

HANDOUT 11

BREATHING TOGETHER

You will need a partner to do this exercise.

- Begin by sitting facing each other, spines relatively erect. Close your eyes, and bring your attention to the sensations of your breath in your belly. Notice how your belly rises with each inhalation and falls with each exhalation. Whenever you find your attention wandering, gently return it to the sensations of the breath. You may notice some feelings of anxiety or apprehension doing this while facing another person. Just allow those feelings to come and go, returning your attention to the breath. Continue for 10–15 minutes.
 - Once you've developed a little bit of concentration, gently open your eyes. Allow your gazes to rest on each other's bellies. Watch the breath of your partner as you also continue to notice the rising and falling sensations in your own body. Perhaps your breathing will start to synchronize; perhaps it won't. Either way, just try to remain aware of your own breathing and that of your partner for the next 5 minutes.
 - The next phase can feel rather intense, so feel free to adjust your gaze as you see fit. Try raising your gaze to silently look into the eyes of your partner. Don't try to communicate anything in particular—just take in the experience of being with him or her.
 - Allow yourself to notice your breath in the background while you focus most of your attention on looking into your partner's eyes. If this starts to feel too uncomfortable, feel free to lower your gaze to your partner's belly again, or even to close your eyes. You can shift back and forth between the belly and the eyes to adjust the intensity of this experience.
 - Once you've gazed into your partner's eyes for several minutes, begin to imagine what he or she was like as a young child. Imagine him or her having a mother and father and growing up with other children. Imagine how he or she went through the same stages you did—going off to school, becoming a teenager, perhaps eventually leaving home. Be aware that your partner has had thousands of moments of joy and sorrow, fear and anger, longing and fulfillment—just like you. Go through the stages of life slowly, one by one.
 - Now begin to imagine how your partner will look as he or she gets older. Be aware that, just like you, your partner will be dealing with the next stages of the life cycle. He or she will probably have to wrestle with infirmity and old age. Imagine how this will be for him or her—both the pleasant and unpleasant aspects.
 - Finally, be aware that, just like you, someday your partner will die. The molecules in his or her body will recycle back into the earth or atmosphere and be transformed into something else.
 - Once you've imagined your partner at all stages of the life cycle, bring your attention back to how he or she looks in the present. Then drop your gaze down to your partner's belly and breathe together again for a few minutes.
 - Finish the exercise with several minutes of meditation with your eyes closed. Notice the different feelings that accompany each phase of the exercise.
 - Finally, open your eyes, and take some time to discuss the experience with your partner.
-

This is a supplementary resource to *Sitting Together: Essential Skills for Mindfulness-Based Psychotherapy* by Susan M. Pollak, Thomas Pedulla, and Ronald D. Siegel (Guilford Press, 2014). Copyrighted material. Permission to reproduce this handout is granted to purchasers of this book for personal use only. An audio recording is available at www.sittingtogether.com.