

■ BODY SCAN

The body scan is a form of meditation that aims to cultivate mindfulness, originally described in the Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction Program by John Kabat-Zinn (MBSR; Kabat-Zinn, 1990).

The body scan, as the name suggests, entails bringing awareness to each part of the body. Participants are first instructed to pay attention to the posture and then direct attention to their breathing. After this, attention is brought to different body parts, starting with the feet and moving up from there. During the exercise, participants pay attention to different physical sensations present in a specific area of the body. After attention has been briefly focused on a particular region of the body, the client is instructed to move on to the next region. During the exercise, many find themselves easily distracted by thoughts, bodily sensations or sounds. When distraction occurs, the client is instructed to gently return his/her attention to the body part at hand. Participants are encouraged to do so without blaming themselves or reacting in frustration, as the occurrence of distracting thoughts or sensations are inevitable and it requires extensive practice until they become less. In addition, when paying attention to the body, one might become aware of painful or unpleasant sensations (e.g. neck or back pain). Instead of altering, ignoring or suppressing these sensations, the client simply notices them on a moment-by-moment basis without judgment.

Most research has addressed the effects of the body scan as part of a training program, like MBSR or Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT; Segal, Williams, & Teasdale, 2002), which makes it difficult to isolate the unique effects of the body scan. However, some studies have addressed the direct impact of performing only the body scan. For instance, a study by Ditto and colleagues (2006) showed that performing the body scan produced greater parasympathetic activation than progressive-muscle relaxation.

► GOAL

Practicing the body scan serves many goals:

- The body scan teaches participants how to recognize and experience physical sensations. Much of our attention focuses on our thoughts and on matters outside our body such as our job, social environment, etc. This creates the risk that we pay only little attention to physical signals. The recognition of physical signals such as tension or restlessness is important especially for the

prevention of stress and burn-out (Shapiro, Astin, Bishop, & Cordova, 2005). The body scan is a method to get more in touch with bodily sensations and signals and to become familiar with them.

- The body scan is a method that allows us to experience how associative and strong the noise is that our thoughts cause. The seemingly simple instruction to keep your attention focused on a body part is often much more difficult than originally anticipated.
- The body scan is a method to repeatedly learn how to draw the attention to a certain point. As the body scan is a method of drawing your attention to a specific point, this is also a form of mindfulness training. The effect of the training of attention in this way can also transfer to other areas, such as focusing (concentrating) the attention on a specific task, a conversation with someone, etc.
- The body scan is a method that also helps participants learn to detect when attention wanders. Being able to notice when attention wanders is a critical component of successful self-control. Within the self-control literature, this function is indicated by the term “monitoring” (for more information see: Carver, 2004).
- The body scan can provide insight into the nature and pattern of thoughts in general. You may notice recurring themes of thoughts or realize how some thoughts are played over and over again like an old record. In sum, the client trains the mind how to perceive.

► ADVICE

Before participants start with the body scan, it may be helpful to advise them of the following:

- It may happen that you get distracted, fall asleep, or that your mind keeps wandering and thinking of other things during the body scan. That’s okay, it happens. It is a part of the exercise, and a challenge of the exercise. There is no right or wrong when it comes to this exercise. The moment you realize that you are not present in the exercise, you are in fact already present to make that observation. Simply realizing that you are not present is a success and the non-presence makes success possible.
- If your mind wanders a lot, be aware of these thoughts as passing events, nothing special. Then calmly bring your attention back to the body scan.
- Concepts or judgments such as “success”, “failure”, “doing really well” or “trying to relax the body” are not to be the main issue or goal of this exercise. The body scan is not a competition; it is not a skill you have to fight for or a goal you have to achieve. The only thing that is important and that really helps is practice.

- Approach your experiences (thoughts, emotions, physical sensations) with an accepting attitude: “that’s just how it is now”. Perhaps look at them briefly, notice them and just carry on with the exercise. If you try to avoid, suppress or expel unpleasant thoughts, feelings or physical sensations, chances are high that they will just come back more often.

► INSTRUCTIONS

- Find a place where you will be safe, secure, and undisturbed.
- Lie on your back, on a firm mat or cushioned floor, arms resting by your side, palms facing upward.
- If you find yourself having a hard time staying awake during the meditation, it may be helpful to open your eyes or prop your head up with a pillow. If neither help, you have the option to move into another position that will allow for wakefulness. Other positions include standing or seated in a chair.
- Let your eyes close and start to focus your attention on the fact that you are breathing. Allow each inhale and exhale to flow through your body. Notice how your body feels with each breath as well as where the breath flows. With each breath, allow yourself to sink deeper into the floor.
- Keep in mind that your mind will inevitably wander through this practice as that is what all minds do. When this happens, notice it, and gently and kindly bring your attention back to the part of the body that you were focusing on.
- As you continue to breathe, on the inhale imagine the breath filling your lungs and then moving down into the belly, into the left leg, and all the way out of the left toes. As you exhale, imagine or feel your breath moving in through your toes, up the left leg, through the abdomen, all the way up into your chest, and finally out through your nose. With a playful approach, practice a couple of cycles of this kind of breathing.
- Use this breathing technique throughout the remainder of the scan. When you notice a tense or unpleasant sensation, breathe into it, and imagine relaxing, releasing, and letting go.
- Begin to notice all the sensations in your body, beginning with the bottom of your left foot. Where is there pressure here? What does it feel like?
- Move from the bottom of your left foot, up the ankle to the left leg, lower leg, knee, upper leg, across the pelvic region, down the right leg. Move into your pelvic region, scanning the front and back of your body. Notice all the sensations that arise and let them go.
- As you focus on each part of the body, observe what there is to see and feel there, without forcing anything to happen. If you don’t feel anything in an area of your body, that’s okay. Simply act as an observer, noticing how your body feels today.

- Continue up through the stomach, upper chest, neck, down the left arm, back up through the collarbone down the right arm, up to your hairline, forehead, and finally face.
- Remember to touch on each small area of every part of your body. For example, you may want to notice what is happening in between your toes, ankles, shoulders, ears, tongue. Investigate every area of the body with gentle curiosity.
- After touching on every point in the body, feel your body as a whole being, breathing in and out, fully alive.