

“20 Breaths” Transcript

Adapted from Michael Baime, MD

The mindfulness practice described is called “20 breaths.” This exercise helps you take a fresh start whenever and wherever you want. It teaches you to step away from the distractions, frustrations, irritations, and preoccupations that stress and exhaust us.

The “20 breaths” exercise is actually 20 separate mindfulness exercises. For 20 breaths you bring all of your attention to each breath just for the duration of that breath. Each practice only lasts about 5 seconds, which is how long a typical breath lasts. At the end of each out breath, that breath, and that period of mindfulness practice is over; you take a fresh start with the next breath. When that next breath begins, give it your full and complete attention. You do that 20 times, with 20 breaths.

Start by seeing what it feels like to pay attention to a single breath. Take an upright, balanced posture, close your eyes if that is comfortable to you, and in a moment, I will ask you to take a single breath, while giving it all of your attention. I want you to see how fully and completely you can experience that breath. Do it right now.

It’s not hard, and of course, nothing dramatic happens, you are just noticing your breath, but you are doing something that most people have never tried. You are intentionally bringing all of your attention to what is happening in the present moment. You have started your training in mindfulness.

Try the same thing again, but this time, pay attention to three breaths. When you notice your first breath, see if you are giving it your full attention. Often we notice something without experiencing it fully. It is possible to practice mindfulness with only part of your mind. Obviously, that isn’t our goal now. If you find that part of your attention is somewhere else on your first breath, see if you can bring more of your attention to the second breath. And finally, see if you can bring all of your attention, which is completely possible, to your third breath. It might almost feel as if there is not separation between your attention and your breath; as if you are fully and completely experiencing the sensation of the flow of the breath. So now, take a moment to settle yourself, relax into your body, close your eyes, and in a moment I will ask you to bring all of your attention to three breaths in a row. See what it feels like to experience each breath a little more fully than the one before. See if you can completely merge your attention to the breath. Start now.

When you do the 20 breaths, each breath is a separate event, and each breath gets separate attention. When a breath is over, so is that part of the practice. At the end of the breath, you can let go of any effort. Relax, and the next breath will come. You will need to count the breaths to know when you are finished. So when you breathe in, and breathe out, you count it by saying the number “one” to yourself. After the second out breath, you count “two” and so on. When you get to “10”, start counting back to “zero.” So, for the first 10 breaths, you count from “1 to 10”, and for the second 10 breaths, you count back from “9 to 0.” If you lose count of the track, don’t worry about it. If you like, you can make your best guess as to where you were, and pick up there. Or, you can just start over as the whole exercise takes only a couple of minutes.

As you do this, you might discover that it is harder to pay attention even for only a few seconds then you might have thought. Sometimes, it seems as if every second has its own distraction and that the mind wanders constantly. Don’t let that bother you. In fact, this is one of the most important things that this exercise teaches us. You begin to notice when you are distracted, and then step away from that distraction. If we are going to undo stress, distractedness, and tension, first we are going to have to notice that they are happening in the first place. Try not to give yourself a hard time, or struggle too much. A light touch and a sense of humor will help. After all, you can always take a fresh start. It is very simple, when the mind wanders, just bring it back, and as much as you can, give each breath your full and complete attention.

If you practice this everyday, soon you will find that it is possible to bring all of your attention back into the present moment even when you are very stressed and distracted. You won’t do it perfectly every time, but with practice you will get better and better. Pretty soon you will be able to use this technique to find stillness and relaxation right in the middle of your busiest and most stressful day. Remember to let each breath be a separate practice. Don’t worry about what happened during the previous breath, and don’t try to anticipate what will come next. You might notice how the mind wanders into the past and leads into the future. Then do your best to experience the single moment of breath that is alive in you right now. You can try it now.