

Relaxation Help Sheet-Mindfulness Meditation

How do we relax, and when we try, do we really succeed?

Do you ever wish you could have a rest from your thoughts, just for a moment? Do you ever lie awake at night unable to fall asleep because your mind is whirling? Our mind works hard all day, making decisions, assessing new opportunities, a little bit like a complex computer. One difference however is that we can turn off the computer, give it a rest, some “down time”. How would it be if we could also do that with our mind?

How might it help to have a rest from always thinking? Well for a start we may be able to fall asleep faster!

Thinking is an important part of being human. Positive thought can be uplifting, allowing us to reach our goals and help others. However there is a downside to thinking. We can become depressed or feel hopeless about the future and ourselves, through negative thinking. We may even get to a point where we feel we do not want to exist anymore.

We can also worry excessively, becoming anxious about what people think of us, and fearful of what the future may hold, again through negative thinking. Negative thoughts are both exhausting and damaging to oneself and perhaps to others. Having a rest from thinking may enable you to firstly have a break from negative thoughts, and secondly allow you to gain a perspective on them. You may realise that actually your worries aren't logical and things are better than you first thought.

Ordinarily we relax by spending time and energy doing something we enjoy, for example watching television, reading a book, listening to music or socialising.

These activities are enjoyable, but if you really think about it do you always feel rested and peaceful after them? Or is your mind left racing with new, sometimes distressing thoughts?

How can I take a rest from thinking?

How do we really relax our mind? It's very simple. All that needs to be done is to invest some time in being aware of what's going on right now. We do have the ability to be aware of our internal and external environment. For instance if we accidentally put our hand on a very hot surface we withdraw our hand before thinking about it. How do we do that? We are aware first, then we think a split second later- “that was hot, ow”! Awareness is natural to us - so natural that we often overlook it.

So you can see that in order to have a break from thought we simply need to access our own awareness.

Here are two exercises in awareness for you to try:

1. Sit comfortably in a chair, or lie down on a firm surface.
 - Rest your hands on the upper point of your abdomen, just below where your lower ribs meet in the middle of your chest. You may want to close your eyes to reduce distractions.
 - Notice the way your hand feels on your abdomen, the weight, the temperature and the texture. Then shift your attention to notice how your abdomen gently presses into your hand.
 - Notice how your hand rises and falls as you breathe in and out. Follow this for as many breaths as you can.

It is normal to start thinking again, perhaps almost immediately. For the purpose of this exercise however, put the thought on a mental shelf - you can come back to it later if necessary. Return all your attention back to your hand. Keep returning your attention to your hand as often as is necessary.

You may notice other things going on, the light on your eyelids, sounds in the room, the way your body feels lying or sitting down. That is good - however if you become aware of your thoughts again, return your attention to your hand.

2. This exercise in awareness is to simply feel your feet on the floor. When you're sitting or standing and are not busy with some other activity, notice the way pressure is distributed over the foot, and the way the ground feels against your foot. You may notice more weight on your heels for instance, or the quality of the ground may be soft, or hard, cold or warm. Remember not to think too hard about it, just notice what is happening. . If your mind is racing away with thoughts, this exercise is particularly grounding, literally keeping one down to earth.

Anxiety is linked to the pattern of your breathing.

The way we breathe also affects our mind and body. When you get anxious it's very common to start to breathe high up into your chest, taking quick and shallow breaths. It can feel like you can't get quite enough air into your lungs, making the anxiety worse, even to the point of starting a panic attack. This breathing, called hyperventilating, can then cause tingling in your hands, shaking and palpitations.

If this sounds familiar to you, try this exercise in awareness:

- Place your hand on your abdomen and imagine you are breathing upwards into your hand.
- Follow the downward movement of the out breath, through your lower body into your legs and feet.
- Imagine you are breathing your cares and worries out of your body.

When you do this you are breathing with your diaphragm, the muscle separating your chest and abdomen. The breath is deeper, preserving carbon dioxide levels in your blood, which helps you to stay calm.

When should I do these exercises?

Try these exercises once, or better still twice a day. Good times to do them are when you wake up, when going to sleep and when you have a spare few minutes to sit down. Don't do it if you need all your attention for the job in hand e.g. driving. It is better to do short spells at first, say two minutes, and stop when you're enjoying it, as then you will be more likely to do it again.

Note what you experienced; notice the effect on your mind and body. When you were not thinking, how was it just to be aware? It can seem like a holiday from the never ending thoughts about who did what when and to whom, what to buy next, what to cook tonight, what people think about me.

Do this for a minimum of a month, and perhaps write down your experience each week. You may surprise yourself at the end of the month. If it's boring or exciting, busy or peaceful, persevere. Just keep noticing whatever it is you experience when you're not thinking.

If you find it difficult to not think don't worry, just notice that you find it difficult. It is the act of noticing, or being aware that is the focus of these exercises. With practice you will find your thoughts will eventually slow down, trust your own awareness.

Although simply reading about this exercise is helpful, you will never know what it is really like without trying it out. It's like knowing the taste of an apple - whatever you read or hear about it cannot convey the actual experience of the taste – you need to actually taste it yourself.

My life is so busy – do I really have time to do this?

A few minutes a day is a small investment and you will find the returns are good. You may find these simple exercises become helpful resources, portable and accessible whenever you want to relax, be peaceful, or even fall asleep. You can gain control over negative distressing thoughts, reduce levels of anxiety, and have more mental space to enjoy life.

Enjoy!

Author : Simon Ralfe: Useful links www.umassmed.edu/cfm/home/index.aspx

Additional Resource for Accessing Psychological Therapies for people with Depression and Anxiety Disorders