A Mindfulness of Breathing Exercise with Neuroscientist Amishi Jha

The sequence of events in this practice are: focus, sustain attention, notice, and redirect attention back to the breath when it wanders. This is what we might call a "push-up" for your attention.

My name is Dr. Amishi Jha and I am the director of contemplative neuroscience for the mindfulness research and practice initiative and an associate professor of psychology at
Wherever it is that attention goes, the rest of the brain follows. And in some ways, I think it’s very important to consider this. What does this mean? It means that where you pay attention, makes up the moments of your life, it actually makes up your life’s experience.

In my lab’s work we really think about mindfulness not simply as a concept but mindfulness training as a cognitive training tool. To understand this more fully, we should understand what the workout is, what the exercises are that make it cognitive training. So, I want to review with you one very common and foundational mindfulness practice that’s probably present in every single mindfulness-based program available: something called mindfulness of breathing. This is what we call a focused-attention practice and let me just describe it to you.

The Mindfulness of Breathing Exercise:

In this exercise, the mindfulness of breathing exercise, we ask you to sit in an upright, stable, and alert posture. And for the period of time, we’re going to do this short practice (and you can do it for much longer than I’m going to do here), your task is to pay
1) **Tune into the breath-related sensations.** So, once you get settled, with your eyes comfortably lowered or closed, you’re going to focus in on the sensation that’s most prominent to you tied to your breathing. Perhaps it’s the coolness of the air in and out of your nostrils, or the abdomen moving up or down, your shoulders, whatever bodily sensation tied to breathing feels most prominent, that’s what you will focus on for the period of this formal practice.

2) **Pay attention to what arises in your mind.** The second part of this instruction, after you’ve selected your focus and you’ve committed to maintaining your attention there, is to pay attention to what arises in the mind. Notice when mind wandering occurs and your attention is moved off of the target for where your attention should be. Notice when there might be thoughts, sensations, memories that arise that aren’t about the breath at all. And when this happens, simply return your attention back to the breath-related sensations. Nothing special to do, just simply return the attention back to the breath.

That’s it! That’s the practice.

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Even with a very short practice you can get a sense for how your attention got a workout, keeping your attention firmly pointed toward breath-related sensations and actually holding it there, maintaining it there. Also, fully acknowledging that the mind will wander. It’s its tendency. And in fact, what we know about my wandering is that it happens 50 percent of our waking moments—That’s what we know from the research. Mind wandering is ubiquitous, it’s common, there’s no reason to fight against it—it’s just the nature of the mind. If you are conscious, you are going to have mind wandering happen.

But for this formal period of time, in which we’ve dedicated our attention to be focused on the breath, we do something different when mind wandering happens: we actually note its occurrence, and then we redirect our attention back. The sequence of events in
let’s say a five to 10 to 20-minute exercise, may actually not only engage attention, but strengthen it by exercising it over and over again.

So when you think about doing this practice, really think about just how much you may be helping your own attention by exercising in this way.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Amishi Jha

Principal Investigator, Associate Professor of Psychology and Director of Contemplative Neuroscience, Mindfulness Research & Practice Initiative, University of Miami. Her research focuses on the brain bases of attention, working memory, and mindfulness-based training. With grants from the US Department of Defense and several private foundations, her current projects investigate how to best promote resilience in high stress cohorts using contemplative/mind training techniques that strengthen the brain’s attention networks. She was selected as a Science and Public Leadership Fellow by PopTech, and serves on editorial review boards of Frontiers in Human Neuroscience, Journal of Experimental Psychology: General, Frontiers in Cognitive Science, and Frontiers in Psychology.
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Mind Body Thoughts

Thank you for this excellent article on a breathing exercise. It sure is wonderful just how breathing impacts our mind and body. It doesn't take too much to get there either - simple things can do so much.

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Bruce Wyman

well done and helpful - thank you

Like · Reply · 26w

Pam Maccabee

Very clear. Very appealing. Will do tomorrow. Now it is 3:58 a.m.

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