



Thrive Practices



for Regulating
Emotions



theThriveCenter.org



Table of Contents

Introduction

Practice 1: Mindfulness: The Importance of Checking in With Your Body

Practice 2: A Practice in Emotional Regulation: Tending to our Inner selves

Practice 3: A Practice: Centering Prayer of Awareness

Practice 4: A Practice: Shift Your Inner Critic to an Inner Nurturer

Practice 5: Breathing Practices to Calm Your Nervous System

Practice 6: Grief and Mindfulness: How to Manage Your Emotions





Introduction

We've all lost it at one time or another - been overcome with big emotions that came pouring out of us in ways that, after the fact, we didn't feel great about.

Is it possible to create some distance between these big emotions and how we act them out? The answer is yes - with practice.

When we learn to observe our emotions and create a little space between them and how we behave, we start the process of regulating our emotions. We develop many of these tools intuitively. Most of us don't run around punching people when we are angry with them. However, many of us suffer from racing thoughts, resentments, and fears that are overblown for our situations.

The tools we offer below help us regulate, get to know ourselves through observing what is going on within our bodies and thoughts - and they offer ways to question and reframe thoughts that might not be useful for our wellbeing. These skills are important to develop since the ability to regulate ourselves opens us to ourselves and to others, and to the beauty of our spiritual lives. These practices are all available at www.thethrivecenter.org.





Mindfulness: The Importance of Checking In with Your Body

By: Dr. Joey Fung

Dr. Joey Fung shares 5 mindfulness practices to help us check in with our bodies to manage anxiety during times of transition and difficulty.

Introduction:

Many of us have experienced tremendous changes, loss, and grief over the last few years. Loss of social connection. Loss of a sense of normalcy. Loss of employment. Loss of loved ones.

When we experience change, loss, or grief, we are tempted to ruminate about the past or future. We may dwell on how good life used to be and grieve what we do not have. Or, our thoughts may be consumed by the future: Will I find a job? Can I still retire as planned? It is difficult to thrive if we are not aware of how grief affects us. One way to manage grief and ruminating thoughts is to practice mindfulness. Mindfulness is paying attention to the present moment and not judging ourselves. Some people may think mindfulness is just about paying attention to our minds, feelings, and thoughts. But our body actually plays a very important role because it serves as an anchor. While our thoughts often travel to the past or future, our body is always rooted in the here and now. Here are a few things you may try:





1) Mindful Breathing

Mindful breathing is different from deep breathing. Deep breathing is breathing from the diaphragm (rather than the chest) so as to relieve anxiety. Mindful breathing is less about stress reduction (though most people find that to be true). It is primarily a way to cultivate awareness of the present moment. Our breath is a neutral anchor on which we place our attention. Whenever our mind wanders somewhere else, we gently but firmly turn our attention back to our breath.

2) Check in With Your Body

Where am I holding tension in my body today? The three most common places we carry tension are the chest, gut, and jaw. We grind our teeth in our sleep. We feel tight or heavy when we are stressed. This 3-minute body scan may be a good way to help you reconnect with your body. By scanning and focusing your attention on the different parts of your body, you may notice tension in places that you didn't know existed before. Good times to check in with your body may include: when you get up from your desk after a long meeting, after a difficult conversation, or before you go to bed.





3) Grounding

When you start feeling overwhelmed or disoriented, grounding can be a helpful tool. Focusing on each of your five senses can be effective in bringing yourself back to the present moment. As you engage with each sense, be slow and deliberate. Notice how different parts of your body feel as you experience each of the senses.

- **Sight:** Notice one thing that is in your immediate surroundings
- **Smell:** A candle, food stewing on the stove-top, herbs, or a house plant
- **Hearing:** Close your eyes and see if you can differentiate the sounds you hear
- **Taste:** A piece of chocolate, a sip of coffee
- **Touch:** A soft piece of fabric, your comforter, or your pet

4) Repeat a Mantra

Grief can feel disorienting as it often signals a loss of control. We may feel helpless in the face of a pandemic. David Brooks describes the struggles many have with an existential feeling of unsafety. Repeating a mantra that is personal or meaningful can orient and anchor you in moments of uncertainty. A mantra can be a word or a short phrase, “Come, Lord Jesus,” “be still,” “love,” or “peace.” Repeated practice allows the mantra to move from the mind to the heart.





5) Move Your Body

Movement is good because it forces you out of your mind and into your body. You may find walking in solitude particularly helpful to connect with your body during this stay-at-home order. You can do a walking meditation to build awareness of your internal sensations and external surroundings. If you are spiritual or religious, this guide from the Franciscan Order is another option for you to encounter God and pray during a walk. Others have found movements such as gardening or weeding to be helpful.





A Practice in Emotional Regulation: Tending to our Inner Selves

By: Dr. Cynthia Eriksson

Practice attention and emotion regulation using the following.

We can practice attention and emotion regulation using a few simple steps:

Stop

A very simple and powerful thing to do is to stop and breathe. Disengage from destructive and draining thought processes. If you are ruminating, as in cycling over and over a thought, or upset, or if your stomach hurts, no matter what is going on with you, just stop and take a breath. You don't have to stop moving. Often deliberately moving your body helps slow your mind.





For example, sometimes going for a walk outside provides a stop if you are able to pay attention to your thoughts and your body while doing so. It may mean moving to a quiet place and focusing on your breath so that you are able to observe your body and emotions. Or, it may be simply taking 30 seconds to stop where you are and reflect on the bigger picture.

Tune Into Your Body

Tune into your body and what you are feeling physically – scan the body for areas of tension. Notice if you are feeling nauseous, if you are perspiring, if your head aches, if you are breathing more quickly, or if your jaw is clenched. Don't judge, just observe.

Name the emotion

Consider all those physical experiences and reflect upon what emotions you are experiencing – this might be hard at first, especially if you aren't used to allowing yourself to feel certain emotions like sadness or anger. Giving emotions a name, without judgment, is a very powerful path toward resilience. If you don't have a name for a feeling, imagine an emoji.

Don't Judge

Don't judge yourself for having that emotion – God gave us the capacity to have the full range of emotions. We don't get to enjoy the heights of the good ones without the capacity of the depths of the heavy ones. As humans, we feel what we feel. Our emotions are signposts to what matters to us.





Consider the Context

What is happening right now? How might the feelings connect to old wounds? Try to name what it is about the present situation that is bringing up the physical and emotional responses. Try and clarify how wounds of the past might bias how you respond and feel in the moment. Attempt to gain clarity on the significance of the present situation, but try to separate it from past experiences.

Consider the Next Steps

Consider the next steps you might take in the situation. What feels healthy for you and the people you care about? What is needed for this particular situation, to solve a problem, to get support, or to gain a new perspective? Do you need to talk with someone about what you've discovered? Do you need to journal? How might the insight you have gained propel you toward some action? Can you take steps to address something in your community? The goal is to intentionally respond, not automatically react.

Repeat

Practice reminding yourself to “respond, not react” throughout your day. Identify strategies of regulating and reflecting that create the necessary space for you to respond, not react. Maybe it's something like Stop. Tune in. Name. Don't judge. Consider (context and wound). Respond.

This practice is adapted from one in the book, *My Grandmother's Hands*, by Resmaa Menakem.





A Practice: Centering Prayer of Awareness

By: The Thrive Center

Awareness is a practice that allows us to train our mind and body, reorienting to the world around us.

This practice is adapted from the ideas in the Wheel of Awareness by Dr. Dan Siegel.

Introduction:

Awareness is a practice that allows us to train our mind and body, reorienting to the world around us. We access awareness first through our body, and as we become aware of our body, we can then turn our awareness to our thoughts and beliefs, and then outward towards others. As we become aware of others, we can begin to meditate on needs they may have and hopes we have for them. This awareness can include the natural world and the needs of our planet.

As you read through this practice, spend as much or as little time on each question as you need, focusing on those that stand out as most meaningful to you.

Begin by taking a few deep breaths, calming the body.





Become aware of yourself:

- What are you currently feeling in your body? Consider your five senses (smell, touch, taste, hearing, sight), which bring in outside information, and notice what is happening inside your body (muscle tension, pain, relaxation). Observe these feelings without judging.
- What is your mind focusing on? Are your thoughts drifting towards something?
- Observe your emotions. What emotions are influencing your mind and body right now?
- Take another deep breath and, as you exhale, release each of these feelings, thoughts, and observations.
- Guide your focus back to your breath.

Become aware of others:

- Envision the people closest to you. Consider your connection with each person, beginning with the one that stands out most.
- Who makes you smile? Does anyone make you feel tense? How do these relationships influence your life?
- Take a moment to focus on our interconnectedness with one another.
- Guide your focus back to your breath as you exhale these reflections.

Offer love:

- Bring a loving relationship to mind. What do you hope for this person? Is there a need in their life? Offer something you think would help them (love, compassion, joy, wellbeing, healing, provision, kindness). This may look like a prayer or a mantra for you. "I am sending to."
- Bring a challenging relationship to mind. What makes this relationship challenging? Can you envision their perspective? What can you offer this person that can soften the relationship?
- Guide your focus back to your breath and breathe out your hopes for them.





A Practice: Shift Your Inner Critic to an Inner Nurturer

By: Lauren Van Vranken

Here's how to shift your inner critic to the inner nurturer by teaching your body that you can also find strength in being tender with yourself.



Intro to The Two Arrows Practice

Responding to change with openness can help our nervous system slow down, connect to the present moment, and recenter ourselves in our values. When the unexpected occurs, it is even more critical to tend to ourselves with compassion and kindness, rather than jump to conclusions or become stuck in a cloud of anxiety.

Explore the following practice to cultivate new patterns that allow you to open, be present, and centered in your values.





The Two Arrows Practice

In the teaching of The Two Arrows, life shoots the first arrow – inflicting pain through an unexpected life circumstance, illness, or loss — and in response, we automatically fire a second arrow – often aimed right back at ourselves. The second arrow often adds to our pain and suffering through our thoughts, emotions, and what we tell ourselves and others about our experience. Rooted in a Buddhist teaching of The Two Arrows, psychologists and researchers Ron Siegel and Hillary McBride advocate for mindfully disrupting the process of shooting the second arrow. For example, I shot the second arrow in my thoughts regarding going back to school, limiting my ability to change or respond to changes around me, and instead adding to my inner turmoil about what to do next. I needed to learn to disrupt the process of shooting the second arrow — and accept that while I can't control the first arrow, I can control my reaction to it.

The Practice

Shifting our Inner Warrior Critic to Inner Nurturing Friend: a practice of shifting from tightness and tension to mindfully opening, relaxing our muscles, and providing nurturing care

- Imagine standing in a wide-legged warrior stance with one arm holding an imaginary bow and the other pulling back an imaginary arrow (or, if you are able, assume the posture and engage in the movement with your body) — as you pull back the imaginary arrow, inhale and focus on the pain or distress you are experiencing regarding _____ (change).
- Notice where this pain or tension is living in your body at this moment, and exhale with your focus on this area. Take another breath in and slowly exhale out with a focus on this specific tightness, relaxing your grip on the imaginary bow as you lower your arms and assume a comfortable seated position.





- Continue to breathe in for a count of 4, and slowly exhale for a count of 6.
- What posture would you take to provide nurture to your closest friend if they were in distress?
- Imagine yourself giving the same nurturing support to yourself (or, if you are able, physically move your body in a manner that portrays a posture of nurturing friendship toward yourself).
- This might include wrapping your arms around your shoulders in a hug, rubbing your arms, legs, or head, or stroking your hair.
- Imagine your response to a friend's pain and distress, and then convey the same message to yourself.
- By mindfully shifting attention from the inner warrior critic that aims a second arrow right back at us, we can learn to strengthen our inner nurturing friend. This alternative response gradually disrupts our automatic habits of shooting arrows of self-blame, self-criticism, and worst-case-scenario-predictions. It slows down our nervous system responses and encourages a clearer and kinder approach to our struggle. Safe, gentle touch, even from ourselves, has been shown to reduce pain and increase our ability to release tension and feel comforted.
- While we cannot avoid change or control the changes that occur in our lives, we can learn to respond with kindness, curiosity, and a nurturing presence – without adding more pain or distress in the process.

*See “The Wisdom of Your Body” by Hillary McBride (2021), and “The Mindfulness Solution: Everyday Practices for Everyday Problems” by Ron Siegel (2010)





Breathing Practices to Calm Your Nervous System

By: Jilleen Westbrook

Focusing on and regulating the pattern of our breath can help calm us during emotional storms and connect us more deeply with ourselves.

Why should I focus on breathing when I'm upset?

Adding attention and energy to breathing can help us manage our emotions and open us to a deeper level of understanding, and the internal softening that occurs through breath work connects us deeply with ourselves. As we practice paying attention to the pattern of the inhale and exhale, we settle our bodies and minds, creating space to observe our emotions and thoughts.





When I find myself ruminating or when faced with really difficult situations or news, focusing attention on the pattern of my breath, feeling the flow of air into and out of my nostrils and lungs, provides a sense of calm. Research supports my personal experience and shows that slowing down the breath—extending the number of seconds you inhale and exhale—offers psychological and behavioral changes, such as “increased comfort, relaxation, pleasantness, vigor and alertness, and reduced symptoms of arousal, anxiety, depression, anger, and confusion.” Proper breathing improves health. Anyone who has seen someone hyperventilate knows how anxiety can show up in the pattern of the breath. The recommended first aid solution to hyperventilation is to give someone a paper sack and ask them to breathe into it. The body constantly works to balance oxygen and carbon dioxide, so the paper sack helps the hyperventilating person’s body balance the levels of the gases in the bloodstream. Anxiety can increase the rhythm of the breath, but intentionally slowing that rhythm can counteract the anxiety. When we ruminate or feel anxious, we can find ourselves almost panting, but intentionally deepening the breath changes the level of oxygen and carbon dioxide in our bloodstream and settles us.

There is a rich history around breathing techniques to enhance connection to a sense of transcendence and to other people. Centering prayer uses the breath as a way to settle the body and open us to transcendent love. Sometimes, even more visceral, synchronized breathing connects us. Think about choral singing and the breath patterns of the singers. The communal singing of hymns has the power to heal pain and emotional wounds, in part from the spiritual practice of breathing together. Yoga and other practices that link breath to movement gain power when done in a group where breathing is deepened and synchronized. Focusing on the pattern of the breath—whether alone or with others—creates space for healing and insight into just how connected our thoughts and bodies are.





Breathing Practices to Try

If you find yourself caught in anxiety or a destructive thought pattern, focus on the pattern of your breath, either squaring it or extending the exhale. These simple techniques can bring you back to yourself and to more constructive and purposeful thoughts. Breathing techniques can be used to energize or help to balance us, as well as calm us down. There are techniques that create various patterns with the breath, each affecting the body, mind, and spirit in different ways. You might want to experiment with various types of breathing techniques to see how they affect your body and mood. We like this simple breath practice offered by the Greater Good Science Center.

For more information and resources:

The plasticity of wellbeing: A training-based framework for the cultivation of human flourishing, Cortland J. Dahl, Christine D. Wilson-Mendenhall, and Richard J. Davidson, 2020, <https://www.pnas.org/doi/10.1073/pnas.2014859117>

<https://fullerstudio.fuller.edu/ted-cosse-on-awareness/>

<https://fullerstudio.fuller.edu/the-role-of-mindfulness-in-the-midst-of-pain-the-importance-of-present-focus-attention/>

Pray as you go app

Healthy Minds app

Centering Prayer: Renewing an Ancient Christian Prayer Form Basil Pennington, 1980

Centering Prayer: Sitting Quietly in God's Presence Can Change Your Life, Brian D. Russell, 2021

Breathwork, How to Use Your Breath to Change Your Life (Breathing Techniques for Anxiety Relief and Stress, Breath Exercises for Mindfulness and Self-Care), Andrew Smart, 2020





Grief and Mindfulness: How to Manage Your Emotions

By: The Thrive Center

Dr. Joey Fung discusses the myths of grief, offering 3 ways mindfulness can help us manage our emotions during times of grief.

Introduction

Harvard Business Review recently interviewed David Kessler on [That Discomfort You're Feeling is Grief](#). Most people have heard of Kessler's five stages of grief: denial, anger, bargaining, sadness, and acceptance. He recently added a sixth stage: meaning.

A health care provider recently shared with me that they had gone past the initial stages and had reached the acceptance phase. I accept there are things that are within my control and things that are beyond my control. I feel at peace with whatever happens.

But when sadness and anger resurfaced, they were caught by surprise. They felt disappointed, frustrated, and a sense of despair—again. I thought I had already dealt with those feelings. Why are they coming back?





Myth 1:

You go through the stages of grief only once.

Fact:

You may cycle through some or even all of the stages multiple times. For the health care provider, they went through denial, sadness, and acceptance when the outbreak started. But when their coworker got tested positive for COVID-19, they went through anger and sadness again.

Myth 2:

Everyone goes through all the stages and goes through them in the same order.

Fact:

Everyone experiences loss and grief differently. Not everyone goes through all the stages. Some may never be in denial. Some may never feel a sense of acceptance. Likewise, not everyone follows the stages in the same order. How you process grief is unique to you.

Myth 3:

There is an end goal, and you want to reach it as soon as possible.

Fact:

Processing grief is not a race up a mountain where the top (or the acceptance phase) is the final destination. It is not a linear journey. You are not trying to “graduate” from stage 1 to stage 2, and then stage 3, and so on. There may not necessarily be an endpoint. Even if you have “reached” the acceptance phase, it doesn’t mean that you will not experience grief again.





In order to lead thriving lives, we need to understand and learn how to manage our emotions. If not, they will spill over to other domains of our lives, leading to more conflict, confusion, and pain. How can mindfulness help us manage our emotions in the face of grief and loss?

Be mindful of your emotions in the present moment.

You may cycle through the different stages of grief within a week, or even within a day. You can pause and ask, What am I feeling at this moment? Not only do you not compare your experience to that of others, you resist the temptation to compare yourself with the past (How come I am still feeling how I felt a week ago?) or worry about the future (Will I still be this sad next week?).

Recognize that emotions are not good or bad.

A lot of us tend to think of emotions as good or bad. Happy is good; sad is bad. Peaceful is good; worry is bad. Emotions are not inherently good or bad, nor are they right or wrong. It is how we handle or relate to them that matters. For example, anger may be an unpleasant feeling, but it may also propel you to take social action. In mindfulness, you are encouraged to label your emotions as pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. This is one way to remove good/bad judgment from emotions.

Accept your emotions.

If you label emotions as good or bad, you may think that it is bad to feel sad or that you should strive to feel happy all the time. If so, when unpleasant emotions arise, you may want to avoid or get rid of them. Sweeping them under the rug, so to speak, which tends to cause more pain in the long run. You may also judge yourselves if you see certain emotions as bad or wrong. You may feel disappointed in yourself for feeling sad, or feel bad about feeling bad. These often make matters worse. Mindfulness is acknowledging and fully accepting whatever you are feeling in that particular moment of the day. Change and acceptance often go hand in hand.

