

Many Mindfulness Exercises

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Breath based

Just notice: Without changing anything about your breathing, just notice what parts of your body move with each inhale and exhale. Focus on each inhale and exhale for several breaths. When your mind wanders, return to your breath.

Belly breathing: Sit or lie in a comfortable position. Place your hand on your stomach, between your ribs and your belly button. With each inhale feel your hand move outward from your spine, indicating that your diaphragm is lowering and pulling air all the way to the bottom of your lungs while pushing out the organs in your abdomen. As you exhale notice your hand moving back toward your spine. Focus on each inhale and exhale. As other thoughts come to mind, gently let them go without judgment, and return your focus to your breath.

Counting: Begin with belly breathing. Count as you inhale, then start counting over as you exhale. Notice whether your inhale or your exhale is longer. Notice if you pause between inhaling and exhaling, between exhaling and inhaling, both, or neither. You may want to slowly increase the length of each inhale and exhale.

Counting the breaths: Begin with belly breathing. As you inhale think "inhale one" and as you exhale think "exhale one." Continue with the next breath and think "inhale two" and then "exhale two." Continue for five breaths to begin with, and work your way up to ten breaths. If you lose count of your breaths, don't judge yourself, and start over at one.

Begin with exhale: Begin with belly breathing. Rather than thinking of your inhale as the beginning of your breath cycle, think of your exhale as the beginning of your breath cycle. Count as with *Counting the breaths* above.

Slower, deeper, longer, quieter: Begin with belly breathing. Count the lengths of your inhales and exhales. Consciously try to lengthen each breath. As you are lengthening your breath, think about breathing slower, quieter, and deeper.

Triangle breathing: Begin with belly breathing. Inhale for a count of four, hold your breath gently for a count of seven, and exhale for a count of eight. Repeat four or five times if you can. Increase the number of cycles as you are able.

Relaxing sigh: Take a deep breath and exhale loudly, as if you are sighing. Repeat several times.

Deep exhale: Imagine that you are blowing up a balloon. With each exhale purse your lips and blow out as much air as you possibly can. Think about pulling your belly button up and toward your spine a bit. You will inhale automatically! Start with four or five exhales and increase as you feel comfortable.

Allowing yourself to be breathed: Imagine that the universe is gently blowing air into your body with each inhale, and gently drawing air out of your body with each exhale. The universe knows exactly how much air you need to take in and release with each breath.

Walking and breathing: As you are walking count how many steps you take for each inhalation and each exhalation. Notice how breathing feels in your body as you are walking. If you wish you can try to make your inhalation and exhalation the same number of steps, or you can try to lengthen the number of steps you take with each inhalation or exhalation.

Stimulating breath: Place the tip of your tongue on the soft tissue just above your upper teeth and keep it there. Breathe rapidly in and out through our nose with your mouth closed. Inhalations and exhalations should be equal and short, and you will feel the muscles in our neck and stomach working hard. Breathe as rapidly as you can and so quickly that you can hear your breath. Start with only 15 seconds and gradually add time as you are comfortable. This is energizing rather than relaxing.

Expansive breath: Stand with your feet about shoulder width apart and your arms straight out in front of you with your hands touching each other and your shoulders relaxed. Inhale and exhale through your mouth for this exercise. As you inhale spread your hands open and open your arms wide, bringing your hands behind you as far as you can and pointing your finger tips behind you. Tip your head back slightly and look upward. As you exhale bring your arms into your stomach and bend over slightly, letting your head hang and looking at your hands. Repeat several times at a comfortable pace.

Power breathing: Stand with your feet about shoulder width apart and your arms hanging comfortably at your sides. Hold your head erect with your chin slightly forward. Imagine that you are standing on a color that represents power, and imagine that you are breathing in a color that represents strength. Follow your breathing for several breaths or minutes, imagining the power and strength flowing into your body with each breath.

Sensation based

Raisin Meditation: Start with three raisins. Pick up the first and use all five senses in turn to examine the raisin. First, look at it carefully; second, roll it around in your fingers; third, smell it; fourth, place it in your mouth and roll it around on your tongue; fifth, slowly chew and taste it. Listen to the sounds your mouth makes while chewing. Completely chew and swallow the first raisin before moving on to the second. Follow the same process with the second (and then the third) raisin, noticing any differences between raisins. This can also be done with other dried fruits or foods; the advantage of raisins is that they vary!

Look: Find any object in your environment. Look at it and try to absorb sensations through your vision only. Try to clear your mind of any other input or distractions, focusing only on your sense of sight.

Listen: Notice any sound in your environment. Listen and try to absorb sensations only through sound. Try to clear your mind of any other input or distractions, focusing only on your sense of hearing. Variation: Listen to your favorite music (or any music) mindfully by focusing on each distinct sound that creates the whole piece.

Feel: Notice any physical sensation in your body. Try to clear your mind of any other input or distractions, focusing only on your sense of physical feeling. Just notice, without judging.

The Betty: Think of it this way: Look, Listen, Feel, 3, 2, 1. First, look at three objects in your environment. It doesn't matter what they are, just focus on three separate things in succession. Next, listen to three sounds in your environment. Again, just switch from one, to the next, to the next. Then feel three things with your body. Just notice three separate sensations in succession. Now go back to looking, and look at two things. They can be the same things you looked at before or different, it doesn't matter. Then two sounds, then two physical sensations. Now look at one thing, listen to one thing, and feel one thing. Breathe deeply and relax.

Observe: Just notice your environment. Pay attention to what is going on around you in this moment (and this one... and this one...). Use all your senses. When your thoughts wander to something from the past or the future, return your attention to the present. Do this again and again.

Describe: Focus on any object or sensation (sound, smell, taste, feeling) and put words on your experience. Imagine you are describing the object or sensation to an alien and include as much detail as you can. Be specific and exact. Notice details.

Imagery based

Waves: This is best done lying on your back in a comfortable position. Begin with belly breathing. With each inhale imagine a wave cresting just above your belly button, and with each exhale imagine the wave crashing out in every direction, washing away tension from every muscle in your body.

Colors: Think of a color that is soothing to you. Imagine that with each inhale you are breathing in air that is rich with that color. With each exhale the air you breathe out is a little lighter. The rich soothing color fills your whole body, getting deeper and richer with each breath.

Sponge: Imagine that your body is a sponge and you are sitting or lying in a pool of very warm or hot water. With each inhale your body soaks up some of the warm water, and with each exhale the warm water saturates your body-sponge. As you continue your body becomes warmer and warmer, as well as softer and softer.

Countdown in the sand: Imagine yourself sitting or lying on the beach in the sand. With your non-writing hand smooth a small area of sand in front of you. With your writing hand write the number 10 in the sand. With your non-writing hand smooth the sand over, and with your writing hand write the number 9. Continue smoothing the sand over and writing numbers in reverse order until you reach 0. Vary by starting with any number you wish.

Under the waves: Imagine that you are a pebble and you have been dropped in the ocean. The waves may be stormy or calm on the surface of the ocean, and you pass through them. As you sink lower and lower you notice that the water becomes more and more still and calm. Look up and notice the waves and weather on the surface of the ocean, while remaining in the calm and still place deeper down in the water.

Firefly: Begin with belly breathing. With each inhale imagine that you're bringing light and energy into your body. With each exhale imagine the light and energy flowing out through every pore of your skin. Imagine your body creating a rhythmic glowing, like a firefly.

Balloon: Begin with belly breathing. Imagine that each inhale fills your body with a little more air, as if you were blowing up a balloon. First fill your chest and torso, then your arms, then your legs, and finally your head. Imagine the air filling your body from the top of your head, all the way to your fingertips, and all the way to your toes.

Appreciation/Heart coherence: Begin with belly breathing. Imagine that your breath is massaging your heart with each inhale and exhale. Think of something you appreciate or otherwise bring a positive emotion to mind. Focus this positive feeling right on your heart, and imagine your breath massaging it into your heart with each inhale and exhale. (Adapted from HeartMath Quick Coherence Technique)

Guided Imagery: Many guided imagery CDs are available at the library or on-line. I recommend Andrew Weil, M.D.; Martin Rossman, M.D.; Jon Kabat-Zinn; or Belleruth Naparstek. Some websites have a few free downloads.

Body based

Any physical activity can be a mindfulness exercise. Yoga and Tai Chi are particularly good mindfulness activities because they incorporate body, mind, and spirit. Team sports are great because they require focus and participation. The key is to keep increasing your practice so that your body and mind are challenged enough to stay focused. If you find your mind wandering, take your practice to the next level so that you have to concentrate and focus again.

Just noticing: Focus on the physical sensations in your body. Notice any tightness, pain, softness, or other sensations. Do not try to change anything, just notice and accept your body.

Alternate Finger Feeling: Place your finger tips together. Rub one finger around on the other. Notice that you can direct your attention so that you feel only one finger at a time. Switch fingers.

Mindful Walking: Start by taking very slow and deliberate steps. Notice all the small adjustments your body has to make to keep yourself upright and moving forward. Next walk at a regular pace and notice what muscles your body is using. Think about your feet gently kissing the earth as you take each step. Take a walk outside and notice your environment through your five senses. Use mindfulness to keep your attention on the present moment with each step.

Body feeling contrast: Place one part of your body, such as your hand, on another part of your body, such as your leg, or opposite arm. Notice that you can focus your attention on the sensations in one body part separately from the sensations in the other body part. For example, if you place a cold hand on a warm stomach, you can notice your hand feeling warmth, and you can notice your stomach feeling cold.

Body scan: Begin with belly breathing. While sitting or lying in a comfortable position, bring your attention to different parts of your body in order. For example, you might start with noticing your feet, then your ankles, then legs and knees, then hips and abdomen, then chest and back, then shoulders, arms, and hands, then face and head. Experiment with focusing on smaller and larger parts of your body, such as toes balls of feet, heels, ankles or an entire leg at a time. Experiment with starting with your head and moving toward your feet.

Juggling: Toss a ball or scarf from one hand to the other. If you tend to drop the ball frequently, stand facing your bed with your thighs against the side. If you drop the ball it won't go as far and you won't have to bend down as far to pick it up. When you can toss a ball from one hand to another without concentrating (you notice your mind wandering) start juggling two balls. Juggling instructions and videos can be found on line (try YouTube).

Mountain pose: Imagine a triangle on the bottom of your foot with one point at your heel, one below your big toe, and one below your little toe. Put most of your weight first on one foot and try to distribute your weight evenly on the triangle. Find your balance. Then switch your weight to the other foot and distribute the weight evenly on the triangle of that foot. Find your balance. Now distribute your weight evenly on both feet, again thinking of the triangles. Find your balance. Hold for several breaths, noticing the small movements throughout your body that keep you balanced and upright.

Tree pose: This is a classic yoga balancing pose. Stand and begin following your breath. Find a small dot on the floor about six feet in front of you (look down the tip of your nose) and stare at it to help with balance. Settle your weight on one leg and bring the other foot to the inside of your ankle, leg, or knee. Turn the bent knee out to the side and place the bottom of your foot against the inside of your standing leg. Bring your palms together in front of your chest and slowly raise your arms above your head, keeping your hands together. Your balance will improve as you focus on breathing and staring at the small dot on the floor. If you can count your breaths, try to maintain your balance for up to ten breaths, increasing slowly with practice. When finished slowly lower your arms and legs and shake them out, then repeat on the other leg.

Child's pose: This is a classic yoga relaxation pose. Kneel on the floor on a rug or a mat or other soft surface. Point your toes so the tops of your feet are on the floor. Bring your hips down so your sitting bones are on your heels. Fold forward from the hips, sliding your ribs forward along your thighs, and bring your forehead to the floor. Your arms can reach forward above your head with your palms and forearms relaxed on the floor, or you can bring them down alongside of your legs with the palms up and the backs of the hands resting on the floor. Imagine your lower back muscles relaxing away from your spine. Focus on your breath and stay in this position as long as it is comfortable to you.

Meditations

Non-meditation: Find a comfortable place to sit and just be still. Try to maintain for 20 minutes. Allow your mind to wander wherever it wanders. You may want to take note of the thoughts and feelings you experience. No judging! It is impossible to do this exercise wrong.

Concentration: Find something to focus your attention on. You may want to focus on your breath, a candle flame, a sound or some music, or an object within your field of vision. Try to keep your attention on the object you have chosen. Whenever your mind wanders, gently bring your attention back to the object you chose. No judging! When you first practice this your mind will wander constantly. As you practice you will slowly notice that your focus increases. Think of it as exercising a muscle...you will slowly get stronger. Begin with practicing for one or two minutes and slowly increase to five, ten or more minutes.

Radiating love or light: Begin with belly breathing. Focus on your heart and imagine that it is glowing with love or light. Slowly watch the light spread from your heart so that it fills your entire chest cavity, then your arms, legs, and head. Once your body is filled with light, imagine the light flowing out from your heart toward someone that you love until it embraces and fills them. Each time you practice this, choose a different person to reach out to in love. As you develop your practice, you may want to start including strangers, other beings, or even enemies. Eventually you may want to include the whole universe!

Mountain: Imagine yourself as a mountain. Some thoughts and feelings will be stormy, with thunder, lightning, and strong winds. Some will be like fog or dark, ominous clouds. Inhaling, think "mountain." Exhaling, think "stable." Use your breath to focus on the present moment and cultivate the ability to weather the storm. If you find yourself swept up in a thought or emotion, notice it and simply return to the breath. The key is to pay attention to the ever-changing process of thinking rather than to the contents of your thoughts. As you begin to see that they are just thoughts, they will begin to lose their power. You will no longer believe everything you think! You are not your thoughts! Continue to watch and become mindful of your thoughts, feelings, and sensations for 5-20 minutes.

Do what you're doing (be one-minded): Whatever you are doing, focus on your thoughts, feelings and sensations while doing it. For example, while doing the dishes, notice the feel of the water and the dishes, the smell of the soap, the sounds of the water, etc. Use all of your senses to be in the moment. Do the same while gardening, doing laundry, walking the dog, or any other activity.

Connection to the Universe: Focus on one little thing that you appreciate (socks, hot water, music, etc.) and create a link to all of the people and processes that have put in effort for you to have that particular thing. Example: To be looking at my candle I needed a match to light it. Someone invented the match and many other people were involved in creating the match that I used, including the people who transported it to the store and sold it to me. Likewise with the candle. Be as detailed as you can in your thinking about how many people were required to put in effort so you could have what you have.

Mantras: Find a thought, statement, or affirmation that you wish to focus on. Repeat the mantra to yourself with each inhale and exhale.

Lovingkindness: There are many variations of this classic meditation. The key is to focus on feeling love and compassion for yourself first, and then for others. Spend plenty of time focusing on yourself. When you are ready to move on, first think of someone you care about deeply, then move to a friend, then an acquaintance, then a stranger.

Resources

Undoing Perpetual Stress, Richard O'Connor, Ph.D.

The HeartMath Solution, Doc Childre & Deborah Rozman, Ph.D.

Feel Happy Now!, Michael Neill

The Miracle of Mindfulness, Thich Nhat Hahn

8 Weeks to Optimal Health, Andrew Weil, M.D.

Essential Yoga, Olivia H. Miller