

The Three Minute Breathing Space

This practice was developed by Mark Williams, John Teasdale and Zindel Segal, who put together Mindfulness Based Cognitive Therapy. In essence, it is a mini-meditation, an opportunity to become mindful in the midst of our lives. It provides a bridge between the formal practice of meditation which we will usually do on our own with time set aside for it, and the informal practice of mindfulness in our everyday lives as we go about our business.

The Breathing Space is not to be seen as “taking a break” or taking time-out from whatever is going on. Instead, it can be seen as encouraging a shift in mode, from Doing to Being, from Automatic Pilot to Awareness and deliberately changing our relationship to whatever we are experiencing.

It is traditionally seen as encompassing three distinct stages, which we can envisage in the form of an hour-glass. The first stage is BECOMING AWARE: we stop, we notice whatever is going on in our inner experience, in our thoughts, in our feelings and emotions, and in our body sensations – without trying to change anything. This is like the wide neck of the hour glass. The second stage is GATHERING: we draw our attention close to the breath and the breath sensations, experiencing fully the in breath and the out breath, using the breath to anchor us to the present moment, and we stay here for a little while (perhaps at least a third of the time we are practicing). This is like the narrow neck of the hour glass. The third stage is EXPANDING: from the breath, we expand our awareness to include the body sensations and anything we are experiencing physically, emotionally or within the mind. We also bring our awareness to the space around us and whatever we can experience there through our senses. We breathe into whatever is there, with a sense of acceptance - allowing ourselves to experience it, before moving on with the activities of our day. This is like the wide base of the hour-glass – expanding, open and held in awareness.

We can practice scheduling the breathing space into our daily lives, in the midst of our daily activities. In time, we will be able to introduce the breathing space more spontaneously, at times when we are feeling stressed or experiencing something unpleasant. In these situations, we are not using the breathing space to block out or to get rid of these difficult experiences. Instead, we will be learning to bring more awareness to our reactions and to notice how we might resist and fight against what is happening at these times. The breathing space can help us to befriend and to accept these unpleasant experiences which are there already and to enhance our ability to cope with them.

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At various times during the course of your day, see if it is possible to step out of “automatic pilot” for 3 minutes or thereabouts in the following way:

1. WHAT’S HERE? (BECOMING AWARE)

Notice your posture. Straighten your spine and generally relax the body. With your eyes either open or closed, silently ask yourself: *"What is my experience right now ... in my thoughts ... my feelings ... and my bodily sensations?"* Recognise and accept your experience, even if it is unwanted.

2. BREATHING (GATHERING)

Then, gently redirect your full attention to your breathing, to each in breath and to each out breath as they follow, one after the other. Try noting at the back of your mind: *"Breathing in ... breathing out"* or counting the breaths.

Do this for one or two minutes as best you can, using the breathing as an anchor to bring you into the present and help you tune into a state of awareness and stillness.

3. EXPANDING OUTWARDS

Open the field of your awareness around your breathing, so that it includes a sense of the body as a whole, your posture, and facial expression.

Allow your attention to expand to the whole body - including any sense of discomfort, tension, or resistance. If these sensations are there, then bring your awareness to them by *"breathing into them"* on the in breath. Then, breathe out from those sensations, softening and opening with the out breath. If you wish, you can say to yourself on the out breath, *"It's OK. Whatever it is, it's OK. Let me feel it. It is here already so I may as well be present for it."*

As best you can, bring this expanded awareness to the next moments of your day.

You can adapt this to what works best for you. The aim is to simply maintain awareness in the present moment and to shift modes from doing to being, as best you can.

Adapted from Zindel Segal et al. Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy for Depression.