

Mindful Breathing

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As a therapist, I can provide the best care by doing many different things. I see many different folks in my office for psychotherapy. When you work with people with everything from postpartum depression to acute panic disorder or even schizophrenia, you should have a lot of different tools in your therapeutic bag.

As I continue to build my therapeutic toolbox and have opportunities to work with different types of individuals, there is one exercise that I keep coming back to. In fact, I give it to almost all of my clients at some point.

It's called "mindful breathing" and it is simultaneously the easiest and most difficult exercise. Easy because there is no way for you to fail at it. Difficult because your brain will tell you that you are doing it wrong.

Regardless of ease, in my clinical experience, this simple practice can help you get the most bang for your buck. Here's how you do it:

- [Breathe.](#)
- Notice your breathing. You don't need to change it at all. Don't put pressure on yourself to breathe any sort of way. You might feel like you should be breathing deeply. That's fine. You can breathe deeply if you would like, but you certainly don't have to. Your breath has a unique rhythm to it that belongs to only you. Just take the chance to notice it for a moment.
- Focus on a place in your body that you can feel your breath. Maybe this is the expanding and contracting of your chest or the rise and fall of your stomach. It could also be the sensation of cool air coming in through your nose and warmer air coming out of your mouth. Pick whatever feels natural to you and focus on that physical sensation.
- After a few moments, you will have another thought or a feeling that will bump its way into your awareness and distract you from the sensation that you were focusing on. That's totally okay. Don't try to fight it. Instead, acknowledge the thought.
- Let it pass. Just like clouds in the sky, thoughts drift into our awareness. If we recognize that they are just thoughts and nothing more, they can continue to pass out of our awareness.

- Once you have acknowledged the thought, gently redirect your awareness back to the sensation of your breath. It doesn't matter how long you were distracted for or how many times this happens. Every time you become distracted, it provides another chance for you to practice acknowledging your thoughts and then redirecting back to the experience at hand.

Shoot for practicing this three times per week for two to 10 minutes at a time. I like to do it in the morning to start me off on the right foot.

The reason that I think you get a lot of bang for your buck with this exercise is that you are practicing a couple of really valuable skills. First, practicing mindfulness helps you be more fully [in the present](#) moment. One of the overarching difficulties with mental health is that we tend to have our bodies in one place and our minds in another. This helps you practice being 100 percent present with your mind and body in the same place.

The most important thing, in my opinion, is that you are practicing that attentional shift back to the present. It's not just a matter of hunkering down and pushing yourself to not have any distractions. It's about becoming more efficient at noticing your distractions, saying "hi" to them and then quickly redirecting back to the task at hand.

It's a bit hard to fully explain why that skill is so vital, but trust me when I say that it is. It's like a metaphor that you will find extending to all sorts of areas in your life, whether it be while you are driving on the freeway or giving a speech.