

Emotional Resilience - Lesson Sample 1

Core Teaching

Breath



Why focused breathing?

"Breathe. Let go. And remind yourself that this very moment is the only one you know you have for sure." Oprah Winfrey



Up to now, you have learned that stress, anger, and anxiety can impair not only our health but our judgment and skills of attention. Fortunately, research suggests an effective way to deal with these difficult feelings: the practice of "mindfulness," the ability to pay careful attention to what you're thinking, feeling, and sensing in the present moment without judging those thoughts and feelings as good or bad. Countless studies link mindfulness to better health, lower anxiety, and greater resilience to stress.

But how do you cultivate mindfulness? A basic method is to focus your attention on your own breathing—a practice called, quite simply, "mindful breathing." After setting aside time to practice mindful breathing, you should find it easier to focus attention on your breath in your daily life—an important skill to help you deal with stress, anxiety, and negative emotions, cool yourself down when your temper flares, and sharpen your skills of concentration.

Participants who completed a 15-minute focused breathing exercise (similar to the mindful breathing exercise described above) reported less negative emotion in response to a series of slides that displayed negative images, compared with people who didn't complete the exercise. These results suggest that focused breathing exercise helps to improve participants' ability to regulate their emotions.

Mindfulness gives people distance from their thoughts and feelings, which can help them tolerate and work through unpleasant feelings rather than becoming overwhelmed by them. Mindful breathing, in particular, is helpful because it gives people an anchor—their breath - on which they can focus when they find themselves carried away by a stressful thought. Mindful breathing also helps people stay "present" in the moment, rather than being distracted by regrets in the past or worries about the future.¹

How to

The most basic way to do focused breathing is simply to focus your attention on your breath, the inhale and exhale. You can do this while standing, but ideally, you'll be sitting or even lying in a comfortable position. Your eyes may be open or closed, but you may find it easier to maintain your focus if you close your eyes. It can help to set aside a designated time for this exercise, but it can also help to practice it when you're feeling particularly stressed or anxious. Experts believe a regular practice of mindful breathing can make it easier to do it in difficult situations.

Sometimes, especially when trying to calm yourself in a stressful moment, it might help to start by taking an exaggerated breath: a deep inhale through your nostrils (3 seconds), hold your breath (2 seconds), and a long exhale through your mouth (4 seconds). Otherwise, simply observe each breath without trying to adjust it; it may help to focus on the rise and fall of your chest or the sensation through your nostrils. As you do so, you may find that your mind wanders, distracted by thoughts or bodily sensations. That's okay. Just notice that this is happening and gently bring your attention back to your breath.²



[Click below for a 5-minute breathing meditation.](#)

Breath Meditation



Focusing on the breath can be a meditation by itself or it can be connected with an object. Thick Nhat Hang with children in Santa Barbara developed a simple meditation as "a tangible way for children and families to return to their breathing and their bodies and connect with the world around them".³ This meditation involves holding four pebbles and moving them from one side to the other with the breath. The pebbles represent - flower, mountain, water and space and each embodies a particular quality. These qualities can be personalized or we can use the original meanings - love, compassion, joy and inclusiveness. This meditation opens the world of possibilities, as it involves the whole family and can include many activities.

These activities can include:

- a treasure hunt for pebbles
- colouring the pebbles
- making a small meditation bag for the pebbles
- singing
- reflecting on the experience as a family

Pebble Meditation



[Click below to watch the Four Pebble Meditation](#)

Here is our version of the Breath meditation based on Thick Nhat Hanh's:

We have to learn to enjoy and appreciate our breath. Our breathing is always with us. Regardless of our thoughts, projects, and responsibilities. We can always trust it. Rely on it. Take refuge in it. Breath is ours in the present moment. Breathe.

Get into a comfortable position in your chair with both feet touching the ground. Now allow your eyes to close or keep looking on the floor in front of you. Place your hands in your lap or on your thighs. Or whatever position you find comfortable.

Setting the intention

Our breathing is always with us and we can learn to take refuge in it. Regardless of our thoughts, emotions, and feelings, our breath is a faithful friend. We can turn to our breath anytime, while we are walking, sitting driving or sitting at a desk. When we are worried, sad or anxious, we can use the breath as an anchor and a peaceful source of life.

We should not control our breath. We should accept it as a faithful companion without judgment for what it truly is. It may be long or short, deep or shallow. It can be long, strong and relaxing. It unites our body and mind and brings mindful moments into our life.

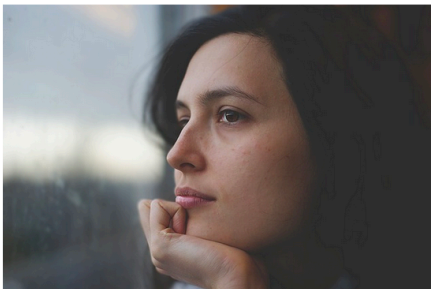
- Feel your breath. How does it feel? Is it short? Is it long?
- Is it shallow? Is it deep?
- Breathing in, I know I am breathing in.
- Breathing out, I know I am breathing out.
- Breathing in.
- Breathing out.
- In.
- Out.

- Breathing in, I notice that my in-breath is deep.
- Breathing in deep.
- Breathing out, I notice that my out-breath goes slowly.
- Breathing out slow.
- Deep.
- Slow.
- Breathing in, I calm my whole body.
- Breathing out, I feel at ease.
- Breathing in calm.
- Breathing out ease.
- Calm.
- Ease.



[Click here for Thick Nhat Hanh's pebble meditation for children.](#)

Managing Thoughts



One of the biggest challenges is staying present and do it non-judgmentally. We often think of the past and dream of the future, criticize ourselves and feel ashamed for our ideas. There is no wonder we get lost in our thoughts when we have anywhere between 50 to 70 thousand thoughts a day and between 35 to 50 thoughts a minute.

One way to manage our thoughts and bring our mind back home when it wanders off is to have an anchor. The most common anchor is breath. It is easily accessible to us at any moment. It's always there.

To use breath as an anchor for our practices, we should not control it. We should just breathe naturally and invite our body to find where the breath is the strongest. It can be in the nostrils, in the belly or in the chest. It can feel cool or warm. We can feel how the in-breath expands our rib cage. [Click below to listen to 5-minute breathing meditation.](#)



Anchor Words



Many thoughts, sounds, and emotions can come up during our breathing practice. You don't have to be distracted by them; just pay attention to them. Once you pay attention to something external like a child crying or an itch on your nose or even what you did last week, you can then choose to either keep your attention on it or to come back to the breath. Your breath acts as a reference point or an anchoring point. It anchors us to the moment.

The use of Anchor Words might be of help to steady your attention while practicing your focused breath. Anchor Words are mental labels that are used to point to what you are experiencing. Purely observational and not judgmental, Anchor Words can be applied to anything. If you hear a noise you can label it "hearing" or "sound".

Experiencing a body sensation you can label it "itch", "buzzing", "hot", or whatever best fits the experience. If it's an emotion that comes up you can label that too.

Avoid labelling anything with judgments such as "good" or "bad" if you can. It is that non-judgmental component that gives mindfulness the ability to provide us with tremendous clarity about ourselves and our disposition.

To use the anchor words, we can say in our mind:

- rising...falling, rising ... falling
- breathing in ... breathing out
- in - out

Three stage breathing space

There are many breathing techniques that we can put into our everyday routine or we can use it when feeling anxious and for those times when you feel your stress levels rising. Perhaps you are in a traffic jam, yet another queue, or just up to here' with family! Before you lose your cool completely, try the 3 stage breathing space:

Stage 1: taking a few moments to be aware of what's happening right now. Becoming still, taking your awareness gently through the body, noticing any sensations whether pleasant or unpleasant. Just being aware, without trying to change anything.

Stage 2: bringing your awareness to your breathing. Letting the breath breathe itself without trying to change it in any way. Following the in-breath all the way in, then the out-breath all the way out. Feeling the sensations of the breath at the tip of your nose, as it enters and leaves your body.

Stage 3: gently broadening and expanding your awareness to include the whole body. Feeling the breath in the whole of your body as if the whole body is breathing. Noticing how you feel right now. Carrying this awareness with you to the next part of your day.⁴