

Working Your Body: A Mindful Awareness Body Scan

Introduction

James Joyce in “The Dubliners” writes: “Mr. Duffy lived a short distance from his body.” Most people who hear Joyce’s line laugh.

Why?

One answer is that many of us actually live a short distance from our bodies. There can be a disconnect with our bodies. Many of us live in our heads, which may or may not be helpful. However, what if it were possible to increase our bandwidth to tune into our bodies just a little more? What if this extra bandwidth provided data that is important for our health and well-being?

This is the purpose of the body scan—to increase this bandwidth and improve our connection with our bodies. As you scan parts of your body, you may notice important things. For example, you may notice your body is tired and in need of rest. So, rather than pushing so hard, you might back off from your schedule with the intention of caring for your body and see how that changes things.

Practice

Let's begin this practice by finding a comfortable posture. This could be laying down, sitting or even walking. See if it is possible to let your body relax right now—just 5% more. This might mean letting your jaw soften or your shoulders release or your abdomen relax.

Again, just 5%.

Next, take three deep, cleansing breaths. Breathing in deeply into the abdomen. It might resemble or feel like a balloon. If it is comfortable, hold the breath for a few seconds and then exhale, allowing the out-breath to be longer than the in-breath.

Repeat this two more times at your own pace.

Next, bring your attention and awareness to your feet. (Allow 5 to 6 seconds between each body part.)

- The left foot and the right foot.
- Feeling the balls of each foot.
- The heels.
- The arches.
- Feeling where the feet make contact with the floor or other surfaces.
- Feeling the big toes.
- The little toes.
- The toes between the big toes and the little toes.
- Can you feel the spaces between the toes?

If your mind wanders off, this is not a big deal. Not a problem. Simply return to the object of your attention and awareness, which, right now, is the spaces between the toes.

- Next, feeling the top of the feet. (Remember to allow 5 to 6 seconds)
- Feeling temperature.
- Can you feel blood flow?

If you don't really feel anything in one or another part of the body, that's fine. You are simply observing what your experience is in this moment. It doesn't mean you are doing the body scan wrong. Simply note what you observe and bring as much curiosity to this part of the body as you can. You don't have to do anything about what you notice right now.

Next, shift your awareness and attention from your feet up to your chest, or what some people call the heart space. What do you feel in this part of your body?

- Feeling temperature on the skin. (Remember to allow 5 to 6 seconds)
- Feeling the chest as it expands and contracts with each in and out breath.
- Feeling the ribcage—front and back.
- Feeling the diaphragm (the large muscle under your ribs that pulls your breath in) as it rises and falls.
- Maybe you can feel the beating of your heart

Bring your attention and awareness to this part of the body.

If you experience physical pain, you may work with it in two ways. First, you may decide to adjust your position as a way to ease the physical discomfort. Or, second, you may choose to be curious about the sensation. Do you notice pressure? Tingling? The feeling of something sharp? Is it possible to bring your curiosity to these sensations, rather than to automatically push them away?

Next, shift your attention and awareness from the heart to the shoulders and arms. (Again, pause for 5 to 6 seconds for each area.)

- Feel the right and left shoulder. Sometimes, there can be stiffness and tightness in this part of the body. If this is your experience, invite these parts of the body to loosen with each outbreath. What do you feel in this part of the body?
- Move your attention and awareness to the upper arms.
- Feel the skin. The bones. The muscles.
- Now shift down to the elbows.
- Move your attention and awareness to the lower arms. Both the top and the bottom of the lower arms. Noticing what you feel as best as you are able. Allowing it to be as it is.
- Feel the wrists. The palms. The back of the hands.
- Shift your awareness to the thumbs.
- The little fingers.
- The index fingers.
- The ring fingers.
- The middle fingers. We may sometimes have thoughts in our practice. Can you notice them and simply return to the object of your awareness—the middle finger.
- How about the spaces between the fingers?

Shift your awareness and attention to the neck. (Again, pause after each one.)

- The skin around the neck.
- Feel the muscles in the neck.
- The cervical spine.
- Blood flow.
- The throat.

Next, bring your attention to the head and neck.

- Feel the face.
- Feel the mouth.
- The gums.
- The teeth.
- The tongue.
- Feel the nose and the nasal cavities.
- The cheeks.
- The ears.
- The ear canals.
- The temples.
- The eyebrows.
- The eye sockets.
- The eyes.
- The space between the eyes.
- The forehead.
- The top of the head.
- The sides of the head.
- The back of the head.

Next, come back and notice your posture. Scan your entire body and if there are any parts of the body which are tight, contracting or tense. If so, see if it is possible to invite the body to relax right now—just 5% more. This might mean letting the jaw soften or the shoulders release or the abdomen relax. Again, just 5%.

Now, as you are able, take three deep, cleansing breaths. Breathe in deeply into the abdomen. It might resemble or feel like a balloon. If it is comfortable, hold the breath for a few seconds and then exhale, allowing the out-breath to be longer than the in-breath.

Go ahead and open your eyes. Let your body stretch in the way it would like to be stretched.

Now, go out there and have a good day (evening/etc.)!

Questions

1. What do you feel in the body after doing the body scan? And, whatever your experience, can you bring a sense of acceptance or kindness to your experience?
2. If you did this regularly, what is your best guess on how the body scan might impact your health , well-being, relationships and stress level?
3. What might be ways of doing a “mini” body scan during the day? Perhaps, you scan only the feet. Or, maybe the chest.
4. Would you consider doing a “mini” body scan while waiting in line at the grocery store? While waiting for an appointment? When you wake up in the morning? If you wake up in the middle of the night and cannot return to sleep?