



FOCUSED ATTENTION PRACTICES

Focused attention practices are techniques, often short, designed to train your brain to concentrate on a single point (like breath, sound, or sensation) while gently redirecting wandering thoughts, helping to calm or energize the nervous system for better learning, emotional regulation, and task performance by filtering distractions and increasing present-moment awareness. They involve using anchors like breathing, movement, or visualization to build attentional control, leading to clearer thinking and effective results in daily life and studies.

Core Components:

- Anchor: A specific object, sensation, or sound (breath, candle, rhythm) to focus on.
- Focusing: Directing mental energy to the anchor.
- Returning: Gently bringing attention back to the anchor when the mind wanders.

Benefits:

- Cognitive: Improves memory, processing, problem-solving.
- Emotional: Enhances regulation, reduces stress.
- Performance: Allows for deliberate, effective action in complex tasks like driving, studying, or working.

Focused Attention Practice - The Resonance (quality in a sound) of Sound and Breath

Take some belly breaths: A few long, deep belly breaths coupled with calming sounds can provide rhythmic healing to a worn-out nervous system. Before you go to sleep or first thing when you awaken, step outside, and just listen to the night or morning sounds. Sit comfortably,

and for two or three minutes take a few deep breaths, exhaling a few seconds longer than you inhale. Listen to the rhythm of the crickets, morning birds, or any sounds that may arise.

Following a Focused Attention Practice, we create a space and some time for reflection. It can be easy to skip this and just move on, assuming that the experience was useful. But it is important to give everyone a chance to let the moment sink in. What we are hoping to achieve, as well as a moment of regulation, is an opportunity to build on our embodied or disembodied sensory experiences. When we reflect on the moment that we just experienced, it allows growing awareness with adjustments in our practices that might feel safer or calming. Some reflection questions we can ask are:

- How did that make you feel? How did your body respond? What sensations did you recognize?
- Did you like this one? Would you do it again? How would you change this to meet your needs?
- Was that enough time to get what you needed? Or was it too long?
- What sensations did you notice in your body before, during, and after?
- Is there a different way you would have introduced or implemented this Focused Attention Practice?

Focused Attention Practices take time and repetition before they feel more comfortable or enjoyable. We need to give our students and ourselves the time and space to feel more relaxed with them, building endurance in how long we can focus our attention. We begin with just a few seconds and build our attention and focus each day! Students and staff tend to comment that at first, they weren't sure about the practices, because they hadn't had the opportunity to focus on a specific sensation in the past, but once they trust the process they begin to enjoy the practices and start requesting them. If you hear people comment that they feel a little sleepy when you get started, that is normal. With Focused Attention Practices, we don't want to judge how they make us feel. Maybe we can involve more sensory options in our routine: include movement, make breathing quicker or with more intentional inhales than exhales, or create doodling and drawing options within the breathing practice. Focused Attention Practices can take a variety of forms.

What are some ways that we can be creative with our Focused Attention Practices?

- Look online for videos or mindfulness or Focused Attention Practices.

- Some Focused Attention Practices are just about breathing, while others involve a script to follow as you think about a visual image or check in with a body scan.
- Include doodling or drawing images.
- Play music and ask students to notice the different instruments or sounds.
- Play clips of sounds and ask if students can identify them.
- Involve other objects, like lotion, essential oils, ice cubes, weights, stones, or any items that provide a texture.
- Think about what senses you'd like to engage.
 - Taste/mouthfeel: mints, hot candies, sour candies, gum, crushed ice, small chocolates.
 - Visual: breathing GIFs, natural landscapes, screensavers.
 - Touch: Sensory tools like fidgets, tennis balls, Velcro, bubble wrap, kinetic sand, pipe cleaners

We may find that sitting still and doing a Focused Attention Practice is uncomfortable. For some people, being told to sit still and be mindful activates their survival state, which can feel very threatening. That would mean that we are in such immediate danger that we can't escape it and can only freeze like a deer in the headlights. Some of us need to move in order to feel safe.

Focused Attention Practices are great ways to start the day or bridge the energy after transitions. They don't have to be confined to classrooms.

We need to give ourselves time to explore a variety of practices and ask ourselves why we enjoyed one over another. Was there something in our environment that made it difficult for us to immerse ourselves in the experience? These aren't practices that work well when we are trying to multitask or when there is much distraction and chaos, as it takes time and practice to work through those disruptions and share these nuggets of insight without our students. Consider these questions as you review your experience:

- Was it too loud or were there too many visual distractions that kept you from being engaged in your internal monologue?
- What do you need to help you focus? Maybe noise-cancelling headphones and closing your eyes?
- Was it too quiet? Would you benefit from white noise or an audio recording of natural sounds to ease you into comfort?

When we are curious about what makes us comfortable, it allows us to explore and find more of what cultivates ease and safety. And when we feel safe and comforted, we are more regulated, aware, and flexible in our thinking processes.

Co-Regulatory Focused Attention Practices

Our nervous systems are designed to ask the question, “Am I safe?” “Safe” can mean physical safety in the environment or relational safety with those around us. Building collaboration, cooperation, and negotiation often requires time and practice. When we feel felt by another person, our physiological states can sense safety and trust. Co-regulation is sharing embodied experiences with another so that we can both find protection and well-being. Co-regulation can change the power dynamic between two people so that a shared experience brings safety. The ability to self-regulate is constructed from ongoing experiences of co-regulation. We can find a rhythm of safety and collaboration through this dyadic process of predictable, emotionally available, and consistent connections with other autonomic systems. Below are some examples of how we can integrate a combination of Focus Attention Practices through co-regulation to build relationships and a sense of safety and connection in the classroom:

1. Dedicate This One

In this Focused Attention Practice, you will create an image or write down a few words that you want to share with someone you appreciate. As you think of this person, breathe deeply for one minute sharing your love, hope and any words of comfort that you want to send them. Then share your dedication with a partner. You can draw, write out, or visualize your appreciation.

2. Regulating With Your Partner

Choose a partner. Without talking, find a rhythm in your own breathing, and see if your partner can match the breathing rhythm. What about drumming or movement rhythm? Change it up as each person takes the lead. Did you find a pattern, rhythm, or even a beat to your dual breathing or movement? Maybe one student could begin a rhythm, and another could add to it and repeat a few times until they have created a patterned collaborative rhythm.

3. Mirror Me

In this co-regulatory practice, one partner creates a variety of body movements that the other person must mirror. You then switch partners, and the other leads the movements.

4. Dual Drawing and Dual Journaling

Create dual storytelling through journaling, storytelling, or drawing. (This may be something that you and your students have already done.) In this co-regulatory practice, partners share a sheet of paper for one minute. When the time starts, one partner draws a line or shape and then passes it back to the other person for

their line or shape. Continue doing this for one minute without speaking. When the time is up, share your dual masterpiece, giving it a title, and any description that feels appropriate to both of you. You can create the same format with dual journaling or storytelling. For one minute, students pass back and forth a sheet of paper, contributing a sentence or two at a time to create a collective story. You can provide prompts of places, objects, or other themes, connecting the story to what you are learning and to each other. Maybe write about your similarities, differences, interests, passions, etc.

5. **Faces, Eyes, Gestures, and Postures**

It is important to notice another person's eyes, listen to their voice, and watch their gestures and posture. These facial expressions and body languages tell us how someone is feeling, and they are signals for us as we interact with them. To be aware of their body language is to understand how we need to respond.

People "listen" more to body language than the words that people say. It is also very important for us to understand our own body language!

- A. What do you share through your eyes, face, and body when you are angry? Worried? Anxious?

Energizing Focused Attention Practices

1. **Breath of Fire or Dragon Breath**

This is an energizing or sympathetic nervous system breath that helps create attention and energy in your nervous system before you begin an assignment, performance, or an activity requiring concentration and some added energy. For 20 seconds, stick out your tongue and pant like a dog. Try to do this quickly, limiting your breath movements to your belly. Stop and take two long deep breaths. Repeat the breath of fire with your mouth closed for ten seconds, and then sit quietly for a minute and notice any sensations in your body or brain. What do you notice? Can you feel the energy move faster in specific areas throughout your body?

2. **Energize**

In this breath exercise, think of a performer preparing for an event. Take a long deep breath in and then exhale quickly and fast. We see athletes using this breath to prime their brains and bodies before a competitive event. It is important to start with five or ten breaths and then build up to 30, but this takes time. You can use this powerful breath to energize your brains and bodies when you are feeling tired, unfocused, and sluggish.

3. Fist Pumping

Stretch your arms out to each side (shoulder height) with elbows straight, opening and closing our fists with an energizing breath of fire. We begin for 30 seconds. Then we take long, slow, deep breaths and begin again for 30-60 seconds. This exercise brings an oxygen flow to the brain, as your fingers act like a remote control for the brain waking us up with this repetition. Begin to focus on the movement and breath. Flip your hands over, then open and close the fists again for another minute. This strengthens the nervous system.

4. Crossing Movements

Make a fist with the thumb inside and straighten your arms out to a 60-degree angle. Inhale with straight arms, and on the exhale bend them to cross at the forearms in front of your forehead. Next, inhale with straight arms at a 60-degree angle and cross behind your head. When you repeat the cycle 20-30 times, this powerful breath exercise releases calcium deposits in the shoulders and increases an improved blood flow to the brain.

5. Twisting and Swirling

Sitting with legs stretched out in front, place each hand (your open palm) on your temple, just above your ear, and inhale as you twist your trunk to the left, then exhale as you twist to the right. Keep your spine vertical and straight with firm pressure on each temple. Your elbows are out as you twist. This exercise balances the parasympathetic and sympathetic nervous systems with the breath and twisting motions as we energize for focus.

6. Punch and Grab

Standing with your feet about three feet apart, make fists with your hands. One arm at a time, reach in front of you, opening your fist on the inhale and closing it and drawing it back to your body on the exhale. Move back and forth with a powerful inhale and exhale, opening and closing your fists, alternating arms as you pretend to open your hand to what you need on the strong inhale, and then grabbing it as you close your fist and pull your arm back to your body on the strong exhale. This is much like a boxing movement with one arm at a time at any speed that feels comfortable to you. The faster you move, the more energy you create!

7. Push It Away

Clasp hands at chest level and inhale. Then, keeping hands clasped, we push them out in front of us, opening our palms but still clasping our fingers, as our arms straighten with palms facing out. When we push out, this is our exhale. On the inhale, we bring our hands back toward our chest keeping the hands clasped. Do this quickly with a

powerful breath for one minute! (You can imagine a thought or color or something that you want to bring into your life on the inhale, and on the exhale, you can imagine pushing out or away a feeling, thought, or experience that you want to release.)

8. Fly Away

Fly like the most beautiful bird, flapping your wings as you move your arms up and down, fanning the air with your beautiful wings and deep breath! Begin with your fingertips on the ground, and then with straight arms, inhale as you lift your arms above your head so that the backs of your hands touch each other. On the exhale, drop your fingertips to the ground. Repeat this movement with your powerful breath for one minute. This not only energizes your nervous system, but it also builds plasticity. Your arms will get tired very quickly, so try starting with 10-20 arm movements. Build up to 100 in a minute as you continue the breath that aligns with the speed of your movements.

Calming Focused Attention Practices

1. Golden Cord

Imagine a golden cord with a glittering ball attached. The cord connects our chest to our belly. As we take a deep breath in, we see the glittering ball move up along the golden cord into our chest, and as we exhale, we see the glittering ball move back down the cord into our belly. You can imagine this movement happening as fast or slow as you would like. Try this exercise for one minute as you focus on your breath and the vision of glittering movement.

2. Paint Breathing

Each student receives a drinking straw and a dab of acrylic or oil paint on a paper plate or sheet of paper. After you inhale through your nose, you exhale long and slowly through the straw so that the air from your exhale moves the paint around the paper. When you are intentional about a long, low exhale, you activate the parasympathetic pathway, slowing down your heart rate and lowering your blood pressure. This Focused Attention Practice can also be done without paint or a straw; you breathe in through your nose, and then you purse your lips and breathe out long and slow, emptying your belly with all your breath.

3. Labyrinth(Winding Path) Movement and Breathing

Students can use chalk, spray paint, or even yarn or string to create their personal labyrinth path. This can take place in a large indoor area or outside. Instead of a traditional labyrinth, students can also create a maze, an intricate

path with different shapes and passages that begin at a certain point and end at another. The Focused Attention Practice is creating a unique labyrinth or maze design, and then moving through it with deep breaths as you wind around your creation. You can implement these in a variety of ways. Some of the variations might include listening to music while walking, walking backward, taking giant steps that align with your inhale or exhale, or any movement that might be engaging for a particular age group. Classes can also collectively design one large labyrinth or maze.

4. **Butterfly Hug**

Begin by holding your hands in front of you with your palms facing inward. Crossing your hands, interlock your thumbs, and place your interlocked thumbs on your upper chest around the clavicle bone. With fingertips pointed upward, begin tapping your chests as the butterfly wings begin to flutter. As you take deep breaths, your wings can rhythmically match your breaths, or you can just let your butterflies flutter around at their own rhythm and pace. Flutter the wings and breathe intentionally for about 30 seconds, building up to a minute or two. If your butterflies get tired, they can rest on your chest as you take in a few more deep breaths without the fluttering.

5. **Sighing**

With a huge deep breath, let out the largest sigh you can! This is not a scream or shout, but the swirling sound of your voice creates when you let all the respiratory and vocal energy go. Sighing can lead to yawning, and giant yawns are calming to the nervous system. Maybe we try three sighs in a row.

6. **Vision Quest**

We begin by focusing on specific objects in our room or whatever our setting. After we focus on our object for approximately ten seconds, we begin to broaden our gaze and create a gentler, more open vision of our setting, which can directly impact our parasympathetic nervous system. As we focus ten more seconds on this broadened view with our softened vision, our heart rate, respiration, and blood pressure all lower! What did you notice around your first point of focus? What could you see in the corners of our eyes? We share with each other all that we observed and how this experience felt to our nervous system.

7. **Box and the Boat**

Write or draw an image of a worry or something that is troubling you on a piece of paper. Maybe you simply imagine this worry or problem without drawing it. You then place your worries into a real or imaginary wooden box, and then place

that box into an imaginary boat. In your minds, we watch that boat begin to sail away down a long, winding river. As you imagine this scene, you breathe in peacefulness and breathe out your worries. You can do this for a couple of minutes as you breathe deeply with the lifting away of a sadness, worry, or anxious time. You then conclude this Focused Attention Practice with questions: How did this feel? What helped you to work through this problem or challenge? Is there something missing from this practice that you could add? How would you change this practice so that it feels safe and comforting to you? (For inspiration, spend some time with this YouTube video of the view from a boat quietly traveling along the Nile River:

<https://youtu.be/cySBHyKZDsM?si=7divz-RXl6b6ZMjE>

8. Physiological Sigh

Discuss and share how you feel at the moment when, after you have been crying, your tears or sobs suddenly begin to lessen; or what moment when your breathing changes as you begin to relax and fall asleep at night. Your bodies naturally take in one or two quick inhales of breath, and then a long exhale follows. Mammals do this breath without being taught how, because it is the natural way that we release tension, tightness, and stress. (Always model this breath a few times before asking students to try it out)

9. Giraffe Breath

Following the Physiological Sigh, it feels good to do the Giraffe Breath. For this Focused Attention Practice, take a blank piece of paper and turn it vertically. With your eyes closed, or just looking away from the paper, take four long breaths while making a line from the bottom to the top with your inhale, and then from the top to the bottom with your exhale. Part of the challenge is trying to align these lines without looking as if you drew them, increasing your spatial and motor skill awareness. The students will love it!