

[EXPOSURE-FRIENDLY]

Mindfulness

INTRO

Here is an *exposure-friendly mindfulness exercise*. It begins with the actual practice. If you don't have much experience, you may want to start with section 2 or 3 to see tips or discussion, and/or to selectively practice only one aspect of mindful awareness. Blessings to you as you learn and grow in staying present!

To begin, find a place where you won't be distracted for however long you set your timer or wish to practice. We will give mind to many aspects of present awareness: attention to breath, distress/comfort, external environment, bodily sensations, and thoughts.

PRACTICE

Take a few slow, intentional breaths, and close your eyes or look at a fixed spot.

Notice your breathing. Try breathing in through your nose and out through your mouth. Again- in through your nose and out through your mouth. Notice the flow of air as you breathe and the sensations of breathing- your lungs and diaphragm; your stomach rising and falling; your chest in and out. Become aware of how breathing feels.

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As you continue to breathe, you will notice all sorts of thoughts and feelings and sensations. Gently guide your

attention back to breathing. You will feel the pull to follow content or stories or distractions down a rabbit hole. Just simply note and observe. Sit with it. Maybe it's a sensation, an urge, a feeling. Whatever it is, observe without following, and bring your attention back to your breathing now.

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This is not a relaxation exercise. You might feel relaxed; you might feel distressed. The purpose is to be mindful and stay present.

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Now, gently accept the presence of any

distress or discomfort.

Make a brief mental note of any discomfort, whether it be something like back pain or muscle soreness, feelings of sadness or anger, or maybe even a thought that is uncomfortable. Maybe it's a whole bundle of things that are distressing. Just simply make a note of it, without following it down a separate path.

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Now, consider any ways that you feel comfortable. You might not be aware of it, but maybe an article of clothing feels warm, supportive, or smooth. You might notice a pleasant taste in your mouth, or a part of your body that feels relaxed, or the temperature of where you are. Be aware of feelings of comfort, without taking time to explore it further; observing it *as it is* in this moment.

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Let's expand our observation- while staying present- to other details around us. If you closed your eyes originally, go ahead and open them.

Start to become aware of what is around you. Maybe you notice a chair or couch, the floor, or a tree. Be aware of colors, sounds, smells, touch, or any other details you wish to take note of. Be mindful of your external environment.

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You may notice yourself getting distracted. That's normal. Gently bring your focus back to your environment. Remember to build on the concept of focus- not suppression- including any distress you feel. *You can do this!*
You can learn to grow in awareness and focus.

...

Back to anything you feel is distressing. Feel free to close your eyes again or focus on a fixed point. Have you given in to any distress? Followed it away from the present moment? Gently bring your attention back to the trigger without giving into it. Notice what the stress is- observe it in simple form without trying to fix or solve or engage it during this exercise. Maybe the exercise itself is distressing. Graciously notice this. Be present.

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Become aware of any sensations you may be experiencing. However small or large, simply notice what sensations you have. Maybe you can feel blood flow through your fingertips, tingling in your scalp, the weight of your body resting on a seat or standing, your heart beat, your stomach. Whatever you notice is okay.

...

You may notice yourself getting distracted again. Gently bring your focus back to bodily sensations.

Take the opportunity now to become aware of your thoughts. They may be moving slowly or quickly, one at a time or several at once. Just notice a thought as it initially occurs, without following the content, meaning, or interpretations you may feel pulled towards. Sit with those thoughts, and let them pass by like water, or cars on a road. Your mind may want to pull you in various directions; allow yourself the chance to, for this moment, become an observer of your thoughts while you stay present.

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Where did your thoughts just go? Notice how you're able to bring your attention back to the gist of the thoughts without running away with them. Take another moment to do this.

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As we come near to the end of this exercise, bring your attention back to your breath. Be intentional noticing your breath. Maybe you've changed how you're breathing since we started. Note how you are breathing. Is it in through your nose? Are you letting your abdomen or chest rise and fall with breath? Are you holding your breath? However you are breathing is ok; just notice.

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When you are ready, you may end the exercise.

REVIEW

How did it go?

What was the experience like?

What did you learn?



TIPS

- **Everyone gets distracted.** Not only is this normal, it's a great reminder of how the brain is working. Accept this as an input-something to be mindful of!- and gently guide your attention back to observation without being critical of yourself (this is, in my experience, the most significant barrier). Even if you get distracted after 1 second, that's okay! This is how your brain is working right now- it takes practice. You are learning, and learning to listen without rushing to respond.
- This takes some time to build upon.

- *Regular, daily practice* is often beneficial.
- **The aim of this mindfulness is to simply become aware of whatever you are being mindful of.**
- *Adapt* this! For example, if you have allergies or sinus problems, change your breathing to fit what you can do reasonably.
 - You can break up any of these paragraphs and use separately. You may prefer to focus on only one aspect of mindfulness and omit the others. Mix and match! Make this your own!
- Only have 30 seconds to practice while in the bathroom? That's okay! However, it is recommended to spend a minimum **5 - 10 min** or more to give this a fair shot, and remember that daily practice is very useful for a period of time (like a trial of 30 days), especially if you would like to grow significantly in your mindful awareness.
- You may want to use the recorded version of this for easier utilization. Go to my website for my version (www.justinkhughes.com)!



CONSIDERATIONS

Mindfulness in simple form is *contact with the present moment*. Its popular use in therapy may be likened to the experience of relaxation- for the purpose of calm, relieving stress and tension. There are extensive other uses.

In working with conditions like OCD and Anxiety Disorders, *mindfulness in exposure therapy* practices and outside of actual exposure utilizes certain nuances (wondering what exposure therapy is? Check out the video here). For example, **distraction is contraindicated during exposures** (Gillihan et al., 2012). Relaxation training is not a first-line treatment in OCD (Ponniah et al., 2013) and **can be contraindicated in Panic Disorder treatment** (Schmidt, et al. 2000). Surprisingly, relaxation for anxiety over time actually **appears to be slower in providing relief and less enduring** (McGlynn et al., 1981). This does not mean that mindfulness and relaxation practices that seek to distract or place focus on relaxation are unhelpful. Rather, they typically are considered useful *outside* of exposure. This exercise utilizes mindful breathing, mindful observation, and some cognitive defusion- not to mention hints of radical acceptance. Feel free to look up these terms separately to understand their meaning.

It is stated that the exercise is "exposure-friendly." This is meant to portray that, at its core, exposure requires presence of mind with distressing stimuli. If you are engaged in exposure therapy, this exercise may or may not fit with your treatment-

especially if it is used to distract unnecessarily. Always follow the plan of your qualified health provider according to your treatment, and never disregard their advice for the sake of this educational exercise.

- There are no tricks to mindfulness. It may seem or feel strange to those who are not familiar with it, but there's no mind games or weirdness that has to be a part of this.
- Some people naturally feel relaxed with an exercise like this. Others feel no effect. Still yet others get considerably more distressed. Stick with it!! The **end goal:** *strengthening the ability to be present* and not run after thoughts, feelings, sensations, triggers, and distractions. These skills are transdiagnostic and can assist with any number of goals.
- Want more? See www.justinkhughes.com

I hope this helps you! Blessings, ~Justin

References:

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JUSTIN K. HUGHES, MA, LPC



Justin K. Hughes, MA, LPC
Owner, Dallas Counseling, PLLC
www.justinhughes.com
(469) 490-2002
justin@dallascounseling.com



ABOUT

- **Specialized Treatment:**
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- **Short-term therapy for most.**
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Justin K Hughes
MA, LPC