

The Power of Breathing

Objective: Breathing is one foundation of mindfulness. Learning how to feel the breath in your body can help you relax your mind and body, reduce stress and increase your energy level.

Preparation

- Pass out a small piece of paper and ask students to write down 3 to 5 words that describe how they are feeling right now and then turn the paper over. They will come back to it later.
- Students sit comfortably in a chair with both feet on the ground.
- Focus is on inward, not on others.
- Have a chime, non-religious bell or tone on your phone.

Facts

- When you inhale your heart rate increases slightly, and wakes you up.
- When you exhale your heart rate decreases just a little.
- Surface area of the human lungs is roughly the size of a tennis court!
- 70% of the waste in your body is eliminated through breathing.
- Breathing calmly activates the Vagus nerve,* which lets you know you're safe.

Discussion (10 minutes)

- Breathing is something we do 24 hours a day but do we even notice that you are doing it? How often do you think of or put your attention on your breathing? When do you notice your breath? – Allow students to answer.
- What happens to your breathing when you hear bad news? When something scares you? When you get excited? When you are exercising? When you are falling asleep? When do you hold your breath? Why? Have you ever been told you were holding your breath without realizing it? Have you ever tried to control your breathing? When did you do it?. ***What if you could change how you feel by changing how you breathe? (Pause - let that sink in.)*** - Allow students to respond.
- Today we can try some ways of using our breath to help us get “back online” when we’re feeling upset or out of control. Our thoughts and feelings are wired into our bodies, and that’s why it sometimes feels like our whole system gets triggered or shuts down; know what I mean? - *Students can respond.* We have old parts of our brain (“Lizard Brain”) that try to keep us safe by triggering the Fight, Flight or Freeze response when we feel threatened, even when another part of our brain may be telling us that logically everything is OK! The Power of Breathing allows our Lizard Brain to “hear” our more logical brain (pre-frontal cortex) and activates the Vagus Nerve: part of our nervous system that lets us know we’re safe and everything is okay; “Rest & Digest” vs. Fight, Flight or Freeze”

Exercise (7-8 minutes)

IMPORTANT - PLEASE READ/ SAY ALOUD TO STUDENTS: “If at any time you feel uncomfortable or panicky doing breath practice, please try just feeling your feet on the floor or anything that helps you feel better, including opening your eyes, standing up, quietly taking a break or connecting with an adult in the room. You’re not doing anything “wrong” - for some folks using the breath isn’t helpful and it’s pretty common. If you want to keep practicing mindfulness, just try to focus on feeling your hands or feet, or anywhere else in the body that feels safe, relaxed or calm.”

1. With your eyes open, try taking 2–3 deep, slow, replenishing breaths so you can feel it in your body. Breathe in a way that feels good to you. Take a moment just to notice how that feels.
2. Now, if it feels okay, go ahead and close your eyes, or if not use a soft focus* with hands placed comfortably in your lap and feet flat on the floor. Now listen to the *sound of the bell* all the way until it disappears. ... See if you can notice the sensation of your feet on the ground – the slight pressure of gravity and weight. Can you also notice your seat on the chair? And maybe your spine against the back of the chair? Maybe you can feel the sense of the whole body sitting here, or the weight and substance of your body as gravity holds it. Maybe try saying to yourself, “Relax... relax” a few times silently to yourself and see what happens. If you don’t relax, don’t worry – that’s common.
3. Now, let’s try taking two deep breaths together and see where you can you feel the breath the most. Do you notice the sensation most at the nostrils? Your mouth? Throat? Chest? Belly? Check it out. This will be your anchor spot today for your breathing practice –it will be different for each person and maybe even for you at different times.
4. Now let your breath just return to normal. See if you can become aware of your breath without altering it at the place (anchor spot) you found it to be most obvious. Just witness yourself breathing.(1 minute)
5. Now, if you feel comfortable, try changing your breathing pattern: Take a quick deep inhale, let your belly expand and then exhale to a 5–count. *Repeat a 4–5 times as facilitator counts aloud.* ... Notice how you’re feeling. –there’s no right/ wrong answer.
6. Now inhale to a 5–count and exhale to a 5–count –*Students count silently to themselves as they find their own rhythm* (30 seconds or so)
7. Slowly allow your breath to return to its natural rhythm while feeling breath in your anchor spot. Stay just feeling the natural rhythm of your breath for another minute.
8. *Take a moment to notice how you’re feeling now? Teacher rings the bell:* Slowly open your eyes or bring back your gaze to center.
9. On the back of the paper you wrote on at the beginning, please take a moment to write down any words that describe your current feelings. When you’re ready, compare the lists. Did anything change?
10. OPTIONAL: Open Sharing or Topic Question: How might you use this at home or at school? How about with family or friends? Or Q & A for the remainder of time allotted.

* *Soft focus - look down at table, hands or floor 1 to 2 feet in front of you with a soft focus, eyes slightly open*