

Introduction to Mindfulness of Breath

This is a mindfulness exercise, with a focus on the breath. During this exercise, you will learn to observe the natural breath, paying attention in a non-judgmental manner to your experiences in the present moment.

Mindfulness of breath has been useful in improving self-control skills, increasing relaxation, improving ability to control racing thoughts, along with increased focus and concentration.

During practice, you will simply be asked to focus your attention on your breathing, in a mindful way. It is very common for people to experience mind wandering or to become distracted by their thoughts, sensations in the body or noises in the environment.

When you notice that this has happened, I encourage you to acknowledge that you have become distracted and with a smile on your face gently bring your attention back to your breath.

It is the mind's job to produce thoughts, the purpose of this exercise is not to stop our thoughts or control them but to simply be more accepting of them, learning to let our thoughts come and go, realising the impermanent nature of our thoughts.

Mindfulness of Breath exercise

Find yourself a quiet, comfortable space, free from distractions. You may like to turn your phone off, loosen any tight clothing and take your shoes off. Ensure that you can be comfortable for the next few quiet moments.

To begin, sit in a comfortable but alert upright position, with your spine aligned, your legs and arms uncrossed and your feet on the floor.

Gently close your eyes or, if you prefer to keep them open, let them rest on a point in front of you. Take a couple of deep breaths, and, as you exhale, begin to settle into your body, letting go of any obvious tension or holding.

Bring your attention to your whole body and observe how it presents itself to you right now. Be mindful that there is no particular way to be; just notice how you are at this moment.

Now, begin to focus your attention on your breathing. There is no right or wrong way to breathe while doing mindfulness practice; the key is to simply notice how the breath is right now.

Notice where in your body you feel the breath most clearly. This may be the abdomen rising and falling, the chest expanding and contracting, or the sensation of air passing through the nostrils or mouth. Let your attention rest with your breathing.

Often people find that their mind wanders away from the breath to thoughts such as ‘am I doing this right?’; ‘what will I make for dinner?’; or ‘how much longer?’ Whenever your mind wanders away from the breath to other thoughts or feelings, observe where it has gone, and then without criticism or judgment, gently guide it back to the breath.

Think of your breath as an anchor to focus your attention, to bring you back to the present moment, whenever you drift away with your thoughts. Use your breath to help you remain in a state of relaxed awareness and stillness. Moment to moment, be fully present, and connected with yourself. If you find you become drawn away into a stream of thinking and you are no longer observing your breath, simply use your breath to anchor you and stabilise you in the present moment.

Notice where your attention is right now. You may have to gently shift your attention back to the breath once or 100 times – just repeat the process as often as needed. Remember, there is no need to analyse or stop thoughts from arising, in fact this can just increase their impact. Instead let the thoughts come and go as they need to.

Now begin to expand your awareness from your breath to your whole body. Notice where your body makes contact with the chair. Soon it will be time to finish our practice. If you have had your eyes closed, I encourage you to gently blink them open and connect yourself back with your surroundings. Take a moment or two before moving onto the next activity for your day, trying to take some of this mindful awareness with you.