This is an important skill to help you deal with stress, anxiety, and negative emotions, calm yourself down when your temper flares, and sharpen your skills of focus and ability to sustain concentration.

HOW TO DO IT

The most basic way to do mindful breathing is simply to focus your attention on your breath, the inhale and exhale. You can do this while standing, but ideally you'll be sitting or even lying in a comfortable position. Your eyes may be open or closed, but you may find it easier to maintain your focus if you close your eyes.

It can help to set aside a designated time for this exercise, but it can also help to practise it when you are feeling particularly worried, anxious or stressed.

Practitioners believe that regular training of mindful breathing can make it easier to do it in difficult circumstances. Sometimes, especially when trying to calm yourself in a stressful moment, it might help to start by taking an exaggerated breath: a deep inhale through your nostrils (3 seconds), hold your breath (2 seconds), and a long exhale through your mouth (4 seconds). Otherwise, simply observe each breath without trying to adjust it; it may help to focus on the rise and fall of your chest or the sensation through your nostrils. As you do so, you may find that your mind wanders, distracted by thoughts or bodily sensations. It is fine to experience this. Just notice that this is happening and gently bring your attention back to your breath.

Encourage yourself to enjoy the experience of meditation rather than focussing on getting it perfect. When you climb a mountain, you journey upwards towards the summit. Depending on the weather that day, you may or may not reach your goal, but whether you make it to the peak or not you are still a mountain climber. You still elevated yourself to a new, higher perspective along the way.

In a similar way, when you meditate, you journey inwards towards silence. Depending on your state of mind, you may or may not reach your goal, but whether you achieve total silence or not you are still a meditator! You still elevated yourself to a new, quieter perspective along the way.

A longer mindfulness meditation can be practised using the steps below:

1. Find a relaxed, comfortable position either seated on a chair or on the floor on a cushion. Keep your back upright, but not too tight and rest your hands wherever they are comfortable, either in your lap or on your knees. Place your tongue on the roof of your mouth or wherever it is comfortable.
2. Notice and relax your body. Try to notice the shape of your body as it is seated. Let yourself relax and become curious about your body seated here such as the sensations it experiences, the touch, the connection with the floor or the chair or the cushion. Relax any areas of tightness or tension. Just breathe.
3. Tune into your breath. Feel the natural flow of breath, in out, in, out. You don't need to do anything to your breath and so there is no need to make it long or short, just let it be natural. Notice where you feel your breath in your body. It might be in your nostrils, or throat or chest or abdomen. See if you can feel the sensations of breath, one breath at a time. When one breath ends, the next breath begins.
4. Now as you do this, you might notice that your mind may start to wander. You may start thinking about other things. If this happens, remember that this is very natural. Just notice that your mind has wandered. You can say "thinking" or "wandering" in your head softly. And then gently redirect your attention right back to the breathing.
5. Stay here for five to seven minutes. Notice your breath, in silence. From time to time, you may get lost in thought, then return to your breath.
6. After a few minutes, once again notice your body, your whole body, seated here. Let yourself relax even more deeply and then offer yourself some thankfulness for doing this practice today.

And finally, a poem to dwell on by a man of enormous courage:

Wonderment by Siegfried Sassoon

*Then a wind blew;
And he who had forgot he moved
Lonely amid the green and silver morning weather,
Suddenly grew
Aware of clouds and trees
Gleaming and white and shafted, shaken together
And blown to music by the ruffling breeze.*

Like flush of wings
The moment passed: he stood
Dazzled with blossom in the swaying wood;
Then he remembered how, through all swift things,
This mortal scene stands built of memories,—
Shaped by the wise
Who gazed in breathing wonderment,

And left us their brave eyes
To light the ways they went.

EVIDENCE IT THAT WORKS

Arch, J. J., & Craske, M. G. (2006). Mechanisms of mindfulness: Emotion regulation following a focused breathing induction. *Behaviour Research and Therapy*, 44(12), 1849-1858.

Participants who completed a 15-minute focused breathing exercise (similar to the mindful breathing exercise described above) reported less negative emotion in response to a series of slides that displayed negative images, compared with people who didn't complete the exercise. These results suggest that the focused breathing exercise helps to improve participants' ability to regulate their emotions.

WHY IT WORKS

Mindfulness gives people distance from their thoughts and feelings, which can help them to allow and work through unpleasant feelings rather than becoming overwhelmed by them. Mindful breathing in particular is helpful because it gives people an anchor, their breath, on which they can focus when they find themselves carried away by a worrying, stressful or anxiety provoking thought.

Mindful breathing also helps people stay "present" in the moment, rather than being distracted by regrets in the past or worries about the future. Mindfulness practice is about staying in the moment rather than a solution to all concerns and it thereby makes overwhelming feelings acceptable until the person is ready to seek alternatives and helpful solutions.