

Transcript: Mindfulness of the Breath

Health Care Provider:

This is a guided mindfulness of the breath exercise. It is an exercise that can be done without this audio for those familiar with mindfulness; but it can be helpful, especially for those who are still learning about mindfulness, to have some instructions. Put simply, we will be paying attention to our breath. The exercise involves two main parts. The first is to try to focus our attention on the breath. The breath is always changing, flowing in and out. By keeping your attention on your breath, you can build your ability to stay in the present moment, which is where life happens. It is easy to get caught up in the past through regret, guilt, anger, or shame, and caught up in the future through fear and anxiety. But we can miss out on life right now if we allow ourselves to get too involved with the past or future. Along with focusing on your breath, the other goal is to notice when you have stopped paying attention to our breath and are doing something else, like thinking, remembering, daydreaming, getting caught up in emotions, or noticing other physical sensations. When you have succeeded in noticing when your mind has wandered, recognize the sensations for what they are – you can mentally give them a label such as “thinking” or “remembering.” Then the next step is to gently bring your attention back to the breath – just like every repetition of lifting weights makes your muscles strong, repeatedly bringing your attention back to the breath makes you mentally strong. The hope is that by practicing this technique, you can use a similar strategy and do the same thing in your daily life when you find yourself caught up in thoughts, memories, emotions, and sensations in a way that keeps you from being engaged in life. When this happens, you can notice these various internal experiences for what they are; and then recognize your ability to come to the present and choose to engage in life in meaningful ways.

So, to begin, it is recommended that you sit upright, with a relatively straight back, and your neck and head in line with your spine. Your spine does not need to be rigid, but rather firm and flexible, rising from your hips up to the top of your head. If possible, place your feet flat on the floor. Rest your hands in your lap in a comfortable way, with palms either up or down. If you feel comfortable closing your eyes, please do so. Otherwise, rest your gaze on a point out in front of you – either on the ground or on some other surface.

Begin by taking a few deep breaths through your nose. The breaths can be longer than normal, maybe four to six seconds for breathing in. Then exhale slowly for about six seconds. One key with deep breathing is that you should start your breath at your belly - you should feel your belly expanding with each inbreath and contracting with each outbreath. Feel free to rest a hand on your belly for a short time to see if you are breathing deeply into your belly. You should notice your hand rising and falling with your abdomen as you take these deep breaths.

Now allow your breath to return to normal pace, breathing through your nose if possible. Explore the areas of your body where you can notice your breath. You may notice your breath at the tip of your nose, where the breath enters and leaves your body. Can you notice

differences in temperature between the in breath and out breath? Or notice your breath in your throat as the breath moves from your nose into your lungs. Or your chest, with a slight rising and falling. Or your abdomen, as it expands and contracts with each breath. When you breathe naturally, where can you most easily notice your breath in your body?

For the next few moments, we will continue to watch or notice our breath. Continue exploring what it feels like to breathe in that area of your body, either your nose, throat, chest, or abdomen – just noticing the sensation. When your mind wanders, gently bring your attention back to your breath.

Questions or thoughts may arise, “Am I doing this right?” Or “This is odd.” When those come up, try to recognize them, label them as “thinking,” and bring your attention back to your breath. Like waves on a beach, watch your breath as it moves in and out.

Has your mind wandered; where did it go? You can label it either as thinking, feeling, or remembering. And then come back to the breath. One breath at a time.

Continue watching your breath, noticing the natural rhythm. Recognize you benefit when you notice your mind has wandered – and then be kind to yourself and bring your attention back to the breath.

As we draw near to the end of this exercise, allow yourself a just few more breaths. See if you can remember what your surroundings looked like before you closed your eyes; and, when you are ready, slowly blink and open your eyes. Feel free to move your feet, legs, hands, or arms – stretch as needed. Now notice your breath again. It is always with you and as you go about your day and find yourself getting pulled into the past or future in a way that is not helpful, come back to your breath. It can act like an anchor to the present moment – the place from which you can act in a purposeful and meaningful way.