

Self-Regulation Practice

The third part of mindfulness is developing a self-regulation practice. Going back to the caveman days, the human brain has been hard wired with a negativity bias in order to help avoid potential danger. This negativity bias influences how we think, feel, act and relate in our environment and with the people around us. Even though we no longer have to worry about the predator lurking to eat us, whether we are aware of it or not, our brains still scan our environment and seek out confirmation of danger.



Our default is to gravitate towards processing the world through a negative lens and at the slightest indication of a perceived threat, the amygdala, which is the part of the brain that cues the emotional state of fear, sadness, and anger; sends signals to release the hormones that prime our body to focus and act upon the threat; moving us quickly into a fight, flight, or freeze response. The problem is, this is all happening faster than what we can cognitively process. The brain makes a lot of mistakes along the way so that we don't miss the one time that we really are in danger; however, by the time we recognize that there is no threat, our emotional and physical reactions have already been set off as if we really were in danger.

Have you ever been unexpectedly called into your boss' office and assumed it couldn't be for anything good? Or have you ever received a call from someone at an unexpected time and assumed it was bad news? What about seeing a shadow in the night, convinced that you were going to be harmed; only to realize moments later that it was just an "overactive" imagination? In the name of survival, the brain does not presume good intentions. It remembers the one time a specific negative situation either real or perceived happened to you or to someone else and then generalizes it to all other experiences without any evidence that something bad is going to happen.

When we get caught up in the negative energy, it takes a toll on our body, the way we think, and the way we interact with the world. What we choose to pay attention to strengthens over time. At the push of a few buttons, we have instant gratification and immediate access to information, including negatively biased news and social media. This accessibility has us flooded with negative information at all times; it distracts us from engaging positively in the present moment.

We sleep less, move less, and eat foods engineered with less nutrition which are designed to have us craving more. All of this is a perfect storm for a racing mind; unless we make an **intentional** effort to pull back, slow down and live in the moment.

Taken from Terry Fralich's work on Mindfulness, the seven self-regulation techniques below are strategies that you can experiment with to create your own personal practice. Try to keep it simple when you are starting out and see what works for you. Mindfulness does not need to be complicated but it does require practice to train the brain and the body to pay attention in the moment and without judgement.

1. The Exhale –
 - Bring your attention to the exhale.
 - Make the exhale longer than the inhale
 - It can stimulate relaxation when enhanced with a sigh
 - Practice for a minute or two
2. Enhance the exhale –
 - Choose a settling word or short phrase, such as “relax,” “calm,” “let go,” “you’ve got this,” “slow down,” “peace,” “purpose,” etc.
 - Silently repeat this word or phrase as you exhale
3. Imagine –
 - Imagine your body relaxing and softening as you connect with the exhale and repeat your settling word or phrase
4. Positive Visualization –
 - Think of a positive memory, image, or landscape
 - Try to engage some or all of the five senses to strengthen the visualization
 - Use this visualization to shift out of the negative energy and settle into a more neutral or positive state
5. Affirmation, intention, blessing, or prayer –
 - Recite a short saying/prayer that is soothing to you
 - Practice Loving Kindness for yourself or others – i.e. May you find comfort, may you find peace, may you find joy. (selecting the “prescription” to whatever is causing the negativity)
 - Use as a mantra or a way of grounding in the moment to stay present
6. Anchoring –
 - Use the five senses to settle the body and mind, either as outlined or as it may work best for you
 - i. Five things you can see
 - ii. Four things you can feel
 - iii. Three things you can hear
 - iv. Two things you can smell
 - v. One thing you can taste
7. Audible sighing, humming, singing, chanting
 - The vibration touches the vagus nerve and stimulates relaxation
 - The sound disrupts the negativity and refocuses attentions and can have an effect on mood