

Cultivating Presence Practices

Mindfulness is rooted in ancient Buddhist tradition and comes from the Pali word *sati*, which means having awareness, attention, and remembering. In the 1970s, mindfulness began its journey into the secular mainstream in the West with Jon Kabat-Zinn's Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR), which was developed for managing chronic pain. Jon Kabat-Zinn defines mindfulness, in what is still the most widely-used definition, as: "**paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally.**"

Paying attention. Doesn't sound too hard, right? Well... It is simple in nature, but it requires two important things: **intention with curiosity and non-judgment**. And, we are not always good at doing that. A 2010 study by Harvard researchers showed that on average people spend nearly 47 percent of their waking hours with their minds wandering (and they are less happy when doing so). And, sometimes we are our biggest critic. So, in each of these practices, we must always remember that no matter what kind of experience we have, we must remain curious and non-judgmental (and take care of ourselves – no need to sit with a pain in our foot if we don't wish to be examining pain that day). When we do so, and practice training our attention intentionally with the right attitude, we begin to shift the structure and functioning of our brain in very positive ways. Mindfulness is actual brain strength training!

So, let's get started.

We recommend that you set aside a similar time each day to practice. The practices can take as little as 7 minutes (the time of a typical coffee break), but you will benefit even more, the more time you invest. You might consider setting your alarm clock just 10-15 minutes early and starting first thing in the morning, sitting up right where you are in bed *WITHOUT first checking email*. Make YOU your first priority and see how your day unfolds from there. If that is not practical, or you are a night person and prefer to use the practice as an end of day reflection, trust your body and listen to what feels best. You may even want to try out a few different times. But, I encourage you to start weaving it into your day at a similar time so that you can start to feel what it feels like to have a daily practice. We don't want this to feel like homework that you only get to *if* you have enough time. The first, most important commitment is showing up each day for yourself, no matter what, and trusting that as you give yourself this space, you will start to uncover the insights you need to guide you.

To make this even more powerful, **consider finding or creating a special space** in which to do your practice each day. You don't have to worry about any props – yoga mats, special meditation cushions or incense (unless you have these items and they support you). But, finding a place that feels peaceful - even if it is just a chair next to a window with a plant, or a space under a tree near your home – can help bring a sense of ritual and the sacred that can support you. This is for you, after all. And you deserve a space that honors the beauty of your inner

wisdom, and which can help even temporarily give you a safe and quiet reprieve from the world around you.

Basic Sitting Instructions

If you have never meditated before, here are simple instructions for how to start. Go to your place. You may sit on the floor, a chair, or another surface, but sitting up is helpful so you do not fall asleep. You can sit cross-legged or in another way that is comfortable. Your hands can be clasped in your lap or resting on your legs. There is no specific way they have to be. You can close your eyes, which can help you focus your attention inward better. But, if that feels uncomfortable for any reason, you can look downward at the floor in front of you at nothing in particular with an unfocused gaze. Try to sit with a straight spine. Imagine someone is pulling on a string attached to the top of your head. You should not be leaning back or slumped. Sitting upright should feel noble. Engaged. But not too tense. This will help you stay alert.

PRACTICE 1

Breath Noticing Meditation

Our breath is something we have with us in every moment, so it is an easy anchor for our attention. It also is a constant reflection of our emotional state – over time we may notice that we breathe differently when we are stressed vs. relaxed vs. afraid. On the other hand, we can deepen and slow our breathing to help us relax or even breathe a certain way to give us energy. But in this exercise, there is nothing we need to do other than notice whatever is happening about our normal breathing.

It is good set a timer/alarm so you don't have to watch a clock. Sit in your meditation posture described above and start with two deep, cleansing breaths ("Ahhhhh..."). Notice how you feel right now. Then begin watching your normal breathing:

- How does the breath feel in your nose or mouth, throat, and as far into your lungs as you can feel it before it disappears?
- What is the temperature of the in-breath and out-breath?
- How fast are you breathing?
- How shallow or deep?
- What does it sound like?
- Do you pause? When – after an inhale or after you exhale?
- Where does breathing involve a sense of effort and where does it involve letting go?
- Does anything feel stuck?
- What changes over the time you are breathing?

If your attention goes away, without judgment, just notice that, even say to yourself "thinking", and then bring it back to the breath. When you get to the end of your session, gently open your eyes, take two deep cleansing breaths again, and notice how you feel.

You can find a guided video of this practice here as Mindfulness Practice 1:

<https://conscioussocialchange.com/resources>.

PRACTICE 2

Noticing the Body

Begin by noticing your breathing. When you are ready, bring your attention to your body, scanning your body from the top of your head down to your toes, part by part. See where you are tense, see where you have pain, see where you are numb. Invite each cell to wake up. Notice the temperature, notice the sensation of the clothes or air on your skin. Notice the pressure of the chair or floor holding you up. Notice how deep you feel from front to back, notice how tall you are, notice how wide you are from shoulder to shoulder. Notice the parts of your body that you haven't felt before – the insides of your toes, the backs of your eyeballs, the very top of your head, your elbows, your fingernails, your eyelashes...

When you finish your scan, feel your feet with exquisite attention. Then ask your feet what they feel and what they need. Don't think about it too much, really try to *feel* as if all of you were in your feet and then just write down whatever pops into your mind.

Write it down this way: "My feet feel _____, and my feet need _____."

An example: *My feet feel sore and my feet need time to rest without holding up the burden of my whole body.*

Then turn to your legs: "My legs feel _____, and my legs need _____."

Repeat with your hips, belly, spine, heart, throat, hands, eye, etc.

When you are finished, revise each sentence slightly in the following way – inserting "I" into your sentence, and see what insights arise:

I am my feet. I feel sore and I need time to rest without holding up the burden of my whole body...

I am my hips. I need time each day to sway with freedom.

Spend a moment on each body part and see what intelligence they may hold for the rest of your body and your life at this moment.

You can find a guided video of this practice here as Mindfulness Practice 3:

<https://conscioussocialchange.com/resources>

PRACTICE 3

Noticing the Emotional Center

Practice 7 minutes of noticing with conscious breathing. Begin again by noticing everything you can notice about your breath. Once you have contemplated your normal breath, begin to notice what, if any, emotions you are feeling. Name them (e.g., “discomfort”, “fear”, “love”, “frustration”, “sadness”, “annoyance”, “joy”). Notice if the emotions stick with you or change as you name them. If a thought arises, name it and then bring your attention back to the breath and your emotional body. After 7 minutes, note anything that you have observed from that session about your emotions. At the end of the week, share by email any reflections about your observations of the emotions. Consider:

- What do you feel most often, and does it shift as you notice it?
- If thinking arose during this exercise at all, what is the dynamic between your thoughts and feelings?
- Do you find that you feel your emotions more strongly than you connect with your thoughts or vice versa?

You can find a guided video of this practice here as Mindfulness Practice 4:

<https://conscioussocialchange.com/resources>

PRACTICE 4

Noticing the Mind

Sit in your meditation posture in your quiet location. Set your timer.

Take two deep, relaxing breaths. Check in with how you feel.

Begin by noticing your breath. Notice any difference from other days of practice.

Then allow your attention to watch your mind. For some it might mean switching in and out of thinking and the present moment. For others it might mean watching a movie screen of images. For still others, it might involve an active and intentional thought process. See what happens.

Notice what you notice about your thoughts. Where do you spend your time? Are there patterns, things that need your attention? Do you spend more time in the past or future? Do you see images or have conversations? Are there any predominant messages present? What is the emotional tone of your thoughts?

When you finish your time, take a moment to note any insights from the experience in your journal.

You can find a guided video of this practice here as Mindfulness Practice 6:

<https://conscioussocialchange.com/resources>

PRACTICE 5

Noticing the Three Centers

When we need to tune in to ourselves to make difficult decisions, we often find ourselves speaking about what our heart really wants, or what our gut is telling us, or what we might think. These are significant centers of wisdom which we can explore with the same focused attention that we used to watch our breathing. We can be present with our body (body scan), heart (noticing our emotional state) and mind (watching our mental activity). When we are present with each of these three parts of ourselves, we are better able to notice when we are out of balance or need something for our wellbeing. Once we are fully present with our body, heart and mind, we can pose questions to see what insight arises for us. As we contemplate what to do next, what we might need, or what hard decisions we may need to make, we can test whether our gut (body), heart and mind are in alignment or not. Once all three centers are in support of the same thing, then you know you have your answer. This is a valuable practice to use every day anytime you want to check in with how you are doing, and anytime you need to make a choice to find your guidance within:

Set your timer for at least 15 minutes this time.

Get present: Begin again by sitting in a way that feels noble, and then noticing everything you can notice about your breath.

Body scan: Once you have contemplated your normal breath, begin to notice what you feel in your body with a quick scan body part by body part from head to toe (With all your attention, feel the top of your head, your face, eyes, neck, shoulders, and so on...). You may notice pain, tension, exhaustion, or just a sensation of temperature, or the air passing over your skin. As you recognize a sensation, notice any feelings that arise in connection to that sensation and any thoughts that may be connected to those feelings. For example, does the pain in your knee evoke anger or sadness or a memory of a time in your past? Just play with / explore any connections you find.

Check emotions and mood: Next, try to notice your emotional state or your general mood. If you identify something, see if it feels stronger in one part of your body than another. For example, sometimes we find stress resides in the back of our neck, or our nervousness is in the pit of our stomach.

Watch mind: Finally, take note of your mental activity or mind. When you discover your mind has wandered, what was it doing – worrying, thinking, planning, visualizing, ruminating, imagining? Were you in the future or past? See if you can be your own observer of your thoughts as if they were on a movie screen before you or as if you are listening to your stream of consciousness like listening to yourself chatter out loud.

3 centers simultaneously: See if you can hold your awareness of all three centers of body, heart, and mind. Notice which you feel more strongly and which disappear. Notice whether you feel alignment between your head, heart and gut. See if you can tell if you are in balance or not. Ask yourself what you need most to be in balance. Listen.

You can find a guided video of this practice here as Mindfulness Practice 7:

<https://conscioussocialchange.com/resources>

PRACTICE 6

Open Monitoring

Follow the instructions for sitting in meditation from above. Set your timer for 7 – 15 minutes.

Begin with a quick check in with how you feel overall in this moment, then take two deep relaxing breaths (“Ahhhhh...”).

Next, bring your attention to your breathing, just as it is. You might try to feel everything about it the way you did when practicing focused attention on the breath, noticing if it is different today in any way than the last time.

Then, let your attention expand outward in this moment. What do you notice?

You might notice the sound of the heater or AC that you didn’t notice previously. Or an itch on your nose, or the fact that you may be feeling tired, or that the room is warm. Just allow your attention to rest gently on what comes into awareness without needing to investigate, react or resist.

If you find yourself getting lost in thoughts, notice. Label them “thinking” or “a thought”. And then bring your attention back again to this present moment, just being aware of whatever is happening, inside and outside of you.

When your timer rings, give yourself a moment to bring your attention back to your breathing. Take two deep, relaxing breaths. Notice how you feel and whether anything has changed since you started the practice.

Then slowly, slowly, open your eyes, bringing this quality of attention with you as you now look at the room around you.

PRACTICE 7

Smiling

Each day, notice how often you smile. Let each smile that you experience and witness be an invitation to presence. At each moment you are brought back into presence, notice your emotional state. Notice your body and feel yourself grounded or connected to the earth. Allow the smile to release any tension you are holding in your body. See if you can notice your thoughts before and or after you recognize a smile. Do this when you are driving or riding on a bus or train. Do this when you are in your office or around your family. Do this when you are talking to another. Do this when you are in the middle of an email. Definitely try to do it at least once before responding in conversation and once before making a decision.

PRACTICE 8

Lovingkindness Meditation

Take time to meditate to ground yourself in this present moment and extend self-compassion towards yourself.

Begin by sitting in a way that feels noble with your spine straight, as if a string is pulling upward on you from the top of your head. Sit straight, but not too rigid or tense. Close your eyes if it feels comfortable to do so or lower your eyes and look softly with an unfocused gaze at the space in front of you. Take a moment to notice that you are breathing. Begin to slow your breathing slightly.

As you become more present, ask yourself what you may need for your optimal wellbeing. Listen. Honor any wisdom that arises.

With this wisdom, choose a blessing for yourself that you really need right now. For example, “May I be willing to trust what is emerging.” or “May I find the strength to face adversity.” “May I be peaceful”, “May I be calm”. Offer this blessing to yourself and imagine yourself receiving it and it filling you like your breath fills you.

Next, bring to mind your most significant relationships. Offer this same blessing to each of your closest family members and loved ones. Imagine them one by one, receiving it from you.

Next, offer your blessing to someone you know who really needs it the most. Imagine them receiving it from you.

Offer your blessing to those beyond your family who you know – friends, neighbors, colleagues. See them receiving it from you.

Offer your blessing to those who challenge you most. See them receiving it and it transforming them.

Offer your blessing to a population of need that you may not know personally. Imagine them receiving it from you.

Now offer your blessing to all beings everywhere. Imagine the world transformed by fully embodying this blessing.

Return to yourself and offer this blessing to yourself. Imagine it filling you from the heart outward.

Pause. Notice how you feel in your heart, body and mind.
When you feel ready, you may bring your attention back to the room and open your eyes.