

Two mindfulness exercises

Mindfulness of the body

Start by directing your attention to your breath, noticing all the physical sensations of the breath in your airways and chest. Begin with three deep breaths, but after this, although the breath may well change during the course of the exercise, don't make any direct attempts to control or change it, just observe it. Notice particularly the movement of the diaphragm, which sits under the lungs. It contracts to pull air into the lungs, then relaxes to let go of the breath. Pay attention to this for a while, noticing the tendency of the whole body to relax a little with the outbreath.

When you are ready, take your attention slowly and systematically through your entire body, moving on from one part to another when you are ready. With each part, notice any sensation, such as touch on the skin, movement of the blood or breath, muscular tension, discomfort or pain.

If you find any discomfort, tightness, tension or pain, try to experience it clearly with the inbreath, then let go of it on the outbreath, spreading the relaxation of the diaphragm to that part of the body. You may find that the discomfort reduces as an area relaxes, you may find that the discomfort remains but you are more able to observe it with equanimity, or you may find that there is no immediate effect. (If pain is being caused by the way you are sitting, first see if you can relax through it. If not, simply move.)

The order in which you go through the body is not especially significant. Something that is simple and easy to remember is recommended. One possibility is feet-calves-thighs-buttocks-back-shoulders-arms-hands-groin-belly-chest-neck-scalp-forehead-eyes-face-jaw.

Finish by returning to the breath for a while, observing and letting go of any tensions in the way you are breathing. The breath may become very light and subtle. If it does, allow it to: the body is capable of regulating the breath as it needs without the intervention of the mind.

Once you finish the exercise, try to remain mindful of your body to some degree throughout the day.

Mindfulness of breathing

As above, the aim of this exercise is not to control the breath but to keep the attention directed to it. If you find you have become distracted and are thinking about or paying attention to something else, notice that and then return your attention gently to the breath. The point of the exercise is to get used to doing this, not to have a distraction-free exercise.

Begin with a body scan as above, either at length or more briefly. Then settle the attention on the breath, wherever the sensation of the breath is strongest. Continue to relax any tension that you find. Allow the attention to expand, noticing the subtle movements and sensations associated with the breath even in areas away from the chest and airways. If you notice any tension, again relax it with the outbreath.

Stages

It can help to pay attention to different aspects of the breath in separate stages.

1. The outbreath, focusing on the relaxation of the body.
2. The rising of the new inbreath. After the outbreath there is a brief pause before the new breath comes in. Watch for this, allowing the body to draw breath itself without the mind stepping in and taking control. This is a good method for observing and reducing the controlling tendencies of the mind for those who need to.

3. The first touch of the breath as you breathe in. Focus on the point where you first feel the breath coming into your body, usually in the nose or passing over the upper lip. This is a point where you can keep the attention very still once it has settled somewhat.

Either allocate an amount of time for each stage or move from one to the next when you feel ready.

Counting

Another tool that can be used to aid focus is to count the breaths. If this is used, count the breaths from one to ten, returning to one if you reach ten. If you get distracted and lose count, or start counting without attention and go over ten, also return to one. In the first stage, place the number at the end of the outbreath; in the second, at the start of the inbreath. After this drop the counting.