

Mind and Body Strength

Gentle Listening to the Softening Breath

By Lesley Ann Saketkoo, M.D., M.P.H.

Living with a chronic illness is one of the greatest challenges with which a human heart, mind and body may have to contend. Ability and energy constantly fluctuate and may become less and less available. Symptoms such as pain, difficulty moving or breathing - and treatment side effects - can seem impossibly intrusive while trying to live as we expect to live - as we thought we were entitled to live.

At times, it is a struggle to be able to enjoy the most precious people in our lives; as well as manage the ensuing guilt of not being able to connect - and of the shifting dynamics of our relationships as dependence and independence continuously vie for “new normals”. The toll that worry, helplessness and possible grief are having on our loved ones may be the most discomforting aspect of chronic illness. How can we model and impart strength to loved ones who witness changes in our ability and perhaps even our loss?

People who live with systemic sclerosis (scleroderma) and other connective tissue diseases are some of the most remarkable role models in quickly adapting to and developing strategies to manage multi-dimensional and

profound difficulties. My own father lived with lupus for years before he developed pancreatic cancer. In the beginning, he would not tell us that he had lupus hiding traces of symptoms because he didn't want to hurt us and he didn't want to be viewed as sick. We accepted his strange habits like wearing oven mitts to get things out of the freezer. Only when seemingly catastrophic manifestations, that could not be ignored or hidden developed, he had to talk, explain, involve us and risk hurting us with worry and anxiety. *It was indeed painful* - as was the diagnosis of cancer that came later - but ultimately it was a deepening and tender experience for an already very close family. We were forced to self-reflect - especially when sadness or conflict with each

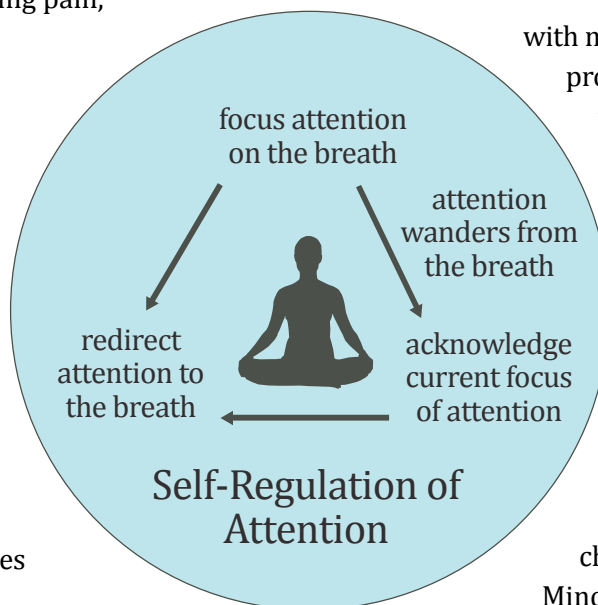


Dr. Saketkoo and her dad, doing yoga which is a mindfulness-based form of exercise.

other’s coping follies became too painful – how changes in symptoms or the issuance of objective test results altered us and who we are to each other - when all we struggled for was peace and comfort for the other.

So, amidst torrents of anxiety and rushes of impending loss, how do we find any peace? Any pockets of calm where we sit well inside of ourselves? Any expanses of ease where we’re able to bask in the bliss and love of those we love? Where can we align with inner resources and stamina to adjust to new levels of ability? How we can find some reprieve from overwhelming pain, nausea, fear or depression?

I don’t know – but experiences tell me *there may be deep strength in softening and vulnerability.* Something already available to and used by most of us – but often haphazardly. These strategies have helped me (and my family) recognize and follow the threads of discomfort back to our best possible selves – a stronger sense of peace while remaining engaged and responsive to the situation at hand. These are techniques that I explored with my dad, share



with my patients, and teach to healthcare professionals and medical students. These techniques are scientifically evident and for decades supported by billions of government research dollars – but often lie outside the purview of standard treatment. These are known as “mindfulness-based techniques”.

These techniques allow attention to fall on the interface of body sensations with the breath; providing relief from a chaotic or painful mind experience. Mindfulness-based techniques have been

Introduction Exercises – Connecting Body with Breath:

Exercise 1: Sit in a chair with bottoms of feet comfortably on the floor, hands resting softly in your lap. The eyes soften to closed or an unfocused downward gaze 4-5 feet in front of you. Sit for 7 minutes. What did you notice that was tough or pleasurable?

Exercise 2: As in Exercise 1, but this time gently rest the hands on the belly, while your attention rests on the changing sensations at the tip of the nose from the flow of air as it moves gently past. Your breathing is gentle and natural. Your attention will wander many times – and that’s okay – just gently invite your attention back to the tip of the nose. How did this compare with exercise 1 for you?

Exercise 3: As in Exercise 2, but now, allow the attention to rest upon another body sensation (of your choosing) that changes as the breath gently flows into and out of the body: perhaps the gentle stretch and deflation of the belly, or the thighs gently pressing and then releasing from against the chair, or the slight stretch and release across the back or shoulder blades. Allow yourself to notice any pleasurable sensations as the breath suspends at the end of in/out breath.

If paying attention to the breath is uncomfortable, it is possible to substitute other anchors such as the sensation of air on the skin, a sound or lack of sound, for example.

used for cancer and chemotherapy-related symptoms for more than a decade; are an effective treatment for fatigue, nausea, insomnia, anxiety, depression, pain and post-traumatic stress, as well as, addiction medicine such as for weight loss, smoking cessation and freedom from substance abuse. Recent studies describe neuro-immunological effects of stress even to the level altering DNA; with these DNA alterations protected against by mindfulness practices.

Mindfulness practice is most often associated with *meditation*. Meditation is *not* the blocking out of sounds, the rest of the world, thoughts or emotions. Meditation is probably best described as *noticing* or perhaps *quiet listening*. It is a non-denominational activity. Dedicated *quiet listening* is the most robust way to strengthen one's "mindfulness muscle". Meditation can involve various techniques of breathing and visualization. However, setting aside time for dedicated meditation or learning complex techniques is often not feasible – and initially, it can be scary to 'be alone'

with oneself. I teach an adapted version of mindfulness; a series of "on the spot" techniques that gradually introduce mindfulness throughout the course of a day. This version has demonstrated durable effects on stress, depression and anxiety in our medical students.

Mindfulness is comprised of four pillars: noticing the **breath** and **body** sensations, noticing strong **emotions** and the **mind's** reaction to strong emotions. Noticing the body sensations that emotion creates provides us with a *physical anchor*. The breath's gentle movement subtly changes that sensation and helps us be quietly grounded.

The mind's healthy focus is displaced when it reacts to strong emotions (shame, disappointment, fear, anxiety, loneliness, anger etc.) by creating unhelpful, distracting or overwhelming thoughts of past or future events. Unhelpful thoughts crowd the mind, taking space from potentially happy, constructive, peaceful and productive thoughts. Recognizing the "runaway brain" breaks the cycle; allowing the mind to rest on the physical sensations of the gentle breath.

The Daily Mind:

1. Sit intentionally for at least 3 to 5 minutes (exercises on previous page) each day.
2. Mindfulness practice is available at any moment of the day. Notice the pattern of your breath for 20-30 seconds each hour of the day (maybe before starting the car, in lecture, at a red light etc.)
3. Three purposeful breaths – use each breath to soften the mind, spine and body (you might try bottoms of feet, eyes, mouth, forehead etc). Perfect for frustrating or anxiety-causing situations: test-taking, rude drivers, mind-fog, etc.
4. The beauty of small things – take moments to notice little pleasures during the day such as the sensation of fingers typing on keys, any pleasurable sensations of walking between routine destinations, the sensation of cloth brushing skin while dressing.
5. Sleep wave – while lying in bed, hands rest on the belly, allow the eyes to soften and close, allow the attention to rest on the rise and fall of the breath under your hands.

Sometimes I encourage imagery: a balmy night, floating either on your back or a raft in a moonlit tropical lagoon; gentle waves rise and fall against the warm sandy shore.

*Remember – to be **gentle** with your mind. When your mind wanders, that's okay – that's what minds do. Think of your mind as an excited sweet puppy that needs **gentle** re-direction. Smile at yourself with wandering.*

Dedicated to my dad, Dr. Goodarz Saketkoo, the Padeshah.

Recommendations for reading and recordings: Thich Nhat Hahn, Pema Chodron, Sharon Salzberg or Tenzin Gyatso the 14th Dalai Lama. NPR podcasts of On Being with Krista Tippett.



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