

Mindfulness and Your Body

Adapted from:

<https://www.mindful.org/beginners-body-scan-meditation/>, A Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction Handbook, Stahl and Goldstein, 2010 and The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma, Bessel Van de Kolk, Penguin Books, September 8, 2015.

Becoming more aware and in tune with your body has several positive outcomes:

- 1) You can become more aware of your physical self.
- 2) You may become more aware of your emotions, such as fear or anxiety and with greater awareness you can decide what to do next.
- 3) You can bring your full attention to real-time experiences happening in the present moment—helpful when emotions or thoughts feel intense or difficult to handle.
- 4) You become aware of pleasant and unpleasant sensations, learning to notice what happens when we simply hang in there and feel what’s going on in your body without trying to fix or change anything.

The method to increase connectedness with your body and awareness of what is happening in your body is called the body scan. The body scan is a systematic method to bring awareness to different parts of your body. Some people have a routine where they start in the same place and bring awareness to parts of their body in the same order each time. Others choose to quickly check in with their entire body, a quick “once over” and notice which part(s) of their bodies need awareness. It might be easier to begin with the scan starting with the same place and going in the same order while you learn.

Doing the body scan

Find a comfortable place with few distractions. Pick a posture that is comfortable. Many people choose to lie down to do the body scan but some struggle to stay awake while lying down. Experiment by lying, sitting on the floor, a chair or the couch until you find the best posture for yourself. You are also not locked into one posture; you can listen to your body and decide each time. 45 minutes is a good time when you are beginning but 45 uninterrupted minutes can be hard to find at times. Set aside however long you are able.

Start with noticing your breath and how it feels when you inhale and you exhale. Again, you might be distracted by thoughts, if so notice them non-judgmentally, and bring your attention back to your breath and then to where you left off before the thought occurred. Pick a progression of areas of your body and follow it. For example, begin with your left foot. Be aware of all the parts of your foot, your toes, the arch, your heel. Notice the sensations: is there pain, tingling, tightness, dry skin etc. Then slowly move to your ankle, your calf, your knee and so on. There is a recorded body scan script that will guide you on this webpage: <https://www.mindful.org/beginners-body-scan-meditation/> .

Be aware that many sensations and emotions may arise during a body scan, especially if you have experienced trauma. As Bessel Van de Kolk says in The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma:

“We have learned that trauma is not just an event that took place sometime in the past; it is also the imprint left by that experience on mind, brain, and body. This imprint has ongoing consequences for

how the human organism manages to survive in the present. Trauma results in a fundamental reorganization of the way mind and brain manage perceptions. It changes not only how we think and what we think about, but also our very capacity to think.”

If you are doing a body scan and difficult thoughts and memories arise, shift to mindful breathing, notice your breath as you inhale and exhale until you regain a sense of calm and grounding. You may want to journal about the experience sometime after you have some distance from it.

Stahl and Goldstein note that there are 4 potential barriers to becoming aware of your emotions:

- 1) Some people have had the emotions invalidated or ridiculed while they were growing. They may have been told “It’s ridiculous that you’re scared.” Or “Boys don’t cry, be tough.” Or similar things. You may have learned to deny or repress emotions. If they come up it may be disruptive.
- 2) Some people confuse thoughts with emotions. As your awareness increases try and key into whether you are having thoughts or emotions. For example, the thought may be “I’m stupid.” While the emotion might be shame, guilt or sadness.
- 3) You might become aware of an emotion that might be hard to define. Emotions are not always clear cut, so it may take some time to become clear what the emotion is.
- 4) Some people may not have the vocabulary to describe what they are feeling.