

Mindful Work

Body awareness

In a busy, active environment, bombarded with stimuli from emails to billboards, it's no surprise that we mostly live in our heads.

Yet our bodies are incredibly sensitive instruments, and in many ways a much better gauge of our emotional life, than our busy minds.

A key tool in developing mindfulness is to tune-in to our body. We cannot *think* ourselves into a clear and calm mind-state.

Dealing with difficult emotions, for example, can be addressed much more quickly by tuning-in to the feelings in our body; in fact trying to resolve difficult thoughts by thinking alone, will often lead to more confusion. When people ask what our gut feeling is, it means exactly that (our guts are lined with brain cells called the enteric system).

With practice, we can learn to recognise internal body feelings such as the effects of specific emotions, and get quicker at noticing tension arising. By becoming more aware of body sensations, externally and internally, we can access an incredible reserve of emotional intelligence.

Taking the time to consciously tune-in to the body, from tip to toe, is a core exercise in developing mindfulness. By learning to 'listen' to our bodies, we can become more sensitive to the messages it may be sending us.

Next time you're in a situation that typically causes you stress, such as team meeting or a client review, employ these skills of tuning-in to the body.

The body scan is a key practice in this course, and great way to relax; if you suffer from poor sleep patterns it can really help, but try to keep awake while you're doing it – keeping eyes open helps! Not only is it an exercise in tuning into the body, but it's also about developing the capacity for sustained attention.

As with mindful breathing, this is an exercise that should be used regularly.

Exercise: Body scan

Lie on your back with your hands lying by the side of your body or resting gently on your belly. Begin by making contact with the breathing, gently bringing your attention to the full experience of the in-breath and the out-breath. You may be able to notice your abdomen moving up and down with the rhythm of the breath.

You then bring your attention to the top of the head and simply notice what you can feel – the actual sensations of hot or cold, texture, tinglyness, achiness, whatever it is that occurs to you. We are looking for the direct experience, without needing to put words to the feelings.

Once you have fully taken in the experience of sensation at the top of the head, you can move the focus down to your face. You can break this down further into forehead, cheeks, chin, eyes, ears, nose, lips etc.

You continue this process, slowly and gradually, right down through every part of the body, on the external surfaces, and whatever you can feel of what is going on inside the body such as breathing, heart beat, gurglings in the gut, etc. Take it right down to the toes.

Wherever you find tension or discomfort, create a sense of being kind to yourself, relaxing and smiling, with self-compassion for whatever caused that discomfort. When you have scanned right through the body, try to become aware of the body as a whole. Simply experience being a human organism, alive and sensing, with nothing to do.

This is simply an exploration, and an exercise in concentrated awareness of body sensation. Try to avoid making comments or judgements, such as ‘this feels good’ or ‘that feels bad’.

If you find that you’re beginning to fall asleep, keep your eyes open and see if you can ‘fall awake’; conversely if you find yourself distracted, keep the eyes close, return to the breathing, and maybe take the cushion away.

In the workplace, you might try a quick version of this when you pause between activities.