BODY SCAN MEDITATION

Difficulty: MODERATE | Frequency: 3X/WEEK | Duration: 5 MINS

WHY YOU SHOULD TRY IT

This exercise asks you to systematically focus your attention on different parts of your body, from your feet to the muscles in your face. It is designed to help you develop a mindful awareness of your bodily sensations, and to relieve tension when possible. Research suggests that this mindfulness practice can help reduce stress, improve your well-being, and decrease aches and pains.

TIME REQUIRED

5 minutes, three to six days per week. Research suggests that people who practice the body scan for longer reap more benefits from this practice.

HOW TO DO IT

The body scan can be performed while lying down, sitting, or in other postures. The steps below are a guided meditation designed to be done while sitting. You can listen to audio of this three-minute guided meditation, produced by UCLA’s Mindful Awareness Research Center (MARC), in the player; if it doesn’t play, you can find it here or download it from MARC’s website.*

Especially for those new to the body scan, we recommend performing this practice with the audio. However, you can also use the script below for guidance for yourself or for leading this practice for others.

1. Begin by bringing your attention to your environment, slowly looking around and noticing that you are safe in this moment.
2. Bring your attention into your body.
3. You can close your eyes if that’s comfortable for you or maintain a soft gaze, with your eyes partially closed but not focusing on anything in particular.
4. You can notice your body seated wherever you’re seated, feeling the support of the chair or the floor beneath you.
5. Take a few deep, long breaths, within the range of what is comfortable for you.
6. And as you take a deep breath, bring in more oxygen, enlivening the body. And as you exhale, you might experience a sense of relaxing more deeply.
7. You can notice your feet on the floor, notice the sensations of your feet touching the floor. The weight and pressure, vibration, heat.
8. You can notice your legs against the chair, pressure, pulsing, heaviness, lightness.
9. Notice your back against the chair, supporting you. If you are not able to notice sensations in all areas of the body, that is OK. We are more connected to certain areas of the body than others, at different times of the day.
10. Bring your attention into your stomach area. If your stomach is tense or tight, can you allow it to soften? Take a breath.
11. Notice your hands. Are your hands tense or tight? See if you can allow them to soften.
12. Notice your arms. Feel any sensation in your arms. Do your best to allow your shoulders to be soft.
13. Notice your neck and throat. Try to allow them to be soft. See if you can invite a sense of relaxation in.
14. Try to soften your jaw. Do your best to allow your face and facial muscles to be soft.
15. Then notice your whole body present. Take one more breath.
16. Be aware of your whole body as best you can. Take a breath. Slowly open up the eyes, without focusing on anything in particular. Allow the head and neck to gently rotate, taking in the space you are in. When you feel ready, you can return to your normal gaze.
* You can also listen to a 45-minute version of the Body Scan that the UC San Diego Center for Mindfulness uses in its trainings in Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction.

EVIDENCE IT THAT WORKS


Participants who attended eight weekly sessions of the Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MSBR) program showed increases in mindfulness and well-being at the end of the eight weeks, and decreases in stress and symptoms of mental illness. Time spent engaging in the body scan in particular was associated with greater levels of two components of mindfulness—observing thoughts, feelings, and physical sensations, and non-reacting to stress—and with increased psychological well-being.

WHY TO TRY IT

Our body can sometimes be a source of pain and negative emotions, whether they are caused by injury or disease, or experiences of discrimination and prejudice. The body scan provides a rare opportunity for us to experience our body as it is, including any difficult feelings that come up, without judging or trying to change it.

It may allow us to notice and release a source of tension we weren’t aware of before, such as a hunched back or clenched jaw muscles. Or it may draw our attention to a source of pain and discomfort.

Our feelings of resistance and anger toward pain often only serve to increase that pain, and to increase the distress associated with it. According to research, by noticing the pain we’re experiencing, without trying to change it, we may actually feel some relief. Even if the pain doesn’t go away, we can take steps to shift our relationship to pain and our relationship to our body in general.

The body scan allows us to work with these types of negative feelings. This practice may also increase our general attunement to our physical needs and sensations, which can in turn help us take better care of our body and make healthier decisions about eating, sleep, and exercise.

SOURCES

Diana Winston, Ph.D., UCLA Mindful Awareness Research Center
Steven D. Hickman, Psy.D., UC San Diego Center for Mindfulness

This practice is part of Greater Good in Action, a clearinghouse of the best research-tested methods for increasing happiness, resilience, kindness, and connection, created by the Greater Good Science Center at UC Berkeley and HopeLab.