

Mindfulness: Focusing & awareness

Mindfulness incorporates both focusing and awareness. Focusing is an excellent place to start training your mind. In order to change, though, you will want to shift from focusing to becoming more aware of thoughts and feelings. At any time you may go back to focusing.



Focusing

Inward: “eyes on the road”

Anchor on an object (e.g. breath) to keep the mind centred

Awareness

Outward: seeing thoughts and feelings from the outside. You see yourself and your mental dynamics in more detail from this perspective. You notice things you’ve never seen before.

“Seeing the scenery”: watching the mental traffic as if it belongs to someone else.

Imagine the mind as a stream of consciousness. When there is a deluge of thoughts and sensations and you are at risk of being drowned in the stream, that’s when focusing comes in.

Shifting emphasis from focusing to awareness

- a) watch the stream of consciousness, dispassionately
- b) pluck something from the stream and deliberately focus on it (e.g. a dream image, a memory, a pain)

Awareness exercise

Start by taking your mind inwards for a moment by focusing on the breath. Take a few gentle deep breaths, from the belly. In and out. Relax... Continue to breathe for as long as you wish.

Now take your mind outwards. See your thoughts, feelings, moods, and sensations as objects floating down a stream, coming into view and vanishing from sight. Simply watch without judgment or analysis. Just watch them pass by.

Now pluck one of these objects from the stream and take a moment to focus on it. Let the other sensations and thoughts go by in the background. Note any new thoughts or feelings that arise from observing this object. Sit with these thoughts/feelings for a moment.

Whenever you are ready to leave this object behind, simply deposit it on a leaf and let it float downstream.

Mindfulness exercises

Focusing exercises

Practice focusing every day. It will help you learn to stay in the moment in your everyday life. See [Take a Deep Breath and Relax](#) in the [Managing Stress at University module](#).

1. **Body Scan:** Lie down with your eyes closed. Slowly scan up and down your body for tightness/ soreness. If you find a tight spot, stop and breathe into it until it relaxes. You might also imagine healing, white light radiating into the spot.
2. **Object Meditation:** Choose a favourite or interesting object e.g. a stone, a flower. Spend some time observing the object: its shape, hues, textures, smells, tastes. Go for detail.
3. **Mindful Eating:** eating slowly, mindfully. Be aware of all the sensations of the food: taste, texture, sounds, weight.
4. **Walking Meditation:** While you walk, focus on sensations of the body moving. Soften the eyes and look at the ground a few paces ahead of you. Pay attention to how you walk. Aim to walk with no tension: relax into it, letting your hips and shoulders swing easily. Breathe with your footsteps. It can help to scan your body as you walk allowing the movement to free up tensions. You may also consider saying a mantra or affirmation in time with the steps.
5. **Mindful stretching** e.g. slow, gentle Hatha yoga

Awareness exercises

1. Simply watching

This is a particularly useful activity when your mind is very busy and you are finding focusing difficult. Watch the passing thoughts without judging them. Just watch them like the clouds passing by. Identify (or say out loud) each thought, feeling, and sensation that comes up: e.g. sore neck, pizza, best friend, anger, tingling, empty stomach, pizza again, grandma, I miss her...

2. Practice new thought statements to detach:

Thought are not facts. I am not my thoughts.

3. “Urge Surfing” for cravings and urges.

Be aware of the warning signs, i.e. the urge or craving is approaching. Imagine the wave as an urge, i.e. the urge crests then falls. Ride the wave without giving into the urge. Let the urge pass. Celebrate your effort to ride through the urge. Accept that new urges will appear.