



## HANDOUT 10.2

# Instructions for Focused Breathing

## RATIONALE

One way of dealing with distressing feelings involves decreasing your physiological arousal through a skill we call Focused Breathing. The aim is to slow down your breathing to decrease anxiety, breathlessness, and disorientation. In addition, the exercise is similar to meditation, in that it helps you reduce disorganized thinking or flooding by focusing on a single sensation and single task—namely, breathing.

Focused Breathing can be used to manage states of anxiety, irritation, or anger, and as a meditative tool for feeling calm and grounded. It is also an exercise that highlights the connection between the mind and the body. By clearing the mind of all thoughts and by directing your concentration toward regular breathing, you will experience the influence of mind over body. The relaxation of the body that comes from regular breathing will also reduce the flow of undirected, distracting thoughts, which completes the circle with the influence of body over mind.

Practicing Focused Breathing will help you experience the connectedness and integrity of the body and mind in a positive, healthy way. The ability to engage in Focused Breathing in a meditational fashion is a challenge and takes practice. So do not become discouraged. Practice regularly and with patience, and your skill will develop over time.

## PROCEDURE FOR FOCUSED BREATHING

### Getting Started

Place one hand on your chest and the other on your stomach. Take a slow, deep breath, and pay attention to which hand moves. When you are breathing from your diaphragm, only the hand on the stomach should move up and down, with little movement coming from the chest. It may help to think of how babies sleep—how their stomachs quietly move up and down. Or you might imagine your stomach as a balloon, filling with air and expanding as you inhale, then letting out the air and shrinking as you exhale.

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## Instructions for Focused Breathing *(page 2 of 2)*

### **Slow Down Your Rate of Breathing**

Take in enough air to fill the space under the diaphragm, then let it out slowly. Sometimes breathing out through the nose is easier because your nostrils are smaller openings, which will help slow the rate of exhalation. Pause briefly after exhaling before inhaling again. Some people tend to hold their breath too long at first; the pause should be brief after exhaling. Imagery can be helpful in maintaining a slow and steady rhythm. For example, seeing your breath as a wave, following it as it ebbs and flows, can be a helpful image. Alternatively, imagine climbing up a slide (inhaling) and then sliding down (exhaling), and briefly pausing at the bottom before walking around and climbing up again.

### **Meditational Component**

In order to help slow your thoughts and focus your attention on breathing, count your **breaths as you inhale, and think “Relax,” “Calm,” or some similar thought as you exhale.** Continue counting your breaths until you get to 10, and then start over at 1. It is perfectly natural for other thoughts to come into your mind. Try not to get angry or frustrated; just allow the thoughts to pass through your mind, and bring your attention back to counting as often as you need to. Some people find it helpful to concentrate mostly on the physical **sensation of their breathing, others on the counting or “Relax” statement.** Experiment with different methods, and do whatever works best for you.

### **Practice**

Practice is essential to develop this skill, so that it becomes something you can use to decrease distress in stressful situations. It is best to practice Focused Breathing in a comfortable, quiet place where you will not be disturbed. Take a few seconds to relax, and then practice the breathing exercise for at least 5 minutes. Practicing at least twice a day is the goal. When you are beginning to learn this skill, it is best not to practice when you are already distressed. The idea is that if you practice the breathing when you are in a calm state, it will become a habit that you can then call upon more easily when you are distressed. As you become more skilled at it, you may begin practicing using it in mildly distressing situations, such as when you are feeling impatient while waiting in a line.



## Focused Breathing (Diaphragmatic Breathing Technique)

1. Place one hand on stomach, one on chest
2. Breathe slowly from your stomach, noticing only the hand that's on your stomach move
3. Imagine stomach as a balloon, expanding and shrinking as you breathe
4. Slow down your breath, pausing very briefly after each exhale
5. Count ten slow breaths with calming word:  
1...relax...2...relax...3...relax...
6. Practice for 5 minutes, twice per day

