



Tools for Tension

Introduction

Mindfulness encompasses a wide range of practices ranging from informal exercises, to formal meditation, to intensive retreats. Starting out with a formal meditation practice can feel intimidating. For today, the goal is simply to incorporate a number of small mindful moments into your daily routine. These exercises help reduce tension by calming, soothing, or grounding you. What does grounding mean? Anxiety and overwhelm can sometimes make you feel as though your energy and focus is shattered into a million different pieces, each shouting for your attention and claiming equal urgency. A grounding exercise helps to slow or still the whirling chaos, or at least locate it outside of you, such that deliberate, sequential action is possible. Grounding reminds you that you are the ringleader of the circus, not one of the monkeys.

Exercise 1: Square Breathing (AKA Box Breathing)

My single favorite breath-oriented exercise is square breathing. I find it particularly useful as it can be employed anywhere, at any time, and it isn't necessarily detectable by others. I have personally used square breathing while in front of clients, in front of family members, and during difficult moments in surgery. The only caveat to my previous statement is that it cannot be engaged in while talking.

In the simplest terms, you breathe in through your nose for a count of four, hold your breath for a count of four, breathe out through your mouth for a count of four, and hold your breath for a count of four before beginning again. If you are present with someone, you may prefer to breathe out of your nose to disguise what you are doing.

My personal variation is to match my counting to my pulse. This can be done in company by folding your hands together in front of you with the fingers of one hand wrapping around the wrist of the other. As square breathing is usually initiated when you are in a state of arousal, your heart rate will likely be elevated, such that your counts of four pass very quickly. This is helpful as breathing slowly can be difficult in a state of tension. Then, as the rhythm of your breathing begins to calm you, your heart rate will begin to drop, this will result in longer breathing intervals, which will result in further calming until your breaths are long and slow in response to a resting heart rate if you are sitting, or a baseline heart rate if you are standing.

Exercise 2: Mountain Meditation

The Mountain Meditation is a guided meditation that asks you to cultivate the stance of a mountain. It may sound a little strange, but I ask you to suspend judgement until you have given it a chance. As a grounding exercise, the Mountain Meditation is a fantastic way to prepare yourself before stepping into a chaotic system (in the car before stepping into work) or conversely, a fantastic way to recover following immersion in a chaotic system (in the car before returning home). It is also an exercise easily adaptable for groups. If your staff is willing, completing the exercise prior to starting work may improve team cohesion. For my guided Mountain Meditation please visit: <https://thoughtfullifecounseling.com/mindfulness/mountain-meditation/>

Exercise 3: Body Scan & Progressive Muscle Relaxation

A body scan is an excellent way to check in with your physical self and provides a way to systematically identify areas of tension or stress. Progressive muscle relaxation follows the same systematic pathway through your body, but as you consider each muscle group, you intentionally tense the muscle group as you inhale, then release the tension as you exhale. This exercise can be done sitting or standing and can facilitate falling asleep at night or simply returning your body to a neutral state following a stressful day. For my guided Body Scan visit: <https://thoughtfullifecounseling.com/mindfulness/guided-body-scan/>