

Mindfulness in action

Take a breathing space

It is easy to be mindful when things are going to plan but it takes practice and confidence to remember to act mindfully in a crisis, when we feel some negativity or when something difficult, threatening or unpleasant happens.

The breathing space is one of the most useable tools of mindfulness training. It is like a door. Whenever you encounter difficulty, such as anger, negativity, fear, anxiety, or any unpleasant physical or mental states, you have the choice to walk through the door when you take the time to do a breathing space. You are now in a different space just by moving to the other side of a door. Once you have walked through the door you find a corridor with lots of other doors leading off it. You can observe the many doors off the corridor and you can consciously choose which door to open next. This gives you the chance to consider what action to take next. This has moved you from reactivity to considered response.

When you have done a breathing space, the boss may still be angry, the baby may still be crying, you may still feel sadness, but you are steadier and in the 'being' mode rather than the 'doing' mode. From this perspective things always seem more manageable. Sometimes it may not be easy to respond to the needs of the moment at once, but by stepping back and doing a breathing space at least you are not compounding the difficulty.

It's important to remember that the aim of the breathing space is not to get rid of all negative states but to allow us to access a mode of mind in which we can be with the negative states as they arise more efficiently and with greater clarity. Negative feelings such as dread, fear, sadness or worry, carry with them an unpleasant feeling tone plus a reaction or aversion to them. These reactions are expressed in tiny (or huge) changes in the muscles in the body – frowning, tensing of the jaw, holding of the neck and shoulder muscles, tensing of the lower back. All of these can be directly attended to by turning our attention towards the sensations in the body. One way to do this is to use the breath to carry the attention directly into the area of intensity. With the out breath any tensing or holding may soften or release naturally. If this happens that is great. If not you have still taken a step back from the intensity and are able to see what is happening with more clarity.

Practicing the breathing space regularly can enable us to develop more skillful relationships to our experience, particularly to those aspects of ourselves that we previously found difficult and avoided. Often, difficult situations provoke habitual reactions of avoidance, suppression and escape. By turning towards, and being willing to be with our experience with the attitudes of acceptance and kindness we offer ourselves the possibility of cultivating our capacity for well-being despite our difficulties.

Adapted from:

'Mindfulness – Finding peace in a frantic world';

Mark Williams & Danny Penman.

Mindfulness in action

The STOP breathing space

STOP

TAKE A BREATH — bringing your attention directly to the sensations of the breath wherever you feel it most, either at the nostrils or down in the belly. Move in close to these sensations, if in the belly, perhaps noticing how the belly rises on each in-breath, and gently falls back on each out breath. Follow each breath all the way in and all the way out, perhaps for about thirty seconds or so. Use each breath as an opportunity to anchor yourself in the present.

OBSERVE — your experience just as it is right now – bringing a sense of *'what is going on for me right now'*.

Notice any *thoughts* that are coming up. How might it be to see your thoughts as simply thoughts coming or going, neither to be followed or believed
Notice how you are feeling right now, but not trying to change them in any way.

Notice how emotions are expressed in the body. Perhaps quickly scanning the body to pick up any sensations, such as tightness or bracing, acknowledging the sensations.

Should you find as you bring your awareness to the body that your attention is pulled to sensations of discomfort or tension, make an informed decision as to whether to maintain an awareness of them, or to what ever else feels right for you in that moment.

PROCEED — with whatever you need to do next – perhaps with more ease, or a smile, noticing, if anything, what might be different. When needed, ask yourself *'What do I need for myself right now?' or 'How can I best take care of myself in this moment?'* and ACT upon it. The *'self care prompt'* can help you here.

Always remember, the breathing space can be a very helpful way of connecting to moments of stress, or when dealing with difficult emotions and situations. At the end of a breathing space, simply asking yourself *'What do I need for myself right now?' or 'How can I best take care of myself in this moment?'*, can help you to move away more easily from habitual reactions, while offering you the space to make appropriate choices about what to do next? However, like many other things it will require regular practice to get the most benefit from it, and can be part of your *self-care plan* within the self-care section of the main toolkit.

Keep the process very simple, and adapt it to make it your own.. There is an **audio link** to this practice at www.elishagoldstein.com). Other formal and informal mindfulness practices for you to try out are also found in the resource section of the self-care section of the main toolkit.

Self-care prompt

“What do I need for myself right now?”

Psychological

- Being more accepting of what you cannot change
- Taking control – we can't control other people and situations, but we can control how we relate to them, and our thoughts
- Adopting a more kinder, gentler approach to difficult or challenging experiences
- Challenging unhelpful thoughts
- Taking regular breathing spaces
- Keeping your sense of humour
- Seeking professional support when needed

Physical

- Making time for physical activities, however small they are
- Gauging how your body is responding to stressful situations, e.g. feeling tightness or tension somewhere in the body. Note how the body is often what alerts us to what the mind is thinking, e.g. negative self-talk
- Eating healthily and mindfully
- Getting enough sleep when you can

Emotional / Spiritual

- Honouring and expressing emotions in ways that are appropriate to you
- Reaching out – talking openly and honestly to others you feel safe with
- When feeling tired or in low mood, factoring in how this is likely to influence how you respond or react to events and situations in that moment in time. For instance, 'I'm feeling low today, (or tired). How might this influence the way I interpret things today.'
- Making time for self-reflection, prayer, or inspirational reading
- Taking moments in your day to reflect on all the things you appreciate

Social

- Connecting with people – spending time with those whose company you enjoy
- Having some quality 'me' time – taking time out to relax, read, walk in nature, swim etc.
- Making time to have fun
- Taking mini-breaks and holidays
- Doing something creative
- Planning pleasant activities