

Becoming Mindful of Your World Rather Than Your Anxious Thoughts

Objective: To draw your attention away from your anxious thoughts by using your five senses to focus on your surroundings.

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: 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 cannot change and an uncertain future you cannot 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 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.

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.

- 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 the exercise, 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 feel 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 sniff in order to center yourself when you feel your anxiety rising. Other items such as lavender, perfume, or lotion can also 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 to focus on. Use the following chart to keep a record of your experience.

Sense	Focus of your meditation	What you noticed	What feelings came up?
Day 1			
Day 2			
Day 3			
Day 4			
Day 5			

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 coping with your anxiety disorder?

Reflections on This Exercise

How helpful was this exercise? _____

(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What did you learn from this exercise?

What else can you do to make progress in this area?
