

27 mindfulness

for you to know

Mindfulness is the act of keeping your focus on the present moment. When you practice mindfulness on a regular basis, it can help to keep your anxiety at a lower level. Practicing mindfulness at the time you feel high anxiety can help you to manage it and bring yourself back to a peaceful state.

Being mindful means that you are paying attention to, and therefore living in, the present moment. Most of the time, our minds are reaching forward to the future, and we often start to worry about things that are unknown. That raises our anxiety level. Or our minds are reaching back into the past, and we may feel guilt or regret about something we have done or said. That raises our anxiety level, too.

Being mindful means being accepting and nonjudgmental about whatever is happening in the present moment. It is often our nature to be critical of ourselves, others, and our environment. This kind of judging rarely changes anyone or anything, but it does raise our anxiety level.

Focusing on the present moment can help you let go of anxiety. For example, if you are playing basketball, just focus on playing basketball. Watch your hands and the ball soaring through the air and feel the sweat on your forehead. You can't worry about your final exams or your recital or your job if you are just thinking about the ball. You can't stew about whether you should have said something else in a conversation yesterday if you are just paying attention to dribbling down the court.

Practicing mindfulness can decrease your anxiety as well as enrich your life experiences because you are more fully present in everything that you do.

directions

Try each of the following exercises at least once.

Exercise 1

Choose a simple activity that you can do in the next few hours to practice mindfulness. It could be anything from eating a bag of chips to getting dressed to lying on your bed listening to music. Make a conscious effort to perform this activity with mindfulness.

As you perform the actions, try to keep your attention focused only on what you are doing right at that moment. Use all your five senses to experience the activity. Pay close attention to exactly what you are seeing, hearing, feeling, smelling, and tasting as you do this.

Exercise 2

Since we are not used to focusing on the present, it can be hard to keep our minds from wandering. One way to help yourself stay focused is to talk to yourself silently as you perform each activity, simply reminding yourself of what you are doing at the time. For example, as you are eating chips, think to yourself, "Eating, I am eating." As you are getting dressed, think to yourself, "Dressing, I am dressing." It will probably seem a little strange at first, but it will help keep your mind focused on the present and off anxious thoughts.

Exercise 3

As you go through the day, whenever you notice yourself feeling anxious because you have moved your thinking into the future or the past, simply remind yourself, "Come back to the present." Then move your mind away from wherever it has wandered to and bring it back to what you are doing right now.

more to do

Which activity did you choose to practice mindfulness in exercise 1? _____

Describe what you noticed through each of your five senses as you did it.

Describe what it was like for you to try exercise 2. _____

What are the topics you usually think about when your mind moves into the future?

What are the topics you usually think about when your mind moves into the past?

Describe what it was like for you to try exercise 3. _____

Circle how many times you noticed your mind wandering during the day.

once ten times hundreds of times thousands of times

Describe your anxiety level as you tried these exercises. _____

If you are like most people, you will find mindfulness a challenge. Our minds are simply not used to focusing in this way, but with practice, it becomes easier. Tell what it feels like for you to pay attention only to the present moment. _____

28 following your breath

for you to know

Breathing is a natural and effective tool for cultivating peace and decreasing anxiety within you. One way to use your breathing for this purpose is simply to be aware of it.

Our thoughts are the main cause of our anxiety. When our minds are racing from thought to thought, commitment to commitment, fear to fear, they signal our bodies to become tense. Keeping our minds focused on stressful thoughts, or just on too many thoughts at once, can keep our anxiety level high.

Focusing your thoughts on something simple and peaceful will have the opposite effect, and your breath is an ideal point of focus. Left to its natural rhythm, your breath will settle into a very peaceful cadence. It will be balanced and regular, slow and deep—much like it is when you are in a peaceful sleep.

Focusing on your breath is a simple way to bring yourself out of an anxious state and back to peace. It is a tool you always carry with you, so it can be used in any situation, at any time of night or day, wherever you are, whoever you are with, whatever you are doing. You can stop and focus on your breath when you feel yourself getting anxious because you are having an argument with your friend, having a hard time understanding a math problem, getting ready for a job interview, talking with someone you are attracted to, or at any other time.

Putting your attention on your breath for just a minute or two during a time of high anxiety can help you to lower the anxiety and bring yourself back to a peaceful state. Focusing on your breath takes your mind off anxious thoughts and causes your breath to slow and deepen, bringing more oxygen to your body and relaxing it, bringing more oxygen to your mind and clearing it.

directions

Try this exercise to learn how to focus on your breath.

Sit comfortably and close your eyes. Then simply put your attention on your breath. Notice where you feel it. Can you feel air moving in and out of your nostrils? Do you notice it raising and lowering your chest? Does your breath move all the way down into your abdomen when you inhale, or does it move only into your mouth or throat? You don't have to try to change your breathing or make your breath do anything special: your goal is just to find it and follow it and see how it moves as it flows in and out of your body. Continue to follow it for a couple of minutes or for as long as you are comfortable.

Since we are not usually used to paying attention to our breath, this exercise may not come easily at first. Some people say they cannot even locate their breath. If that happens to you, try holding your breath for a few seconds and then releasing it. Stopping breathing and then starting again can make the presence of your breath more obvious to you.

You may have to practice this exercise a few times until it becomes easy to find and follow your breath. Once you can do it more easily, you will not have to close your eyes anymore. You will be able to focus on your breath while you are in class, at a party, in the shower, or eating dinner with your family. If you feel anxious, simply remembering to find your breath and put your attention on it will cause you to slow down and breathe more deeply and will lower your anxiety.

activity 28 * following your breath

more to do

Over the next day or two, practice paying attention to your breath at different times. Describe how fast or slow, shallow or deep, your breathing is when you are

_____	eating lunch	_____	talking on the phone
_____	in a hard class	_____	riding in the car
_____	in an easy class	_____	listening to music
_____	watching TV	_____	doing homework
_____	hanging out with your friends		

Name some situations in which it would be easy for you to focus on your breath without anyone noticing what you are doing.

Name some situations in which it might be harder to focus on your breath without anyone noticing what you are doing.

activity 28 * following your breath

Name any anxious situations in which it could be helpful for you to focus on your breath.

Describe what happens to your anxiety level as you pay attention to your breath.

29 deep breathing

for you to know

When people are anxious, their breath tends to be shallow and rapid. Making a conscious attempt to breathe more deeply can help you relieve anxiety.

If you watch newborn babies breathe, you will notice that their stomachs rise and fall with each breath. That is because they are naturally breathing deeply and carrying their breath all the way down into their diaphragms. Babies have not yet learned to be stressed. As adults, we tend to inhale our breath into our nostrils, our throats, and sometimes down into our lungs. But rarely do we breathe so deeply that our abdomens move in and out. Most often, our anxious thoughts and hurried activities cause us to breathe using only the upper parts of our respiratory systems. Sometimes, when we are very stressed or in a rush, we may even hold our breath intermittently without realizing it.

Deeper breathing helps relieve anxiety by slowing down our heart rates, relaxing our muscles, and bringing more oxygen deep into our bodies and brains, nourishing our cells more completely and helping us think more clearly. When we are breathing deeply, we are physically less tense. We are also better able to remind ourselves to use positive and rational thinking skills instead of anxiety-producing self-messages and distorted thinking.

directions

Before trying this breathing exercise, it is recommended that you complete Activity 28: Following Your Breath, which will give you practice in finding and following your breath.

Sit or lie down comfortably. Close your eyes so that you can better concentrate and block out distractions. Place your hand gently over your abdomen. Pretend that there is a round balloon in your abdomen, with the opening at the top, or closest to your lungs. Now inhale, and think about pulling your breath all the way down through your body, through the balloon opening and to the bottom of the balloon. As you inhale, let your abdomen rise to make room for your breath. Think about using this breath to fill your body with fresh air, filling the bottom of the balloon first, then the top, then completely filling your lungs from the bottom up.

When you are ready to exhale, gently press down on the bottom of your “balloon” and push the air out of your body from the bottom up, emptying the balloon first, then your lungs and chest.

Repeat this pattern slowly for several minutes, or until it starts to feel comfortable.

Breathing in this way may seem awkward at first. Some people even become anxious because they feel they cannot do it “right.” Understand that it is normal to start out feeling this way. It is something new that your body and mind aren’t used to. The more you do it, however, the more familiar it will become and the more you will be able to relax. Try to take your time and know that eventually you will get the hang of it. Don’t set yourself up for feeling anxious by trying to do it perfectly.

activity 29 * deep breathing

more to do

Circle any of the following things that you noticed while you tried the breathing exercise:

- | | |
|------------------------|------------------------|
| breathing got deeper | muscles twitched |
| felt awkward | felt stiff |
| heart rate slowed down | mind wandered |
| felt peaceful | let go of tension |
| felt a little anxious | felt sleepy |
| muscles relaxed | breathing got steadier |
| other _____ | |

Following is a list of situations in which people can use deep breathing to help them relieve anxiety. Circle those that have happened or might happen to you:

- | | |
|--------------------------------|-------------------------------------------|
| giving an oral report in class | getting a lecture from your parents |
| taking a test | going through a haunted house |
| performing in a recital | performing in athletics |
| going on a job interview | having a tense conversation with a friend |
| taking your driver's test | doing something new for the first time |
| going on a date | jumping or diving off the high-dive board |

Now make a list of personal situations in your own life in which you could use deep breathing to help you relieve anxiety.
