

Developing a Mindfulness Practice

Adapted from A Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction Handbook, Stahl and Goldstein, 2010

When developing your mindfulness practice there are some important concepts. One is the attitudes of mindfulness that will guide your practice:

- 1) Beginner's mind: awareness of things as if they are new, a sense of curiosity.
- 2) Nonjudgment: awareness of developing a nonjudgmental observer, noticing thoughts, emotions and body sensations without judging them.
- 3) Acknowledgement: awareness to acknowledge things as they are.
- 4) Non-striving: awareness of being in the moment, not trying to concentrate, not trying to breathe in a certain way.
- 5) Letting be: simply let thoughts, emotions and body sensation be as they are.
- 6) Awareness of self: being aware of the truth or untruth of your own experience.
- 7) Compassion for self: non-judgmental compassion for yourself as you are.

Breathing: Breathing is what mindfulness is built upon. Using breathing as a place to start being in the moment with yourself. Abdominal breathing is the preferred method. This is deep breathing that reaches into the abdomen rather than staying in the chest only. One way to know you are abdominal breathing is to put your hands flat on your belly. When you inhale you should feel your belly pushing out and then contracting as you exhale.

Vagus nerve, breathing and emotion awareness

Note: this section speaks to neurobiology and has links to more detailed information about the brain. If this is not interesting skip ahead to the next section.

Simply stated, the vagus nerve is a set of 3 nerves that start at the brain stem and extend to the gastrointestinal tract. It is responsible for monitoring the major organs and messages go the body from the brain and from the body to the brain to help maintain normal bodily functions.

The nervous system has 2 parts: the sympathetic and the parasympathetic. Briefly the sympathetic system prepares us for action – “acceleration.” The parasympathetic system controls rest and relaxation – “deceleration.” If the brain detects danger or stress it notifies the sympathetic system into action – increased alertness, muscle tension, to be ready to act. The sympathetic system sends signals to the brain that it's time to relax the brain and body. One thing that stimulates the sympathetic system to send this message is abdominal breathing.

For more information this is one of many sources: <https://www.healthline.com/human-body-maps/vagus-nerve#problems>

Additionally, a mindful practice can increase positive thoughts and feelings about oneself, which causes the parasympathetic to send calming messages to the brain.

Mindful Breathing Practice:

A reminder of how to do breathe mindfully:

Find a place that is comfortable and has few distractions. Find a comfortable posture, sitting on the floor or in a chair or elsewhere if it works for you. Once you are in place close your eyes fully or leave them slightly open, depending on your preference.

Begin abdominal breathing. Until you are feeling confident about your abdominal breathing you may want to put your hands on your belly to be sure that your breaths are deep and go into your abdomen. You should feel your hands moving in and out as you inhale and exhale. Gently direct your attention to your breaths, notice your breath going in and out.

It is very common for thoughts to come into your mind. If this happens, non-judgmentally notice the thoughts and then let them go. Bring your awareness back to your breath. The act of bringing your awareness back to your breath is a mindful act in itself.

One caution: As you develop your mindfulness practice, and maybe use mindfulness to increase your awareness of your emotions in the present moment unpleasant or painful memories or thoughts may come up. The handout called “Mindfulness, Stress Reduction and Emotion Management” has some specific ways to respond to these difficult thoughts and/or emotions. You may want to journal after a session if these thoughts or emotions arise. This may be useful for processing these later. A journal template is on the next page if having it would be useful.

Date: _____

Difficult or painful thoughts or memories:

Reflections on thoughts and/or memories:
