

Focused Attention Meditation

One key aspect of mindfulness is the ability to calm and focus the mind. This ability to stabilize and direct the mind is especially important in moments when we may feel stressed, distracted, or overwhelmed. No matter the situation, the ability to calm and focus a busy mind can be beneficial. One specific mindfulness practice that enables us to experience calm and focus in a very direct way is focused attention training.

Contrary to popular belief, this does not mean that you have to stop thinking or cease all thought. In fact, research suggests that our minds naturally wander approximately 50 percent of the time. Being able to exercise focused attention simply means being able to direct your attention, becoming aware if your mind has wandered, and then being able to redirect your focus.

In this simple exercise, I'll ask you to direct your full, undivided attention to a single object of focus, which is the experience of breathing. If you find that your mind wanders, I'll simply invite you to refocus your attention.

You can use this focused attention practice any time to start or end your day, or when you feel stressed or distracted, or any time when you want to bring more calm and focus to whatever you're doing. So let's begin:

Sit in a way that is alert yet relaxed. Close your eyes if you'd like or direct your gaze downward, gently softening the visual field. Establish yourself in a comfortable seated position. Notice your body, your feet on the ground, the sensations of your body sitting, your legs and torso as they make contact with your seat or the ground. Also notice your posture. See if you might sit in a way that's upright but not rigid, relaxing into your body and breathing normally.

Begin now to notice your breath. Directing your attention to the experience of breathing, the sensations of the in-breath and the sensations of the out-breath. Noticing the air coming in and out of your body. Firmly but gently directing your full undivided attention to this experience of breathing whatever that means to you. Noticing the air coming in your body and the air coming out. Paying attention to this full cycle of breathing.

If you've noticed your mind has wandered, that's perfectly natural. The mind may wander away many times and if you've noticed your mind has wandered from your breath, take note and then gently but firmly bring your attention back to your breathing. Come back to the experience of in-breaths and the out-breaths, the full cycle of breath. This is the process of focused attention on the breath.

Stay with the breath. As we draw this practice of focused attention to a close, I'd like to invite you to take three slightly deeper breaths at your own pace. And then, whenever you're ready, open your eyes. That is the practice of focused attention training. I hope you enjoyed learning the exercise and that you will find it useful for cultivating a calm and focused state of mind.

Thank you very much for your attention today.