

Exercise: Awareness of Breath

Try to find a warm, quiet, comfortable spot where you won't be distracted or disturbed. It might be useful to set an alarm to let you know when the time you have allotted for the exercise is up.

Sit down in a comfortable position – feet flat on the ground, with hands held loosely in your lap is usually quite good. Closing your eyes often helps too, but some people prefer just to allow their eyes to unfocus and come to rest on a spot in front of them.

When you are ready just start to notice the sensations within your body – any areas which feel tight or sore; any areas that feel relaxed. You don't need to try to change anything – you are just noticing. Then after a while, narrow the spotlight of your awareness in so that it is focussed on your breathing: the changing patterns of sensation in your stomach as you breathe in and out; the gentle rise and fall of your rib-cage; the feeling of the cold air passing into your body through your nose, and the warm air leaving your body through your mouth. Bring a quality of gentle curiosity to your noticing, as if you were a curious alien who had just arrived on Earth and had never observed 'breathing' before.

As you do this, your attention will wander – thoughts, feelings, memories, urges will arise naturally. Whether they are pleasant or unpleasant simply notice that your attention has drifted and, when you feel ready to do so, gently refocus your attention on your breathing. Remember that you are just here to observe your breath – not to try and change it or regulate it – simply to let it be what it is.

Even if your mind wanders a hundred times it's OK. Allow the thoughts, sensations, and memories to be whatever they are – there is no need to change them or try to chase them away. Just gently refocus your awareness on your breath when you are ready to do so, with the same quality of gentle, open curiosity.

When it is time for you to finish the exercise, expand the spotlight of your awareness again to take in the whole of your body, noticing any sensations that are there, wanted or unwanted, pleasant or unpleasant. Expand it further to take in what you will see and notice as you open your eyes. Then open your eyes and spend a few moments reflecting on the exercise and anything you noticed...