

Observing

Name: _____ Date: _____

The mindful skill of *observing* involves attuning yourself to your experiences in the present moment by paying attention to the information your senses are giving you. Sensory experiences occur in the present moment. You cannot see, hear, touch, taste, or smell anything in the past or future. You can only engage in sensory experiences in the *now* of existence.

You do this by observing the information your senses are giving you. When you observe the information coming from your senses you bring your conscious awareness into the present moment, without thoughts or feelings about the past or future.

It's not that you're telling yourself not to think about the past or the future, because telling yourself not to think about it is still thinking about it. The more you tell yourself not to think about it, the more you're thinking about it.

Instead, you're using the information that your senses are giving you to shift your conscious awareness away from thoughts about the past and the future and towards experiences in the present moment.

The first step in observing is to focus on one thing at a time. For example, close your eyes for a moment and observe what you might be hearing. Were you aware of these sounds before this exercise called your attention to them? If you hear nothing, were you aware of the silence?

Now look around you. What do you see in the immediate environment? If you were an artist, and you had to draw the things you see around you, how would you see things differently? What would you notice about the shapes and colors around you? What about their proportions relative to each other? What about how the light and the shadow fall on the various objects that you see?

Now notice your sense of smell. Are there any pleasant aromas in the air around you? What about unpleasant ones? What memories do these aromas evoke?

Direct your awareness now to your sense of touch. What do you notice about your body as you read this? If sitting, how does your body contact the chair? If standing, or lying down, what do you notice about how your body interacts with the environment? Is the temperature too hot, too cold, or just right? Is there any tension in your body? Are there any pleasurable sensations? Any pain? Any comfort?

Finally, direct your attention to your sense of taste. Unless you are eating or drinking something it may be hard to experience your sense of taste in the current moment; however, you might experiment by taking a few deep breaths. As the air passes over your tongue can you detect any taste to it, however faint? Are you able to taste the changes in the weather? Don't worry if you have trouble tasting the air at first; it's a difficult skill to learn, but it does indicate the level of awareness and sensitivity that can be achieved through observing.

Experiment for a few moments with observing through your senses in this manner. When you are ready, go on to complete the exercises on the next page.

Observing

Name: _____ Date: _____

For this exercise we're going to practice observing in a natural setting.

First, go outside and find a relatively calm outdoor spot where you will be undisturbed for the duration of the exercise.

To begin focusing on one thing at a time, close your eyes take a few deep breaths in this outdoor setting. Continue breathing until you feel calm and centered. When you are ready, open your eyes and focus on the first thing that catches your attention. Practice observing by answering the questions below.

What is the first thing you noticed?

In observing this thing, is there anything about it you have never noticed before?

What are the visual characteristics of the thing you noticed? What does it look like? What color is it? What shape?

Describe its visual aspects here:

Observing

Name: _____ Date: _____

What are the auditory characteristics of the thing you noticed? Does it make any sounds? If so, describe them here:

Are there any aromas associated with the thing you noticed? If so, describe them here:

Is it possible to touch the thing you noticed? If so, do so now. If not, just imagine what it might feel like to hold this object or to touch it, and describe these sensations here:

Is the object edible? If it is, are there any tastes you might associate with it? If so, describe them here. If not, take a deep breath and see if you notice any taste to the air, and describe it instead:

Observing

Name: _____ Date: _____

Does observing this object in this manner change your experience of it? If so, how?

Now that you have some experience with observing things outside of yourself, let's go on to observing things inside of yourself. Continue to sit quietly in your peaceful outdoor setting. Take a few deep breaths and notice the first thought that comes to mind. What is that thought?

Observing

Name: _____ Date: _____

Review the thought you observed on the previous page.

Just notice this thought, and this thought alone. If this thought tries to lead you on to more thoughts, just gently return your attention to this thought. If you didn't notice a thought on the previous page, you can notice a feeling instead.

Now step back and watch what your mind is doing.

Thoughts and feelings are not who you are; they are just processes of the brain. Thoughts and feelings are not facts. They're just things your brain does.

When observing your thoughts in this manner you develop the awareness that you are not your thoughts. You are not your feelings. If another thought comes into your mind during this process, just notice it without feeling you have to react to it.

It may help to picture your thoughts and feelings like a river. Sometimes negative thoughts and feelings float to the top, and sometimes positive thoughts and feelings float to the top.

If you find yourself in a part of the river where the negative thoughts and feelings are on the surface, your goal isn't to dam up the river. You're not trying to block the flow of thoughts and feelings. You couldn't even if you wanted to. If you tried to stop your thoughts by building a dam on the river, they'd eventually rise up behind the dam until the dam burst and flooded your consciousness.

Instead, if you find yourself floating in negative thoughts, you don't have to let them wash you downstream. You can make a conscious choice to get out of the river for a moment and allow those thoughts and feelings to float downstream on their own. You don't have to stay in the river and drown. Instead, you can choose to sit on the riverbank and watch them flow by.

Do this now by choosing one thought or feeling to observe. Allow yourself to experience it for as long as you'd like. When you feel you are ready, go on to the next page and answer the questions.

Observing

Name: _____ Date: _____

What was the experience of observing your thoughts and feelings like for you? Did you find it easy or difficult?

How similar or different was this to the way you usually experience your thoughts and feelings? Why?

Were you able to avoid the temptation to follow your thoughts and feelings into “snowballing” mode? Were you able to focus on one thing at a time? What, if anything, might have made it easier for you?
