

Mindful Work

Mindful breathing

Perhaps the most fundamental and most practised form of meditation, is mindful breathing, or 'conscious breathing'. We simply observe the movement and nature of our own breath.

It sounds incredibly simple, and it is. And one of the advantages of using breathing as a tool in developing mindfulness, is that it's always available, and it's free. Breathing brings mind and body together.

When we put our attention on the breathing, and just sit and observe, we actually find that every breath is subtly unique, and therefore continually interesting.

With breathing as the object of our attention, calm naturally arises, and with it we can see how scattered the mind can be and how elusive full concentration really is. We may also notice the tendency to judge what's happening around us, or in our thoughts. This is not bad, it's normal.

The following exercises are very simple, and form the foundation work at all stages of mindfulness training. Wherever you are, whatever you are doing, you have access to practice attention to the breath.

If practised regularly, one's ability to maintain concentration will improve, and as one's interest in this form of meditation grows, it becomes quite natural to want to practice for longer. As one's concentration improves, staying in the present moment becomes more and more natural.

Here are the key things to bear in mind:

1. Experience your breathing as it is, naturally – do not alter the breathing
2. Focus your attention where the sensation of breathing is most evident to you – e.g. at the nostrils, the lungs, or the movement of the belly
3. Notice movement, temperature, texture, length, smoothness/jaggedness, or any other sensation, as if experiencing breathing for the first time.

Use the audio download until you're happy to do it without.

First establish good posture. Whether you're sitting on a chair, or on a cushion, you need to maintain an upright and reasonably straight spine, with your head resting naturally balanced. Your hands can rest comfortably on your lap or on your knees, so that there is no strain on the shoulders.

To begin with, it will be easier to close your eyes, although as you become more practised, you will find that keeping the eyes open is important. Be aware that with your eyes closed you may get sleepy, so if you feel this happening open your eyes.

With the eyes open, you may get too distracted, so in this case half close the eyes and let your gaze rest on the floor.

When you feel comfortable and settled, you simply bring your attention to the breathing. Do not try to change the breath in any way. Simply notice as much as you can about the sensation of breathing.

For example you could simply notice the movement of in breath and out breath; how long and deep they are; whether they are regular or irregular; whether it feels hot or cold. You can focus your attention at the nostrils where the air comes in and out, or to the lungs or the movement of the torso and belly. It doesn't really matter exactly what you focus on, but whatever it is that you choose, stay with that only.

It is perfectly natural for the mind to wander off. When it does that, observe the wandering with interest, not criticism. As soon as you are aware that you have lost concentration, simply bring your attention back to the breathing.

Try to keep your attention on the unfolding of the present. Just notice if you have started thinking of events in the past or of possible future events, and if you do drift backwards or forwards in time, just come back to now, without criticism.

Breathing practice at work

This ability to stay focused, to notice more quickly when the mind has wandered, and to recognise the judging mind, has all sorts of practical benefits in the world of work and relationships. It becomes a key skill in the application of mindfulness in daily life.

So, at work or in any social interaction, while your doing whatever you're doing, simply try bring your attention to the breathing for a few moments.