COMMON HUMANITY MEDITATION

Difficulty: CASUAL | Frequency: 1X/DAY | Duration: 10 MINS

WHY YOU SHOULD TRY IT

When we encounter other people, it's easy to focus on differences like political opinions, cultural backgrounds, or life experiences. Recognizing our common humanity means acknowledging that we are all humans, facing similar problems. We all experience suffering and stress, loss, and pain. We all want to be loved and experience contentment.

(Of course, not everyone faces the exact same challenges in life, and some groups face more systemic barriers than others. Taking time to acknowledge similarities is a tool we can use at times to combat the tendency to disconnect; it doesn't mean that we shouldn't also recognize unfairness and fight for change.)

Research suggests that the Common Humanity Meditation can not only improve our well-being, but also help us build compassion and identify more with all of humanity.

TIME REQUIRED

10 minutes. Although you may not choose to do this particular meditation every day, it can be something you incorporate regularly into your meditation practice.

HOW TO DO IT

This exercise draws on a guided meditation created by Sean Fargo, a former Buddhist monk and founder of Mindfulness Exercises.

We recommend listening to audio of this guided meditation in the player below; you can also listen at Mindfulness Exercises. We have included an adapted script of this meditation to help you follow it yourself or teach it to others. In brackets are the lengths of the pauses in the original guided meditation, to give you a sense of how much time to allot to each step.

Common Humanity Meditation

Today we'll be practicing acknowledging the similarities between ourselves and others. We often focus on differences, but realizing that even people who seem very different from us in fundamental ways are just like us, can become the basis of real connection.

This can include people we don't know very well, people with whom we're in conflict, or even people who we see as enemies. It's possible to develop a sense of compassion and understanding by coming to feel our shared sense of experience as human beings. This practice can help overcome that sense of difference and distrust by opening channels of compassion.

1. Let’s begin by taking a moment to allow your body to settle in a comfortable position, inviting a sense of ease and relaxation throughout the body [5 seconds].

Breathing full deep breaths with a soft belly [5 seconds].

Feeling grounded by feeling the weight of your body on the ground or your chair [5 seconds].

And just softening around any tightness [5 seconds], dropping the shoulders [5 seconds], softening your hands [5 seconds], and relaxing the muscles of your face and jaw [5 seconds].

And gently closing your eyes or looking downward just to limit visual distractions [5 seconds].

2. Allow yourself to take a deep breath in, and a long breath out. And as you breathe out, allowing a sense of releasing any tension that you're holding in your body [5 seconds].

3. As you breathe, briefly scan through your body with your awareness, noticing any sensations or emotions [5 seconds], just noticing what's predominant for you [5 seconds], and inviting a sense of spaciousness and acceptance for whatever you're experiencing right now in your body or in your emotions [5 seconds], just acknowledging them without judging anything to be good or bad, right or wrong [10 seconds].

4. Now bring someone to mind who you don’t know very well [5 seconds], maybe someone who seems very distant or different from you [5 seconds], even someone you’re in a minor conflict with [5 seconds]. And as you bring to mind this person you may not like or know very well, just notice if you experience any shift in sensation in your body [10 seconds].

Holding this person in mind as if they were right in front of you [10 seconds].

5. And say to yourself, “This person has a body and a mind, just like me” [10 seconds].

“This person has feelings, emotions, and thoughts, just like me” [10 seconds].

“This person has at some point in their life been sad, disappointed, angry, hurt, or confused, just like me" [15 seconds].

"This person has in their life experienced physical and emotional pain and suffering, just like me” [15 seconds].

“This person has experienced moments of peace, joy, and happiness, just like me" [15 seconds].

"This person wishes to have fulfilling relationships, just like me" [15 seconds].

“This person wishes to be healthy and loved, just like me” [15 seconds].

6. Now take a moment to sense how you’re feeling [5 seconds]. And as you hold this person in your awareness, just notice: What do you experience? [20 seconds].

7. Now as you hold this person in mind, send them good wishes. May they be well [5 seconds], may they be happy [10 seconds], may they be healthy [5 seconds], may they live with ease [15 seconds].

8. Now shifting your awareness back to your breath, breathing in [5 seconds], breathing out [5 seconds]. Reconnecting with your body, feeling present, alive, connected, right here, right now.

EVIDENCE IT THAT WORKS

Brito-Pons, G., Campos, D. & Cebolla, A. (2018). Implicit or explicit compassion? Effects of Compassion Cultivation Training and comparison with Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction. *Mindfulness, 9*(1), 1494–1508.

People who participated in a nine-week Compassion Cultivating Training (CCT) program, including the Common Humanity Meditation, were less depressed and stressed and more self-compassionate, mindful, happy, and satisfied with life afterward compared to people on a waitlist. In comparison to a similar program that focused on mindfulness (Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction), CCT helped participants cultivate greater empathic concern and identification with all humanity.

WHY TO TRY IT

Human beings naturally experience more emotional empathy for people who are similar to us, making us more detached from those we perceive as different. Luckily, there are steps we can take to practice skills of empathy and compassion. The Common Humanity Meditation is one such practice, which challenges us to recognize similarities and broaden our circle of concern.

These feelings of connection and belonging to a larger group are a key aspect of well-being. And research suggests that the more similar we feel to others, the more compassion we have for them and the more willing we are to help them, even at a cost to ourselves.

SOURCES

Hooria Jazaieri, Ph.D., Santa Clara University

Gonzalo Brito-Pons, Ph.D., Nirakara Institute

Sean Fargo, Mindfulness Exercises

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.