

What did you notice? You may have noticed that actually, although it may only have been a short time say 30 seconds, your mind might have wandered off. You may have had thoughts like “What’s this about? Will this help me? Did I do my job correctly yesterday?” You may have heard various things outside the room; your attention may have been drawn to the postman pushing letters through the box, or whatever. The point about this is that our minds are indeed very unruly and the more you practise this short breathing exercise and the longer you can extend it, the more you will notice how much our minds simply bob about all over the place. When you first do this kind of breathing focusing, it can be quite surprising just how much your mind does shift from one thing to another. This is all very normal, natural, and to be expected. So we need to train the mind and the only thing that is important in this training is not to try to create anything. You are not trying to create a state of relaxation. You are not trying to force your mind to clear itself of thoughts. All you are doing is allowing yourself to notice when your mind wanders and then, kindly and gently, you bring your attention back to focus on your breathing. That’s it! Notice and return. Notice the distractions and return your attention to your breathing. In other words, the exercise is simply an exercise where we learn to focus our attention. You are not trying to achieve anything. If you have 100 thoughts, or 1000 thoughts, that doesn’t matter at all. All that matters is that you notice and then, to the best of your ability, gently and kindly bring your attention back to the breathing. Now, if you practise that ‘attention and return’, ‘attention and return’, gently and kindly you may find that your mind will bounce around less and less. It may become easier, but some days it will be easier than others. Remember, you are not trying to relax as such. All you are doing in this exercise is noticing that your mind wanders, and then returning to the focus on your breathing. So it is ‘notice and return’ and each time it wanders that’s fine, don’t get angry with it, just kindly bring it back to the focus of your breathing.

You can do these exercises at any time and in any place, such as sitting on a bus, or you can do them standing up. Just allow yourself a moment where you focus on your breathing and for your mind to come back to that single focus. You may take an interest in how much of a grasshopper mind you have, but at all times try, to the best of your ability, not to condemn your wandering mind, always be gentle, always kind. Just notice and return. If you have thoughts that you are not doing it right or that it cannot work for you then note these thoughts as typical intrusions and return your attention to your breathing.

The key thing is the mindful attention to the process rather than the result. We can explain that this is a bit like sleeping, where we try to create the conditions that will help us sleep but if we focus too much on whether we are asleep or going to sleep this makes sleep more difficult.

Simple body scan and relaxation

When we are stressed, the body speeds up because usually stress means that the body has detected a threat and is preparing for action. We are now going to explore ways to try and relax, unwind, and soothe ourselves - to give our brain a chance to recuperate. In fact, there are many different ways of relaxing and different types of relaxation. For example, some people like to relax through activity such as pottering around in the garden, swimming, walking in the hills or parks, painting, playing a musical instrument, or socialising. These can help because they take our minds to different non-stressful places.

We can now move on to another exercise using 'notice and return', but this time we're going to focus on allowing ourselves to relax. We are going to look at letting tension go, by this I mean trying not to see tension as a bad thing or our enemy that we have to get rid of but rather as an understandable way that our body tries to protect us (by making your body tense and ready for action). We need to be gentle and help the body understand that it does not need to be like this right now. As we let go of our tension it is like giving the body permission to relax – for which it is grateful!

Exercise 2: Simple body scan and relaxation

Now try once again to focus on your breathing until you click into, find, sense, or feel that rhythm that is most comfortable and soothing for you. If that seems hard, do not worry, just breathe in as comfortable a way as you are able. When you have done that, focus on your legs. Notice how they feel for a moment. Now imagine that all the tension in your legs is flowing down through your legs and down into the floor and away. Let it go on its way. So, as you breathe in, just note any tension and then, as you breathe out, imagine the tension flowing down through your legs and out through the floor. Imagine your legs feeling grateful that they can let go. Sometimes people find that if they slightly tense their muscles as they breathe in, and then relax as they breathe out, this can be helpful. Just spend as much time as you find is helpful to you exploring the idea of letting that tension go with kindness

Now let's focus on our bodies and imagine the tension in our bodies from our shoulders down to our stomach and again, as you breathe out just imagine the tension leaving this part of your body, going down through your legs, down through the floor and away. Again, if it helps, just gently tense your stomach and back muscles as you breathe in and then relax them as you breathe out. In a way it can be like imagining emptying a vessel of the tension that's now running through your legs and down through the floor..... Your body is grateful and you feel kind to it.

Now focus on the tips of your fingers, through your wrists, your arms and elbows and shoulders. Imagine that the tension that was there can be released - can be let go of. So, gently let the tension go so that it can run off down through your body, down through your legs and out through the floor and away.....

Now imagine the tension that sits in your head, neck and forehead. The tension has been your alert system in action and it would like to be released now - to take a rest. So again, as you breathe out, just imagine it running down through your body, down through your legs and out down through the floor.....

Now we can focus on your whole body. Each time you breathe out, focus on the keyword RELAX. Just imagine your body becoming more relaxed..... Okay, Just spend a minute or so doing this.

We will now end this exercise by taking a deeper breath, moving the body around a little and noting how it feels and how grateful it is to you for spending time to try to let go of the tension. When you are ready, get up and carry on with your day.

You can practice this exercise as often as you find it helpful. It can help with sleep too. Keep in mind that if your mind wanders when you do it – just gently bring it back to the task at hand. There are many variations on this basic exercise. It's up to you how you go about exploring different relaxation exercises and finding one that works for you. The one that I've given you is a very basic one and helps some people. The idea is to practise and see what happens for you. When you are trying to relax just 'notice and return' when your mind wanders from focusing and relaxing. As you sit there, allowing yourself to focus on your breathing, you may become more relaxed as you become more familiar with your body, you may become more aware of where tension sits in your body. Gradually you can come to think of your body as a friend, or that you can become a friend to your body, and take an interest in your body and how you can nurture it, care for it and help it relax. Tension is not your enemy to be got rid off because it only came as a form of protection and readying your body for action – so it is grateful for its release from your body. Focus on the feeling of gratitude in your body for doing these exercises.

These ways of *being with our bodies* can also be used when we are engaging in activities. Suppose you have to do the washing up or ironing, we can practice these ways by relaxing while doing these activities rather than being on automatic pilot and ruminating on our difficulties. Developing a relaxed body is a way of being kind and gentle with it and nurturing it.