

PUNCTUATING THE DAY USING MINDFULNESS

We all have the capacity to be mindful. It involves cultivating our ability to pay attention in the present moment and disengaging from mental “clutter”, to have a clear mind. It makes it possible for us to respond rather than react to situations, thus improving our decision-making and potential for physical and mental relaxation. It is not simply a relaxation technique or ‘power of positive thinking’: it is based on Buddhist meditation principles.

Linehan¹ describes 3 “what” and 3 “how” skills, all involved in ‘destressing exercise’ (next page):

1. observing (attending to events and emotions),
2. describing (applying labels to behaviours, emotions and situations)
3. participating (entering into current activities)
4. taking a ‘no judgemental’ stance,
5. focusing on one thing in the moment
6. being effective (doing what is needed rather than worrying about what is right or second guessing the situation).

The different techniques can be used to punctuate the day. It is useful to practice them regularly to enhance wellbeing and to have them readily available when you are stressed.

Commas,,,

Try regular short practices of this one minute exercise² – it makes you feel great

- Sit in front of a clock or watch you can use to time the passing of one minute.
- Your task is to focus your entire attention on your breathing, and nothing else, for the whole minute.
- It is ideal for busy lives.
- Don't put it off until later – have a go now and find a minute a day to practice.



¹ Linehan M, Cognitive Behavioural Treatment of Borderline Personality Disorder, New York; Guilford Press, 1993.

² Adapted from those in Elliston, P, Mindfulness in medicine and everyday life. British Medical Journal, Career Focus, 17th November, 2001.

Full stops...

Preparation

- You can practise anywhere, but try to choose a quiet place free from disturbance.
- Lie on your back or sit upright in a comfortable place. Allow your eyes to close gently.

Breathing

- Now feel your breath as it passes in and out of the body.
- Be aware of the sensations of breathing: note the coldness of the air as you breathe in and the warmth as you breathe out, feel the rising and falling of your belly.
- There is no need to control the breath.
- When distracting thoughts and feelings come to you, carrying the attention away with them, be aware of them and let them go, gently bringing your awareness back to the sensations of breathing.
- There is no need to stop these thoughts coming into mind or to try forcing them out. Struggling with them will only make them stronger. Even if your attention wanders away from the breath repeatedly, each time practice letting go of the thoughts and bringing your awareness back to the breath.
- Then, you may move to the listening or the body scan. Do as much as you wish and have time for.

Listening

Practise the same restful attentiveness with listening. Just be aware of the sounds around you, both near and far. You can also eat mindfully and walk mindfully, using the same principles. Now try the body scan (over page)



Body scan

- Take a few moments to feel your body as a whole, from head to toe, then the envelope of your skin, the sensations where your skin touches your clothes, anything else.
 - Bring your attention to the toes of your left foot. Direct your breathing towards them (visualising as if your breath is travelling from your nose to your foot and back).
 - Allow yourself to feel any sensation from your toes. If you feel nothing, allow this too.
 - Stay with this until you are ready to repeat the process with your forefoot, sole, ankle, leg, thigh, then start the same process over with the toes of your right foot.
 - Then move to your lower belly, lower back, upper belly, upper back, shoulder, arm, elbow, forearm, hand fingers, neck, face, head. Include more body parts if you wish.
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- Initially practise for 10-15 minutes once or twice daily. Aim to build up to 10-45 minutes twice daily or as much as you feel benefits you.
 - The whole body scan process will take 30-45 minutes, or you can modify to only scan some parts.
 - Starting with mindful breathing helps to orient yourself to your body. You may then move onto other mindful practices or stay with the breath.

Finishing

- After practising for the allotted time, gently move back into the activities that await you.



Photo courtesy of Jun Yu Chen

[Parentheses] De-stressing

- Bring yourself into the present by deliberately adopting an erect and dignified posture.
- Ask yourself "What is going on with me at the moment?"
- Allow yourself simply to observe whatever happens.
- Label any thoughts that you have and then leave them alone....just be prepared to let them float or drift away.
- Attend to your breathing or simply take in your surroundings instead.....
- Besides thoughts, there may be sounds you hear, bodily sensations that you are aware of. If you find yourself constantly elaborating on thoughts, rather than labelling them and returning to the neutral, remember to observe your breathing.
- When emotions or memories of painful events occur, don't allow yourself to become caught up by them.
- Give them short labels such as "that's a sad feeling", "that's an angry feeling" and then just allow them to drift or float away. These memories and feelings will gradually decrease in intensity and frequency.
- More importantly, you will begin to identify yourself as an objective observer or witness rather than a person who is disturbed by these thoughts and feelings. This requires practice but can then be used when used are stressed.

Associated Breathing Exercise:

- Stay with any distressing thoughts for a few moments, then as you let them float away, gently redirect your full attention to your breathing.
- Pay attention to each breath in and out as they follow rhythmically after each other. This will ground you in the present and help you to move into a state of awareness and stillness.