

# FORMAL MINDFULNESS PRACTICES

- **Counting breaths.** Sitting quietly, count “one” as you draw a deep breath in, and “two” as you slowly breathe out, “three” on the inhalation, “four” on the exhalation, and so on. Count up to ten, then start over at one. When you find that your mind is wandering and you’ve stopped counting, simply notice this without judgment and return your focus to breathing and counting.
- **Observing sounds.** Sitting quietly, focus your attention on any sounds that you hear: the sound of your breathing, the sound of people talking in the next room, the sound of air coming through the vents, the sound of the television in the next room, and so on. When you notice your mind wandering, notice it without judgment, then return your attention to whatever sounds enter into your awareness.
- **Observing an object.** Pick up an object, such as a framed photo, a knickknack that sits on the mantle, a piece of jewelry, or a child’s toy, and observe it mindfully. Examine the object with all of your senses, focusing all of your attention on the item. Experience the sensation of touching it. Notice any smell it might have or any sound it might make as you move it around in your hands. When you notice your mind wandering to other things, bring your attention back to observing the object without judging yourself.
- **Observing your thoughts in clouds.** Pretend you’re lying in a field of grass, looking up at the clouds. In each cloud is a thought. Observe the thought as it slowly floats by and label it in terms of what kind of thought it is. For example, when the thought *Am I going to be able to pay my credit card bill this month?* floats by, label it “worrying thought” or “anxiety thought.” When you see the thought *This is a stupid exercise* in a cloud, label it “anger thought” or “judgmental thought,” and so on. As best as you can, don’t judge yourself for the thoughts you’re having or for how you’re labeling them; there’s no right or wrong answer. When you notice you’ve gotten caught up thinking about a thought, simply let it go and notice the next thought.
- **Focusing on a thought.** Choose a meaningful word or a short sentence to focus on, then repeat it to yourself as you focus on your breathing. For example, while breathing in, think “wise,” and while breathing out think “mind.” When you notice that your mind has wandered, don’t judge yourself; simply bring your attention back to the exercise.
- **Being the gatekeeper to your mind.** Pretend that you’re standing at the “gate” of your mind watching thoughts and feelings that are coming through the gate. As best as you can, don’t judge these thoughts and feelings; simply observe what they are so you can become aware of what’s in your mind, just as a gatekeeper must be aware of who’s coming through the gate. Welcome thoughts and emotions as they come through the door, rather than trying to block them. When your mind wanders or you feel yourself trying to stop thoughts or feelings from entering, try to relax and simply observe these things, then go back to watching thoughts and feelings enter. If you find that thoughts and feelings are coming through the gate too quickly, try to slow them down by having each one knock before entering so that you can open the gate, acknowledge it, and then let it through.
- **Being in your body.** Sitting quietly, focus on the different sensations you experience in your body. Notice, for example, the feel of your bottom on the chair or the feel of your arms against the armrests. Observe any tension you may have in your muscles. Notice that you feel cool or that your face feels hot. Acknowledge any emotions you may be experiencing, such as anger about a situation that happened earlier or frustration because you’re finding it difficult to do this exercise. When your mind takes you away from observing physical sensations, simply bring your attention back to the exercise and let the other thoughts go. Another way of focusing on your body is to run a fingernail sharply across your face just between your lip and your nose. Then sit quietly and focus on that sensation for as long as possible; see how long you can feel it. When your mind wanders to other things, tell yourself it’s okay, then bring your attention back to the sensation.