

## Mindful Breath Counting

Breathing In the preceding exercises, you may have noticed that your mind tends to wander to bodily sensations, noises, daydreams, plans, worries, judgments, and so forth. This is natural but it can hinder your ability to let go of the stresses in your life and thereby inhibit relaxation. Mindfully counting your breaths provides you with a way to observe your experience that will help you calm your mind, as well as relax your body.

Being mindful means being aware of your experiences in the here and now as an objective and friendly observer without getting caught up in those experiences. An objective observer is like a scientist who steps back and looks at what is happening in an experiment without judgment or expectation, open to learning something new. A friendly observer is compassionate without being swept away by what is going on. Of course, this is easier said than done. Fortunately, the more you practice this mindfulness mindset, the easier it becomes. In addition, each time you lose track of your point of focus (in this case, your breath and the counting of your breaths) and bring it back to your attention, you are strengthening your ability to attend.

1. Practice this exercise sitting up to enhance mindfulness awareness. Later, if you like, you can use it in bed as a technique to help you fall asleep.
2. Use slow, deep diaphragmatic breathing.
3. Count each exhalation to yourself. When you reach the fourth exhalation, start over again at one. Here is how you do it: inhale ... exhale (“one”) ... inhale ... exhale (“two”) ... inhale ... exhale (“three”) ... inhale ... exhale (“four”) ... inhale ... exhale (“one”) ... and so forth.
4. As other thoughts enter your consciousness or as your mind goes blank, simply observe those thoughts or the blankness without judgment or expectation, and then return to counting your breaths.
5. If you lose track of your count, simply start over again at “one.”
6. Optional: If you like, you can label each of your thoughts, feelings, and sensations as they arise. Say to yourself “thought,” “feeling,” or “sensation,” and then return to counting your breaths. You can make up your own labels, but keep it simple. The purpose of labelling is to increase your objectivity and emotional distance from potentially charged material.

7. Continue counting your exhalations in sets of four for ten minutes. Gradually increase to twenty minutes.

Here is an example of a few moments of a beginner's experience with Mindful Breath Counting: Inhale ... "remember to breathe into my belly...that's a thought" ... exhale ("one") ... inhale ...exhale ("two") ... inhale ... exhale ("three") ... "My shoulders are really tight ... sensations ... thought ..." inhale ... exhale ("four") ... inhale ... "Oh, it feels good to let go of that tension ... sensation, feeling, thought ..." exhale ("one") ... inhale ... exhale ("two") ... "Did I lock the front door when I came home? Tension in my chest, holding my breath ... Yes, relief ... thoughts, sensations, feelings ... I can't do this ... thought, remember to breathe ... now where was I? ... more thoughts" ... Inhale ... exhale ("one") ... .



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