

■ The Body Scan

THE BODY SCAN is a mindfulness practice in which participants practice bringing nonjudgmental, compassionate present moment awareness to every part of the body, one at a time. When participants become more deeply aware of their body-mind sensations, they may develop insight into the nature of their pain and suffering, and they have the opportunity to free themselves from unhealthy habitual emotional and cognitive reactions to sensations in their bodies. Over time, the body scan can change the way that the brain responds to and regulates visceral nervous signals and emotions, ultimately helping participants come to a healthier nervous system mind-body integration.

The body scan is one of the core practices of mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) and is taught and practiced repeatedly in the MBSR program. In addition, the body scan practice is especially useful in certain situations.

■ “GROUND” PARTICIPANTS’ ENERGY

Many of us spend a lot of time “in our heads,” our attention wrapped up in our own thinking, worries, anxieties, and fears. Children and teens sometimes arrive to sessions with a very scattered energy and attention, as if they are “running on adrenaline.” They may arrive excited, anxious, or stressed about all of the many things going on in their lives. The body scan practice helps to bring awareness into the body, grounding them into the present moment by helping release their awareness from purely in their minds.

■ AWARENESS OF MIND-BODY CONNECTION

In the body scan meditation, participants often become aware of the many ways in which their bodies express the pain, tension, trauma, or stress from their lives and minds. In learning to pay attention to bodily sensations, participants become more attuned to sensations arising from the visceral distributed nervous system, which can carry information (intuition, gut feelings, heartfelt sense) about one’s being that is often hidden from direct consciousness. For participants with psychosomatic pain, the body scan can help them heal their emotional pain and trauma by making peace with and compassionately embracing the physical manifestations of their pain.

■ RELAXATION

Many people find the body scan to be deeply relaxing. Sometimes, just bringing awareness to tense body parts can bring about relaxation or allow participants to relax. On the other hand, the body scan is not a “relaxation exercise” in the sense that the goal of the practice is not

explicitly to relax. Indeed, if we instruct participants to relax during the body scan, that can sometimes have the unintended and paradoxical effect of making them feel inadequate if they are “unable” to relax, and this feeling can trigger more judgmental thinking and more tension. Instead, in the body scan, we practice letting go of specific goals and expectations. This practice of “non-striving” is simply about being present and embracing, with kindness, whatever arises in the body—whether it is pleasant (like relaxation) or unpleasant (like pain).

■ INSOMNIA

Improvement in sleep is often one of the first things that participants in an MBSR training course report. When the body scan is practiced at nighttime before bed, it may help people relax and achieve more restorative sleep.

■ CHRONIC PAIN

The body scan teaches participants to change their relationship with their pain. It can be helpful for participants with chronic pain of somatic or organic origin, and in fact from the perspective of mindfulness, the source of the pain matters less than how we relate to and handle it. The body scan is a useful vehicle for a 3-step process of changing the way one relates to pain. The first step is investigation—sensing into the body, not resisting the pain (by avoiding, denying, distracting, or covering up), and allowing oneself to become deeply aware of the sensations and how the body holds tension and pain. A useful equation is suffering = pain x resistance. Pain may be inevitable, but suffering may be optional and depend very much on our own acceptance of or resistance to the pain. Instead of resisting the pain, the body scan invites participants to simply allow the pain to be there just as it truly is in each moment.

The second step is investigating any cognitive and emotional reactions to pain. For many people, cognitive

and emotional reactions can amplify the physical pain or even cause more suffering than the physical sensation itself. With each breath, participants are guided to observe their thoughts and emotions associated with the pain without getting carried away in those reactions.

The third step of changing one's relationship to pain is learning to live one moment at a time. This step may come with repeated practice over time. With observing the pain over and over again, one may learn to live more deeply in the here and now and handle with the pain one moment at a time, instead of being overwhelmed by maladaptive thoughts like, "The pain will never go away," "I can't handle it," and "I'll never get better."

■ TEACHING THE BODY SCAN

The body scan is traditionally practiced in a lying-down position. This practice can be done in as little as 5 minutes by scanning large segments of the body at a time (for example, the whole lower body). Alternatively, the practice can be extended to 30 or 45 minutes, spending time with each individual body part (for example, each finger or toe) and extra time with body parts that are experiencing pain or stress.

The body scan can be guided by a facilitator or recording, or it can be self-guided. Facilitators who guide the body scan practice should use a warm, soothing tone of voice, which is best grounded in the facilitator's own mindfulness practice. The pace of the guided practice should be unhurried. A bell can be used to help participants bring their awareness to the present moment and to mark the beginning and end of the practice. Participants should be guided to bring awareness to and embrace each sensation in every part of their body without judgment, without any particular goals or expectations, and with kindness and curiosity. A sample script follows.

■ SAMPLE SCRIPT: BODY SCAN MEDITATION

- ▶ Use yoga mats.
- ▶ Body scan.

—*Introduction:* "We're going to try being mindful of how we feel as we let ourselves relax, lying down on yoga mats."

—"Our minds are not separate from our bodies. When our mind is tense and stressed out, our bodies become tense and stressed out. But when we let our bodies relax, that sends a message to our minds to relax as well."

—"Lie down on your back, with your legs flat, your arms by your side, your palms facing up, your head centered. If you want, you can bend your knees.

Close your eyes and mouth. If you would rather keep your eyes open, that's OK too. [*Facilitator, be aware of any discomfort with lying down.*] Bring your attention to your body. Feel the contact of your body with the floor. The softness of the yoga mat. The coldness of the wood. Whatever you feel is OK."

- "Bring your attention to your left leg. How does your left leg feel right now in this moment? Does it feel hot? Cold? Itchy? Tense? Do you have trouble feeling anything at all? However it is feeling right now, just bring your awareness to it. If it is feeling tight or tense, see if you can soften it just a little. If that doesn't happen, that's OK too. Just let the sensations be, and just bring your awareness to it. Whether you are experiencing a pleasant sensation, like relaxation or strength, or an unpleasant sensation, like stress or pain, whatever is happening for you right now is OK; you don't have to change anything, you can just fully accept it in this moment."
- "With mindfulness, we practice embracing each part of our body with our love and attention. We can do this by reminding ourselves to smile to each part of our body or each sensation. As you breathe in and out, you can say to yourself silently, 'Breathing in, I am aware of my leg (*or pain in my leg*). Breathing out, I smile to my leg. Aware of leg. Smiling...'"
- "If you have a sensation in your body, notice it. Watch it. How does it change when you bring your awareness to it? What happens? Does it get more intense? Less intense? What thoughts arise as you become aware of the sensation? What emotions arise as you become aware of the sensation? See if your mind has a habit of creating any stories about your pain or any emotional resistance like anger, frustration, or denial. See if these habits might be pulling you away from the present moment, from a pure awareness of the sensation in your body just as it really is right here and now. Whatever is happening for you is OK. There is no need to change or judge anything. You can simply observe what is happening in your mind and emotions and then bring your awareness back to the present moment, back to your body, with kindness and compassion for yourself."
- [*Vary and repeat for all body parts: right leg, left arm, right arm, belly and chest, face.*]
- "Now let your awareness spread throughout your entire body, allowing every part to be relaxed, feel heavy, soft, sinking into the floor."

- “Thank you for taking a few minutes to take good care of your body and your mind, with kindness and mindfulness.”
- “When you are ready, you can slowly start to wake up your body and bring your awareness back to the room. There is no need to rush. You can start by wiggling your fingers...wiggling your toes...slowly roll to one side...when you are ready, bring yourself to a seated position.”

*Contributed by
Dzung X. Vo, MD, FAAP*

The information contained in this publication should not be used as a substitute for the medical care and advice of your health care professional. There may be variations in treatment that your health care professional may recommend based on individual facts and circumstances.

Copyright © 2014 American Academy of Pediatrics. From *Reaching Teens: Strength-Based Communication Strategies to Build Resilience and Support Healthy Adolescent Development*. Permission to make single copies for noncommercial, educational purposes is granted.