

Mindfulness – Exercise for your brain!

You probably know that exercise is good for your body. Exercise keeps us fit and healthy. Did you know you can exercise your mind to keep it fit and healthy? Mindfulness is just like taking your brain to the gym for a workout. When we work our brain with mindfulness it helps improve our mood while also reducing stress and anxiety.



Attention and Mood

Training your attention is like exercising your mind! Attention involves choosing one thing to focus on from everything going on around us. When attention doesn't work well, we have lots of difficulties.

With mindfulness we try to keep our attention on what is happening right now instead of thinking about what happened before, or what is going to happen later. When we control our attention in this way we are training the networks in our brain that not only regulate attention, but also regulate our mood and emotions. Just by doing this simple practice we begin to learn to stop our minds running away and getting lost in our worries. Scientific research has shown that in this way, mindfulness can reduce stress, depression, and anxiety, while at the same time increasing our general wellbeing and happiness!

Who needs mindfulness?

Mindfulness helps us to control our mind. Once we can do that, we can do anything! Right now you might be thinking, "I am in control of my mind! I don't need mindfulness for that." We all think we are in control. But our body and mind have a strange way of doing things we don't like or didn't mean to do.

An Experiment

Start by sitting up straight in a relaxed position, either in a chair or on the floor if you like. Just be aware of your body as you sit still.

While you are sitting still, notice the rising and falling of your belly as you breathe in and out. Don't try to make your breath deeper or longer, or faster or slower. Just let it be natural. Can you feel the movement as your belly goes up and down with the breath?

Just pay attention to these sensations as you breathe in and out. Without thinking about them, just observe the rise and fall as you breathe in and out.

Without letting your mind wander, just stay with the feeling of the rising and falling.

Try this for one minute.



Q: How long did it take before you started thinking about something else?

How Do I Train Attention?

We start by using the breath as our target. Why do we use the breath? Because we don't have to think about the breath to make it happen. It's always there!

The Breath Counting Exercise

Start by watching the breath like we did before. Just watch the movement of your belly as you breathe in and out. Let your breathing be relaxed and natural.

As you breathe in, think "1" in your mind. You can imagine a number 1 or simply think "1". Hold that number in your mind as you breathe in, and then out.

With the next breath, think "2" as you breathe in. Hold that number in your mind as you breathe in and then out.

Count your breath like this up to 21. Each in-and-out cycle is one count.

Remember to let your breathing be calm and relaxed. Don't try to make your breath deeper or longer, or faster or slower. Just be natural.

If you happen to lose count, or forget which number you were up to, that's OK. Just start from 1 again on the next breath. Try this for 3 complete counts of 21!

This is how we start to train our brain muscles!