

Activity 0.09 Introduction to Mindfulness

Module: Introduction Module

Duration: 15 minutes

Social Development Themes:

Arts

Summary:

This exercise is a guided meditation that encourages participants to begin to look at who they are, develop skills to be more self-reflective and to reconnect with the senses, something that an arts-based approach encourages.

Learning Outcomes:

Team-building and Networking within the group

Approach

Meditation isn't easy and it can be frustrating and uncomfortable if groups have never done it before. It can also be quite emotional and bring up some difficult thoughts or feelings that we choose to ignore in our daily lives. There may be similar practices in communities so it could be interesting to explore this further. Always give the group the option of opening their eyes if they're finding the exercise difficult with their eyes closed. This activity can be used at any point during your workshop, but is likely to work best at the beginning of any given day, to help centre and refocus the groups thought process.

1. Ask the group to find a space in the room, either in a chair or on the floor.
2. Tell participants that this process is about grounding ourselves in the present; about the here and now. It's also about reconnecting with our bodies and our breath and slowing down – something that can be hard to do in our busy schedules.
3. The group are going to listen to a guided meditation form, in silence, preferably with their eyes closed. Share with the group that it's natural for the mind to wander. When this happens, just try to reconnect with the breath. If participants need to, they can open their eyes and focus on a fixed point in the room.
4. Remind them that this isn't about 'doing it right' and that sitting still and not thinking about anything can be much harder than it sounds.

5. When the group is calm and still, begin to read the script for the meditation. This should be read slowly and clearly. Below is an example but you may wish to choose a similar script which is appropriate for your local context and language – there may be people of different faiths and beliefs in the group and scripts involving references to specific religious beliefs should be handled sensitively.

Sample script

'If you feel comfortable close your eyes... breathe in, breathe out. Feel the weight of your body on the chair, feel the bottom of your feet on the ground, relax your shoulders, breathe... (pause 10 seconds).

When you're ready, begin to focus on the breath, as you feel it going in and out of your body... maybe focus on your belly, as it expands as you breathe in and falls as you breathe out... (pause 10 seconds).

Or maybe focus on the feeling of the air flowing past your nostrils, just being in touch with your breathing wherever you're most aware of it, keeping your attention on the breath for the full duration of each in breathe and the full duration of each out breath... (pause 1 minute).

Allow the breath to remind you to be fully present, to be right here, right now. If you find that your attention has gone somewhere else, notice where your mind has gone and what you were thinking about, and then gently let go and bring your attention back to the breath. Do this again and again, over and over, each time the mind wanders and moves away from the breath try to bring it back (pause 2 minute).

At a certain point, start to become aware of your body as a whole, sitting here, breathing, open to thoughts and feelings, without reacting to them, watching them come and go, like clouds in the sky. Become aware of yourself sitting in the chair, and then expand your awareness to the group as a whole, the other people in the circle, new friends, their stories, their passions... (pause 30 seconds).

Now slowly, bring your attention back to your breathing, the air floating past your nostrils. In your own time, take a deep breath and when you're ready, start to move your fingers and your toes. When you feel comfortable, slowly open your eyes.

Debrief:

Invite participants to turn to the person next to them and share their experience. Did they find it uncomfortable or unusual? How easy was it for the mind not to wander? Were they surprised by any of their thoughts or feelings during the exercise?

In plenary, ask the group whether it could be useful as Active Citizens to develop tools that help us become more aware of ourselves and the things that are around us? How might noticing things we may not have noticed before support development in ourselves and our communities? Could this be a way of experiencing our worlds differently and trying something new?

During a workshop in Khartoum, with participants from Sudan, South Sudan and Ethiopia, participants noticed that the exercise helped them prioritise what's important in their lives. Some felt that it helped them become very present and not be so consumed by the past. One participant found it to be a moving experience for them:

'I felt like it was a way of seeing what's inside my head, what's really there when I slow down. I also realise that deep down we're all just people who are breathing. When we take it back to basics, sat in a circle, in silence, there's not that much that separates us.'

AC facilitator development workshop using the arts approach, October 2015:

Facilitators might want to start or finish each day of the workshop with a similar guided meditation or visualisation exercise. In the mornings it can help the group leave some of their external thoughts and preoccupations outside of the workshop space. Used at the end of the day, it can be a good way of processing some of the thoughts and feelings that may have come out during the course of the day.