



Exercise: Creating the three-minute breathing space

This is a mini-meditation which lasts about three minutes. One of the key elements of resilience training is the bringing of mindfulness and meditation skills to everyday life. I invite you to bring mindful attention to routine activities such as brushing your teeth, taking out the rubbish, making a cup of tea (or coffee), feeding the cat, and to walk mindfully when you are walking etc.

The three-minute breathing space is a practice that is specially structured to help us bring mindful awareness into our daily activities.

I suggest that to start with, you set the alarm on your mobile phone to remind you to do this four times a day. Although we start in this rather mechanical and structured way, once we have a bit of experience and are comfortable with the practice, we can use it as required. For example, we can employ the breathing space when we notice an increase in tension in our bodies, or when we feel a situation threatens to overwhelm us. In such moments it may feel that low mood or negativity is about to overwhelm us. In such moments we may decide to extend the exercise to five or ten minutes according to the requirements and possibilities of the situation. The breathing space exercise allows us to steady ourselves. It allows us to see clearly what is happening through direct experiential knowing. It also provides a place from which we can choose mindfully and consciously what next steps are required to respond to the situation in which we find ourselves.

Exercise: Three-minute breathing space

Step 1 Becoming aware: Whether you are sitting or standing, begin by adopting a deliberately erect and dignified posture. If possible, close your eyes. Now bringing your awareness to your inner experience, ask: "What is my experience right now?"

- What thoughts are going through my mind? As best as you are able, acknowledge the thoughts as simple mental events, perhaps putting them into words.
- What feelings are present? Turn towards any sense of emotional discomfort or unpleasant feelings, acknowledging and accepting their presence.
- What body sensations are there right now? Quickly scanning the body for any signs of tension or bracing.

Step 2 Gathering: Now bring the focus of your attention to the breath, to the sensations of your body breathing. Move your attention in close to the sense of breath in the belly. Feeling the belly wall expand/rise as the breath comes in and its fall as you breathe out. Follow the breath as it leaves your



body. Follow the breath all the way out and all the way in, using the breathing to anchor yourself in the present.

Step 3 Expanding: Now expand the field of your awareness around your breathing so that, in addition to the sensations of the breath, it includes a sense of the body as a whole, your posture and your facial expression. If you become aware of any sensations of discomfort, tension or resistance, bring the focus of your attention directly to these sensations by breathing into them on the in-breath; and breathe out from them on the out-breath. You may experience a “softening and opening” of tension. You may find it useful to say to yourself something like, “It’s OK; it’s already there whatever it is, let me feel it”.

Now as best you can, bring this moment of expanded awareness into the moment of your day.

In the first step of the create breathing space exercise we are asked to come fully into the present moment. We simply acknowledge and bring awareness to what is already here in this present moment. We step out of our autopilot, our unconscious “doing” mode. Instead, we intentionally suspend our usual habits of self-judgement and self-criticism; we let go of trying to get somewhere other than where we already are. We practice restraining our usual tendency to fix what the rational/doing mind thinks needs fixing.

Sustaining this open, observing, non-judgemental posture can be tricky. Our old established habits of thinking are like well-worn grooves that easily take us away. So we have the second step: gathering and focussing our attention on a single object: the sensations of breathing, just watching this breath going out, simply watching this breath coming in. In this way we give ourselves a chance to steady the mind and to remain fully in the present, right here and right now.

Having gathered ourselves in this way, we take the third step. We expand the field of awareness to include the whole body. We enter the spaciousness of the being mode “the observing mind”. Then as best we can, we allow the spaciousness of the being mode (the observing mode) to remain with us when we return to what we were doing. These three steps with practice help us shift seamlessly from the domain of the doing mode of the rational mind to the being mode the observing mind.

For many of us, bringing mindful attention into our everyday lives can sometimes be a challenge. This breathing space exercise allows us to make a deliberate change of awareness in any given moment.

©Geoffrey Molloy Sept 2020