



FOUR WAYS TO “BE HERE NOW”

We can use many methods to practice focusing our awareness. Each method involves taking a few minutes daily to dwell fully in the present moment.

Some techniques you can apply right away are: making mental notes, using tick marks, involving your body in the process, and handling distractions.

Make mental notes

To practice making mental notes, just choose one activity to do with total attention—fishing, walking the dog, reading the paper, or anything else. Each time your attention wanders away from that activity to a distracting thought, just make a mental note of this fact. You can even say to yourself *distraction*, then gently return your mind to the task at hand.

While you’re making mental notes, remember to release any self-judgments about getting distracted in the first place.

For example, if the lyrics to a song start to bubble up while you’re reading this book, just say to yourself *music distraction* or *song distraction*. Then return your attention to this book. The specific words you use for mental notes are not that important; the act of noticing distractions and refocusing your awareness is.

Make tick marks

Another effective way to focus your awareness is to create a visible record of your distractions.

Say that you notice your attention wandering while you’re taking notes at a meeting. When that happens, make a small tick mark in the margin of your paper. Add another mark each time that you start daydreaming about going to the beach, picturing what you’re going to eat for dinner, or going on any other mental trip that removes you from the meeting.

The purpose of making tick marks is not to give yourself a grade for concentration. Rather, you can use the physical act of putting pen to paper to re-engage your attention.

Bring your attention to your body—or your body to attention

When your mind is drifting, you can engage an old and reliable friend—your body. There are at least two ways to do this.

One is to momentarily bring attention to the state of your body. You can do this as a step to refocus your attention on the task at hand. Scan your body and notice physical sensations. Noticing these sensations as they arise and pass in the present moment is a way to return to the here and now. Once your awareness is focused on the present state of your body, you can redirect it in any way you choose.

A second option is to bring your body to attention. Assume the posture of someone who is fully engaged, active, and alert. Instead of slumping in a chair, move up to the edge of your seat and straighten your spine. Act as if you're waiting for someone to yell "Fire!" Be fully prepared to leap off your seat. Notice what happens to your wandering mind.

Handle the distraction fully, now

Say that you're reading a book and your mind keeps drifting to an argument you had earlier in the day with a coworker.

Faced with this situation, you could apply one of the three techniques mentioned above. Another option is to put down the book, call your coworker, talk it out, and resolve the conflict.

Sometimes a wandering mind is a sign that's worth heeding—a reminder that a problem in the world outside our heads needs to be resolved. What we first label a distraction could be a call to action from a wiser part of ourselves.





“Be” with an orange

When we slow down and “be here now” with simple things, we can experience the ordinary in extraordinary ways.

You can begin with something as simple as eating an orange:

- Notice the color, shape, and surface of the orange. Take three minutes (a full 180 seconds) to observe these characteristics in great detail.
- Now spend another few minutes feeling the orange with your eyes closed. Use your fingers, your forehead, your cheek, your tongue, and the back of your neck. Roll it between your palms. Throw it from one hand to another. (You might want to open your eyes for this part.) Feel its weight and mass. Squeeze it. Will it explode if you squeeze hard enough? What temperature is it? Warm the orange up on your stomach. Does it feel different now? Can you balance it on the top of your head? Will it roll in a straight line?
- Listen to your orange. No kidding. What is the sound of one orange peeling? Are you sure there are no sounds inside your orange? Just put it up to your ear and listen carefully. Will the orange make a sound if you squeeze it? Tap on it with your finger, then with a spoon, then with other objects that are nearby. Compare the sounds. How are they alike and how are they different? How else can you use an orange to make sounds? Will oranges of different sizes make different sounds?
- Without using any type of instrument or utensil, begin dissecting your orange. Will you start at the top, the bottom, or in the middle? How do you know which end is the “top”? Do you use your fingernails or your teeth? Can you peel an orange and keep the entire skin in one piece?
- Use the same strategies you used on the outside of the orange to explore the inside of the peel. The inside is a different color than the outside. Exactly where does the color change? Does it change closer to the outside or inside edge of the peel? How is the inside texture different from the outside texture? Exactly where does this change take place? How many different uses for the peel can you create?
- Now examine what most of us think of as the most important characteristic of an orange: its taste. What does a little piece of that white stuff that we usually try to avoid taste like? What would a whole bunch of it taste like? Put a slice of the orange in your mouth. Will it “melt”? What does it feel like under your tongue? With a slice between your tongue and the roof of your mouth, very slowly squeeze some juice out. Does it squirt, ooze, or do both in different directions?

And just think—we haven’t even begun to consider the growth cycles, chemistry, economics, nutrition, advertising, or politics of oranges. If we look closely enough, we might discover secrets of the universe hidden in a simple orange.

If you get tired of oranges—and have the courage—eat a bowl of cereal this way.



Become a camcorder

You may have used a camcorder—a portable video camera with a built-in microphone. These gadgets have a simple function: to record the sights and sounds that occur in the spot that the lens and microphone are pointed. Camcorders do this without editorializing or making any judgments. Wherever we point them, they just register the details.

There are times when we can benefit by functioning in the same way. Just registering the sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and textures in our immediate environment can help us relax in a matter of seconds. And like the camcorder, we can just register the details in a neutral, objective, nonjudgmental way.

Experiment with becoming a camcorder. Following are some specific details about the outside world for you to “record.” Expand the list with your own ideas.

- The number of steps between your front door and the sidewalk
- Colors of the clothes that your spouse, partner, or children wear
- Locations of objects in a room
- Plants, flowers, and trees in your neighborhood
- Varieties of sound in your environment: traffic, birds, voices, air conditioners, furnaces, machines, and so on
- Smells, colors, textures, and tastes of foods that you eat often
- Colors of the sky and shapes of clouds
- The feeling of your fingers on the keys on a computer keyboard
- The sensation of your clothes touching your skin