

Mindfulness Worksheet - Past, Present, Future

In the world of meditation and mindfulness, we often talk about the importance of being present. But what does that mean, exactly? Why is it important? And if we deem it important, how can we refine our present-moment awareness?

By taking a big-picture view of the past, present, and future, it's easy to understand how staying present helps us experience safety, happiness and ease.

When our mind is occupied with ruminating over past thoughts and experiences, or when our mind is fixated on what ifs and future thinking, the mind is not rooted in reality. The past and the future are only appearances.

When our ruminations about the past or our worrying about the future are unpleasant, we're robbing ourselves of present-moment contentment. Even if our memories of the past or our thoughts about the future are pleasant, contentment, happiness and peace of mind cannot be experienced anywhere but right here and right now.

By staying rooted in the present moment, we're available for the experience of contentment. We become more fully integrated with reality as it's presenting itself to us right now, and not as it appears in our minds.

In the following meditation, we'll practice noting when our mind gets stuck in the past or the future by attempting to anchor it to present moment awareness of breath.

Meditation on Present Moment

- Take a comfortable seat in a quiet place
- Close your eyes and breathe in and out through your nose
- Stay present, with your attention on the breath
- Notice each time the mind wanders off to a past memory
- Make a quick note of this wandering by silently saying the word 'past,' then return to present-moment awareness of breath
- Notice each time the mind wanders off into future thinking
- Make a quick note of this by silently saying the word 'future,' and return to breath awareness
- Let go without lingering, and come back to the present (awareness of breath) as quickly as you can
- Repeat the above process as often as you need to

- As you get better at staying present with the breath, refine your definition of 'past' and 'future'
- Are you lingering with awareness of the first part of the inhale? Past
- Are you thinking forward to the completion of the exhale? Future
- What does it mean to stay present, exactly?

What Did You Notice?

- Describe your experience with the meditation in general
- Did labeling the wandering of the mind as 'past' or 'future' help you let go and return to the present?
- Do you have a tendency to stay in one or the other? Past or future?
- Describe what it feels like to be fully integrated with the present moment.
- Have you ever had a memory of the past that changed over time?
- Have you ever worried about a future circumstance that never happened?
- How might past experiences cloud your perception of the present?
- How might thinking about the future cloud your perception of the present?
- What would it feel like to experience the present moment, without memory or future thinking involved?
- Describe a time when you experienced complete contentment and joy. In that moment, were you in the past, present, or future?
- Describe a time when you were completely integrated with the present moment, how did it feel?
- How do you think you would benefit from being more present?

For Advanced Practitioners

When we first begin to meditate, we find it challenging to be still in the present moment. Over time, we get better at recognizing when the mind wanders to the past, or jumps ahead to the future, and we get better at quickly returning to the present.

As you get more accomplished with staying present with the breath, you can begin to ever more subtly define the past and the future. For example, practice being present with this one inhale breath. And then, remain present with the first part of the breath, the middle part of the breath, the latter part of the breath, and so on. And then, remain present with this one microsecond of your experience, the first part of that millisecond, the middle part of that millisecond, the latter part, and so on.

The more we drill down into the present moment, the more difficult it is to find.

Review

Past and future are mere appearances in our minds. Our memories of the past, and our worries about the future are always changing. We cannot put a finger on the past or the future and say, that's real, so why are we wasting so much time there?

We spend a lot of emotional energy on rehashing the past, or forward thinking to the future. We unnecessarily waste time in emotional states of unease when past or future thinking is unpleasant.

By relaxing into our present moment reality, we're able to connect with what's real, and connect to the only moment in which contentment is possible. This one, right now.