

Strengthening Your Psychological Flexibility Muscles



Psychological flexibility is a skill that helps us stay connected with our values and the things that we enjoy despite uncomfortable thoughts, feelings, or emotions. It is a skill that requires practice and regular use to maintain. Below are some practices you can use to strengthen your psychological flexibility muscles. These practices are adapted from [Steven C. Hayes' Acceptance and Commitment Therapy toolkit](#).

1

The first skill to practice is being “Open”—that is, approaching life with a willingness to accept our internal experiences rather than resist them. To practice:

Look around the room and choose three objects. Look at each object and think “no, those do not belong—that needs to change!” Repeat this a few times. How does it feel to look at those objects and actively oppose them? Then...

Look around the room at those same three objects. Look at each object and think “yes, those belong as they are—they do not need to change.” Repeat this a few times. How does it feel to look at those objects and actively accept them? Did you feel differently when you were taking a “no” approach versus a “yes” approach?



The important thing to take from this practice is that our internal resistance or acceptance can affect our experience of distress. If we try to avoid or resist an uncomfortable thought, feeling, or emotion, we add to the distress that it's causing. If we accept the uncomfortable thought, feeling, or emotion as part of the human experience, and continue to move on with what is important to us, we minimize our suffering.

2

The next skill to practice is being “Aware.” Being aware is to pay attention to our internal experiences, or to be mindful of what is



happening internally during our external experiences.

Being mindful helps us to stay present in the moment, instead of getting caught up in worrying about the past or the future. Practicing mindfulness does not have to be complicated. You can practice mindfulness in two minutes or less:



Set a timer for two minutes. Rest your feet flat on the floor. Straighten your back, relax your shoulders, and let your hands rest on your lap or at your side. Rest your gaze on the floor. Focus on your breathing. Think about how your breath feels as it flows into your lungs. If your mind wanders, acknowledge it, and then refocus on your breathing. Keep practicing until your timer ends.

How do you feel after practicing for two minutes? Even brief practices can help strengthen our mindfulness muscles! You can incorporate mindfulness throughout your day by doing things “mindfully:” simply slow down and pay attention to what is happening internally. For example: brush your teeth, but slow down and think about each step as you do it. Think about how the toothbrush feels in your hand as you brush your teeth.

Practicing being mindful helps us to stay in the present, even during difficult experiences.

3 The third skill is to stay in tune with our values. There are lots of ways to practice this, but one simple way is to think about how your life might change over the next year and how you can be fully yourself while also supporting the people you care about. Then, take some time to write it down. What will be important to you over the next year? What attributes are important to you, and what kind of person do you want to be? Set a timer for 10 minutes and write down your thoughts.

