



## INTRODUCTION TO MINDFULNESS OF BREATHING

**By: Marty Cottler, PhD**

**Mindfulness** is paying attention in a special way – on purpose, moment by moment and breath by breath, and without judgment.

Throughout the day, all of us skillfully pay attention: while walking, talking, driving, eating, typing, reading, thinking. Attentiveness develops naturally, and then we continue learning how to focus and sustain our attention.

Our attention wanders during all activities. It's natural to find ourselves "lost in thought" or distracted by sensations both pleasant and unpleasant. Frequently, we quickly "find ourselves", and return our attention to the task at hand. Consider driving. How often does our attentiveness to the road veer off course? Have any of us ever made a cellular call or texted while driving? Less dangerous, who has lost sight of the roadway talking to a friend in the passenger seat? Have you ever missed a familiar turnoff and then realized you were "lost in thought"?

Sometimes, we get caught in being lost, and have a difficult time rediscovering present moment attentive-awareness. Being lost seems to leave us more vulnerable to blindly reacting. The more we react, the greater the chance we experience stress. Frequent stress can activate a chronic stress reaction that leaves us more susceptible to dis-ease, physical, emotional, and relational.

Practicing mindfulness does not stop the wandering mind. While practicing, the attention can frequently be distracted by wandering. Mindfulness is a special skill we use to return to the present moment. We practice a new way of relating to the natural tendency to wander. We practice neither reacting by fighting nor by fleeing from our distractions and wanderings. Instead, we embrace our wandering by responding with non-judgmental attentiveness, and paradoxically bring our attention back to the present moment. By embracing our distracting wanderings, we break the stress reaction pattern. By responding, we generate resiliency and a hardiness that is enlivening and empowering. We live in the present, moment by moment.

Because of the natural wandering of our attention, it can be helpful to choose a focus when formally practicing mindfulness. For centuries, the breath has been used. Why? The breath is always there. Most of the time, we're not in touch with our breathing — it's just there, forgotten. With practice, we become more aware of our breathing. We can tune into it at any moment. We don't have to control the breath. Just notice it and get to know it, like a friend. All that is necessary is to observe and feel the breath with a sense of interest, in a relaxed manner. It can be used as a tool, like an anchor, to bring stability to the body and mind.

As you may soon discover, practicing mindfulness also involves compassion, as practicing compassion involves being mindful. In the method outlined below, compassionate acceptance of your mindful practice is an essential ingredient. There is no failure, only the opportunity presented to you by your next breath to be present.

## **Mindful Awareness of Breathing Introductory Practice**

1. Create a time when you do not need to do anything else.
2. Sitting quietly, settle into a posture that is upright and alert, yet relaxed. Let your eyes focus on the floor a couple of feet in front of you, or close them if it feels comfortable to do so.
3. Focus your attention on your breath. Find the location where recognizing breathing is the easiest – at the tips of the nostrils or the lips, possibly at the chest that expands and contracts, or maybe on the rising and falling of the belly.
4. Feel your breath - not analyzing it– be attentive to the felt-sense awareness of breathing, one breath at a time.
5. Gently maintain a felt-sense awareness of “breathing in” and “breathing out”.
6. If you become aware of something else, such as other sensations or thoughts that are not too strong, then simply note this, let them float away, and gently bring your attention back to the felt-sense of breathing one breath, and then another, and the next.
7. If stronger sensations or thoughts arise that grab the attention, ask yourself if it feels safe enough to spend a moment noticing this. Always remember that you can immediately return your attention to your chosen focal point of the nostrils or lips, chest or belly if you feel it is not safe to stay focused on the strong “distraction”.
8. If you decide if feels safe enough to be attentive to the strong “distraction”, then recognize how you are reacting. You might be trying to push it away, or chasing after it (especially thoughts), or judging it or yourself. You might also explore what you are reacting to, possibly physical pain, emotional suffering, or negative thinking. Notice if exploring draws you deeper in.
9. When you feel ready, or if you recognize you are “drawn deeper in”, then gently and kindly let go of the “distraction”, and slowly return to focusing on the felt-sense of the next breath at your chosen location, and begin again.
10. Give yourself the time to sit quietly for a few minutes after your practice time ends.
11. Notice how you go about the remainder of your day.

## **7-Day Challenge**

A- Form an intention to practice for 7 consecutive days to see how beneficial the practice might be.

B- Choose a small amount of time, 5 minutes is good. Choosing a longer time is fine, except make sure you are not setting yourself up for a negative judgment like, “I can’t do this. What’s the matter?”

C- If possible, practice the same time each day.

D- After one week of practice, ask yourself:

- What was my experience?
- Has practicing mindfulness catalyzed more personal awareness? If yes, of what?
- Has practicing generated possible answers about what to do to alleviate my suffering?
- Have I taken actions I had not taken before doing this practice?
- Do I want to commit to practicing for another week? Why?

## **Conclusions**

Formally practicing each day generates, solidifies, and strengthens deeply positive experiences that literally etch into the brain. Being mindful generates acceptance of your humanness and the humanness of others, an essential quality for a fuller awakening. Your focus shifts from the time-bound personal narrative of the small ego-self to present-moment mindful awareness. When you awaken mindfulness, you are more in tune with your essential nature, and reconnect with the vast fullness of life.

Remember, being mindful is a natural skill you use all the time; although you may have never learned how to be mindful of your *inner* life. By practicing mindfulness, you are building up your “attentive-awareness muscle” in a new way. Be patient, explore, and experiment. After a steady practice, you can find yourself more often spontaneously mindful, even when you’re not formally practicing.

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