

Exercise 5.1: Mindful attention (pages 126-7)

We are now going to work on helping you train your mind to pay attention to what you chose to; not what your tricky brain might decide is important. You can do this exercise for two minutes, three or four times a day, while you are learning to be mindful. As you develop this skill, you can learn to focus your attention on everyday things (like doing the washing up) or on more enjoyable things (including the joy of eating or physical activity).

You can either focus your attention on your breath or on your object; many people like to use stones or seashells to focus on, but any object that does not activate your threat or drive system is fine. There are audio files to guide you through both.

You are likely to find that your mind wanders very quickly. This happens to all of us and is a normal part of the process of becoming more mindful. It is the 'default state' for the human mind. Our wandering mind can focus on all sorts of things, perhaps because we are worried about something, because we are looking forward to something, or simply because we are reminding ourselves of our to-do list for the day. The very fact that your mind is wandering is evidence that you're doing the exercise correctly, as the key is to learn to gently and kindly refocus your attention, so we can become more aware of things in the current moment, rather than becoming preoccupied with past or future concerns.

When you are learning to be mindful, you will practice bringing your attention back to your breath or object. So, when your mind wanders, gently and kindly remind yourself it's okay to wander but you want to pay attention to your breath or object for the next few minutes. If your self-critic turns up, kindly remind it that a wandering mind is part of being human not a failure in the exercise. If you notice other topics or memories arising, you can thank your wandering mind for bringing them to your attention. Gently and kindly let them know that, at the moment, you are learning to train your attention to your breath or object and you will pay attention to the things in your threat system when you are ready and in a state of mind to be able to address them, either by yourself or with the help of others.

Please decide whether you are ready to start the exercise, either focusing on your breath or finding an object to focus on. You might want to have a range of objects (e.g. pebbles, shells, feathers, fur, etc.) and use one for each practice. Listen to the audio now and come back to these instructions afterwards.

When you finish, you may want to take a few moments write down anything your wandering mind brought to your attention that you might need to address when you feel ready to do this, either on your own or with the support of other people.

After you finish the exercise, please find something distracting or soothing to do, or simply get back on with the normal activities of your day knowing that you have taken another step in learning to train your mind to pay attention to what you want to focus on.