

Mindfulness exercises and meditations (extended version)

Grounding Exercise

This exercise was first introduced to me at The Centre for Transpersonal Psychology by Barbara Somers and Ian Gordon Brown in 1974. I have given this exercise on many occasions and I also practise it myself. It helps us to connect with the natural energies around us when we find ourselves stressed, preoccupied and out of touch with the ground. It takes only a few minutes and can be done any-time, anywhere!

Remove your shoes.

Stand with your bare feet firmly on the ground, legs slightly apart, and allow your feet to really feel the support of the earth underneath you.

Take a few moments to find a relaxed posture – you may find that gently swaying around your hips helps you to settle into a relaxed upright posture.

Make sure that your head is resting in a relaxed way upon your shoulders, just move the head around the shoulders slowly to find a relaxed position. Allow your back to relax. Allow your in-breath and out-breath to fill your chest and abdominal area.

Rest your gaze at about 45 degrees or just ahead.

Now place your attention firstly on your feet, and then on the earth beneath your feet. Just feel the earth.

Imagine that your feet have invisible roots pushing down into the earth. Push these roots as far as you can go.

Imagine now that your roots are contacting the fresh green energy of the earth. Allow this fresh energy to rise up through the roots into your feet.

Now allow the earth energy up through your feet into your legs, up into your pelvis, belly and abdomen.

And then allow the earth energy to course through your chest, heart and neck and shoulder area.

Cup your hands together at the area of your heart and allow it to be refreshed.

You may wish to leave this exercise there. If you wish to continue, one option is to remain standing with your hands cupping your heart area and to focus your attention at the top of your head. Now imagine the energy from above entering through the top of your head into your face, neck and shoulders, then flowing down into your chest and meeting up with the earth energy at the place of the heart.

Just spend a few minutes being aware of the connection between the energies of above and below.

Body and Chair Exercise

This exercise was given as part of a Continuing Professional Development training day in CAT in Norwich, led by integrative psychotherapist and trainer Margaret Landale, in October 2007.

Take your seat on a chair. With eyes closed or just half-closed, allow your attention to rest on your experience of your body in the chair.

Notice the areas of contact between your body and the chair. Notice the support the chair is offering to you right now. Become aware that the chair is supporting your body right now by carrying most of your physical weight. Allow this to happen, allow a comfortable sense of heaviness to spread through your body, supported and carried by the chair.

Notice the rise and fall of the breath. Notice any tension you are holding within your body, the neck, shoulders, down the arms, the weight of the head. Notice any tension in your back down the spine, into your buttocks, legs, ankles and feet. Notice any tension in your belly or chest. Each time you notice any tightness or difficulty in these different parts of your body allow it to drain into your chair, be absorbed by your chair.

Just rest in this experience of being supported by the chair for a few minutes.

Whenever you are feeling anxious, unsupported or lonely, return to this practice which helps to build a nourishing reciprocal role such as caring or supporting in relation to being cared for or supported.

Mindfulness of Breathing

Firstly, find your seat.

Find a comfortable sitting position on a chair or on a meditation stool or cushion. You may like to feel your feet on the floor or sit with legs crossed.

With your eyes closed or half-closed, just gaze at an invisible spot in front of you. If you are feeling sleepy it's helpful to keep to the half-closed position so you do not actually fall asleep!

It's important that your back is straight and your neck and head well-supported by your sitting position and your back. The back should be in alignment and relaxed, not ramrod straight.

Take a few moments to feel into your body and allow any tension to be released.

Now place your attention on your breathing.

Notice how the in-breath begins. You might want to choose a place where you imagine the breath entering your body – the chest, just below the nose, the throat, the belly or from the earth. Once you have chosen the imagined point of entry keep this for the rest of your sitting practice.

Notice how at the end of the in-breath the breath naturally starts to descend; follow the breath down with your attention until it reaches the depths of your belly.

There is a moment here when it appears that there is no breath: a point of stillness and space.

Then, of its own accord, without our having to do anything, the breath rises once again on the in-breath and the cycle begins once again.

When you are practising mindfulness of breathing you may just say as you are breathing in 'I know I am breathing in' or 'I know I am breathing out'. You may then notice 'I am breathing a long breath' or a slow breath, a smooth or a harsh breath. The main point of your practice is that your concentration is focused upon the process of breathing itself.

And distractions from our mind do arise, many, many times. What we do in this case is that we simply notice we have become distracted, either by a body sensation or a thought and we simply say to ourselves 'thinking' and then return to the breath.

This form of mindfulness practice is basic to all meditations. From this we gradually learn that thoughts are just thoughts – it is often our attachment to them and the emotion that arises from thoughts that produces our distress. Much emotional distress occurs when we get lost in ruminative thinking, going over and over the bad things that have happened to us, thus escalating our fears and our dysregulation.

Befriending fear exercise

This next exercise uses the mindfulness of breathing exercise and incorporates promises on the in-breaths and out-breaths. When we are aware that what we are feeling is fear, we say to our fear:

‘Breathing in, I know you are there my fear.’

‘Breathing out, I will take care of you.’

We simply practise this over and over. We may also practise with our anger, or loneliness.

Unconditional friendliness or loving kindness meditation

Find a place to sit comfortably with your body and shoulders relaxed.

Take a few minutes to connect with the rhythm of in-breath and out-breath, allowing this rhythm to help relaxation in the body.

Then, allow some memories or images of being given kindness, however small, to arise. Notice where these memories touch you in your body.

Notice the sensations in your body – tingling, opening, softening.

Let the in-breath touch these sensations and the out-breath open the sensations further. Allow these sensations to expand until they fill your whole being.

Allow yourself to be cradled by these sensations and feelings connected to kindness. Become aware that you are being filled with loving kindness.

Let yourself bask in this energy of loving kindness, breathing it in, breathing it out, as if it were a lifeline, offering the nourishment you were longing for.

Invite feelings of peacefulness and acceptance to be present in you.

Some people find it valuable to say to themselves: ‘May I be free from ignorance’, ‘May I be free from greed and hatred’, ‘May I be free of suffering’, ‘May I be happy’.

Once you have established for yourself a centre of loving kindness you can take refuge here, drinking at this renewing and nourishing well.

You can then take the practice further. Having established the well of loving kindness within your own being you can let loving kindness radiate out and direct it wherever you like.

You might like to direct it first to members of your family or friends, visualising them and sending them loving kindness.

You can direct loving kindness toward anyone – those you know and those you do not.

You can also direct loving kindness to those you are having difficulty with.

And finally, you can direct loving kindness energy to all sentient beings, animals, plants and the universe itself.

Breath poems

Breath poems are practised by the monastic and lay practitioners of the Buddhist teacher Ven Thich Nhat Hanh.

This is practised using the first line on the in-breath and the second line on the out-breath and allowing the words to aid concentration at just being in the present moment. This breath poem, or 'gatha', contains the elements of helping us to remain in the present moment, to be solid like the mountain and also to recognise that we can be free, just where we are, and that we are all inter-connected as living beings in the realm of all things.

I have arrived

I am home

In the here

In the now

I am solid

I am free

In the ultimate I dwell

The second breath poem is really helpful for allowing spaciousness within current close relationships or with those who have died with whom we wish to remain in loving connection.

No coming

No going

No after

No before

I hold you close to me

I release you to be free

Because I am in you

And you are in me

Because I am in you

And you are in me

