

Becoming Mindful of Your World Rather Than Your Anxious Thoughts

Objective: To learn to focus on the world using your five senses rather than just on your anxious thoughts.

You Should Know

Do you often find yourself agonizing over what might happen in the future, worrying about every possible thing that might go wrong, while simultaneously condemning yourself for what went wrong in the past? Being consumed by all this turmoil does not allow you to appreciate or enjoy the moment: your child's sporting event, a birthday celebration, or even a simple night out with your friends.

Anxiety disorders can demand that you ignore what is taking place around you by bombarding you with disturbing thoughts, urges, and images. These unwanted experiences distract you from living your life in the moment and instead encourage you to obsess about a past you can't change and an uncertain future you can't predict or control.

What if you tried to live your life according to the uplifting and freeing principles of mindfulness instead of the rigid rules of your anxiety disorder? Mindfulness encourages you to notice and accept your thoughts, while at the same time not allowing you to be obsessed with them. By teaching you to focus on the present moment in a meaningful, nonjudgmental way, it takes away the power of your anxious thoughts.

Does This Sound Like You?

Pam often found herself lost in a world of what-ifs, where she agonized over what might happen in the future and worried about every possible thing that might go wrong, while simultaneously condemning herself for what went wrong in the past.

What to Do

This exercise will encourage you to draw your attention away from your anxious thoughts and toward yourself, using your five senses as a guide.

Here's what you will do:

- Commit to using your sight, hearing, touch, taste, and smell to channel your thoughts in a purposeful direction.
- Commit to doing this at least once a day for at least three weeks until you become accustomed to focusing your mind on the present.

- Begin by focusing on one sense for at least one to two minutes, taking the time to truly separate that sense from the next as you move from one to the other.

It does not matter what order you practice the five senses in. You can switch them around as you see fit. You can sit in a comfortable position the first few times, and as you become accustomed to performing it you can engage in it at any time or place.

At first this exercise may seem silly to you and even somewhat difficult, but as you continue to practice you will find it easier to incorporate mindfulness into your daily experience until it becomes a natural part of who you are.

Five Senses Mindfulness Exercise

Sight

- Observe what is around you, noticing shape, color, and texture.
- Look for things you would not usually take the time to notice, such as shadows, a crack in the sidewalk, the texture of your bedspread, or any other small details that usually escape you.

Sound

- Take the time to listen to what is in the background instead of what is obvious.
- Don't just notice the sound of laughter, but try to discern different types of laughs.
- Rather than simply listening for the sounds of traffic, try to distinguish horns honking from tires squealing.
- Instead of bristling at loud music, take the time to figure out what genre you are hearing.
- Listen to previously unnoticed sounds, like the hum of the refrigerator, or the clicking of the oven as it cycles on and off.

Touch

- Become aware of the differing feel of everyday items that surround you.
- Alternate touching items that are cold and warm, and notice how they make your hands feel. Touch items with various textures to notice the difference among them.
- Knit, play with play dough, or pet an animal, and notice the sensations in your fingers and hands as you feel your motions unfolding.

Taste

- Take a drink, and notice the feeling of the liquid rolling over your tongue.
- Chew on a piece of gum or candy, and take the time to notice the taste from when you first put it in your mouth until you are finished with it.

Smell

- Focus your attention on your surroundings to notice what different smells are in the air.
- Keep strong-smelling gum or candy with you to quietly smell in order to center yourself when you feel your anxiety rising. Other items such as lavender, perfume, or lotion also can provide a satisfying aroma that invokes mindfulness.

Five Senses Meditation

For a five-day period, set aside at least twenty minutes to practice this meditation, focusing on a different sense each day. For each sense, choose one suggestion from the mindfulness exercise above to focus on.

Five Senses Meditation Chart

Sense	Focus of your meditation	What you noticed	What feelings were aroused?	Notes
Day 1:				
Day 2:				
Day 3:				
Day 4:				
Day 5:				

Reflection

After practicing mindfulness, what did you notice that you had not previously noticed?

Over time, how did practicing mindfulness impact your ability to focus on the present?

What difficulties did you encounter in practicing your mindfulness exercises? What adjustments did you make, if any, to make it easier for you?

How could you integrate the practice of mindfulness into combating your anxiety disorder?

Rate this exercise on a scale of 1 to 4, with 1 being the lowest and 4 being the highest.

This exercise was helpful overall.

___ 1 ___ 2 ___ 3 ___ 4

It helped me learn something new.

___ 1 ___ 2 ___ 3 ___ 4

It helped me reach my goals.

___ 1 ___ 2 ___ 3 ___ 4