

## Being Mindful of Your Emotions Without Judgment

This technique begins with the mindful awareness of your breath. Focus on the feeling of the air moving in through your nose, your chest expanding and contracting, and the sense of your abdomen rising and falling with each breath. After four or five slow, long breaths, you can do one of two things: (1) observe whatever current emotion you may be feeling, or if you can't identify an emotion, (2) visualize a recent event in your life when you experienced an emotional reaction. If you visualize a scene, notice as many details as possible. Try to remember what was said and how you and others acted.

Read the instructions before beginning the exercise to familiarize yourself with the experience. If you feel more comfortable listening to the instructions, use your smartphone to record the directions in a slow, even voice, so that you can listen to them while practicing this technique.

### Instructions

While breathing slowly and evenly, bring your attention to where you are feeling the emotion in your body. Is it a feeling in your chest or stomach, in your shoulders, or in your face or head? Are you feeling it in your arms or legs?

Notice any physical sensations connected with the emotion. Now be aware of the strength of the feeling. Is it growing or diminishing? Is the emotion pleasant or painful? Try to name the emotion or describe some of its qualities. [If you're recording the instructions, pause here for a minute.]

Now try to notice your thoughts. Do you have thoughts about the emotion? Does the emotion trigger judgments about others or about yourself? Just keep watching your emotion and keep observing your judgments. [If you're recording the instructions, pause here for a minute.]

Now imagine that each judgment is one of the following:

- A leaf floating down a stream, around a bend, and out of sight
- A computer pop-up ad that briefly flashes on the screen and disappears
- One of a long string of boxcars passing in front of you at a railroad crossing  
A cloud cutting across a windy sky
- A message written on a billboard that you approach and pass at high speed
- One of a procession of trucks or cars approaching and passing you on a desert highway

Choose the image that works best for you. The key is to notice the judgment, place it on a billboard or leaf or boxcar, and let it go. [If you're recording the instructions, pause here for a minute.]

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Just keep observing your emotion. When a judgment about yourself or others begins to manifest, turn it into a visualization (leaf, cloud, billboard, and so on) and watch while it moves away and out of sight. If you're recording the instructions, pause here for a minute.]

Now it's time to remind yourself of the right to feel whatever you feel. Emotions come and go, like waves on the sea. They rise up and then recede. Whatever you feel is legitimate and necessary, no matter how strong or painful. Take a slow breath and accept the emotion as something that lives in you for a little while and then passes. If you're recording the instructions, pause here for a minute.]

Notice your judgmental thoughts. Visualize them and then let them pass. Let your emotions be what they are, like waves on the sea that rise and fall. You ride your emotions for a little while, and then they leave. This is natural and normal. It's what it means to be human. [If you're recording the instructions, pause here for a minute.]

Finish the exercise with three minutes of mindful breathing, counting your out-breaths (1, 2, 3, 4) and focusing on the experience of each moment as you breathe. If you're recording the instructions, pause here for three minutes.

Looking back on this exercise, you may have found it to be hard work. Watching and letting go of judgments may feel very foreign, very strange. But you are doing something important –you are learning to observe rather than be controlled by judgmental thoughts. We encourage you to do this exercise three or four times before going on to the next step.

Remember, the key steps to the practice of observing your emotions without judging them are as follows:

- Focus on your breathing.
- Notice how you feel inside your body.
- Notice and describe your emotion.
- Notice whether the feeling is growing or diminishing; see it like a wave.
- Describe any new emotions or changes in quality.
- Notice any need to block the emotion, but keep watching.
- Notice impulses to act on your emotion, but keep watching without acting.
- Notice judgments (about self, others, or the emotion itself), and let them go.
- Keep watching until the emotion either changes or diminishes.
- Finish with a few minutes of mindful breathing.

Adapted from: The Dialectical Behavioral Therapy Skills Workbook: Practical DBT Exercises for Learning Mindfulness, Interpersonal Effectiveness, Emotion Regulation, and Distress Tolerance by Matthew McKay, PhD; Jeffrey C. Wood, PsyD; and Jeffrey Brantley, MD