

Exercise 2: Mindful Breathing

The purpose of this exercise is to practice paying attention to the present moment, on purpose, and without judgment. You'll practice this by purposefully paying attention to your breath, noticing anytime your mind wanders, and then gently redirecting your attention back to observing your breath, without judging yourself. Please note, this is not about clearing your mind of thoughts or creating a state of relaxation, it's simply about paying attention to whatever is going on in the present.

To begin, sit comfortably in your chair in a position that feels awake and alert. Uncross your legs and rest your feet flat on the floor. Sit up straight, but without straining. Allow your head to be comfortably aligned with your neck and spine. Rest your hands in your lap. The point is to be physically comfortable, but not to fall asleep. You can close your eyes if you feel comfortable doing this, or leave them open and gaze downward at a neutral point on the floor so you're not too distracted.

Now gently focus your attention on your breath. Notice your breath coming in, and coming out. There's no need to control your breathing, simply notice your breath coming in, and coming out. See if you can notice the temperature of your breath as you breathe in and out. See if you can notice whether it's shallow or deep, even or uneven. Simply be aware of your breath without judging, and without any requirement to breathe in a certain way.

Our breath is always with us, and it is always happening in the present. And yet, we spend so little time just observing it. See if you can notice where you feel your breath. Perhaps you can feel it entering your nostrils, and exiting your nostrils. Notice the rise and fall of your abdomen as you inhale, and exhale.

There's no right or wrong way to notice your breathing. If you notice some tightness or discomfort as you breathe, try to notice that sensation without judgment. And if a judgment comes up, like "That was a good breath," or "That was a bad breath," or "This is boring," simply notice that it's a judgment. You can say to yourself, "noticing judgment," and gently redirect your mind to simply observing your breath. No need to judge yourself for judging. Whenever you notice yourself making a judgment, you're practicing mindfulness because you're noticing the judgment. And when you return your attention back to observing your breathing, you're also practicing mindfulness. So continue to watch your breath, noticing the qualities of your breathing, noticing where in your body you feel your breath coming in, and coming out.

For most of us, our minds wander away quickly. Perhaps you had thoughts, like "How is this supposed to help me?" or "I'm hungry. What should I eat later?" or maybe "Am I doing this right?" When your mind wanders to other thoughts, simply notice that thought without judging it. You might say to yourself "noticing a thought" or "noticing my mind has wandered." And bring your attention back to your breath. No need to criticize or get frustrated by the wandering mind; that's just what our minds do. The idea is to just *notice* when your mind wanders, and then to practice gently and warmly bringing the mind back to your breath. If you

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need to do this a thousand times, that's fine. Just *notice* when your mind wanders, then *return* your attention to your breath. Notice and return, notice and return.

Even though it may seem like we're not doing much, this exercise can be very challenging – but you've done lots of difficult things in your life, and you can do this. Just keep coming back to your breath, over and over – no matter how many times your thoughts take you away. The focus here is purely on the process of breathing, not on the outcome. If you feel relaxed, that's fine. If you don't feel relaxed, that's fine too. The point is really to just pay attention to however it is that you're breathing in this moment. In and Out.

Continue watching your breath, noticing its qualities, noticing how it changes from one moment to the next. Focusing your attention on your breath can be used as a way to anchor us in the present. As you go about your day, whenever you notice your mind getting stuck in the past or future in a way that is not helpful, you can practice turning your attention to your breath for a few moments to bring you back to the present, allowing your mind to rest there.

Take a few more anchoring breaths, and when you're ready, open your eyes and slowly return your attention to the room.