

FRIENDLY FOCUSING OVERVIEW

Friendly Focusing is a very simple approach that enables you to develop a specific set of skills that can lead to profound changes in how you experience life's difficulties. It also enhances your enjoyment of the good times in life – so, although many people start to practice Friendly Focusing because they are in a time of struggle, if life is going well for you right now you will probably find Friendly Focusing helps you experience your life more vividly.

Many people are surprised that such a simple set of brief practices can bring about such profound changes – and we encourage you to experiment with the approaches here. Try them out and, if you find them worthwhile, you may choose to continue with them; adapting them as you go along. If you find out they are not for you then you won't have invested too much time in them because they take so little time to do.

Friendly Focusing is a way of directing the attention so that we soothe, and eventually retrain, the automatic emotional systems of the brain. This frees up the resources these automatic systems consume in difficult or distressing situations and allows these resources to be used by the wiser and more creative systems of the brain. These wiser and more creative systems tend to make more resourceful responses to difficult or distressing situations so we move towards what really matters to us and live richer and more fulfilled lives.

Friendly Focusing simply involves really noticing, with friendly interest, whatever is happening right now.

Fundamentally it combines 2 approaches:

- Choosing what we focus the attention on (we call this the Focusing Anchor) and therefore what we are placing in the foreground of our awareness.
- Cultivating a kindly attitude or friendly interest towards ourselves and what we are experiencing each moment.

Friendly Focusing involves 2 simple practices:

- The **Connection Practice**: this is done for moments to a few minutes **during** your everyday, routine activities and as such takes no time out of your day. It involves really noticing the physical sensations present during routine activities such as the sensations of the floor under your feet as you walk. The Connection Practice is the foundation practice and, because it is so easy and can be done in the midst of very busy times, it is the one most people find they integrate into the life as their core practice.
- The **Planned Practice**: this is done initially for a few minutes but can build to longer periods. This is done **between** your routine activities and so does require some planning. It involves directing the attention to a chosen Focusing Anchor – typically a physical sensation such as sensations in your hands, sounds or the breath. You will then notice how the attention is taken away from the Focusing Anchor and how it is to return the attention to the Focusing Anchor.

While we can use the 2 Friendly Focusing practices to enhance our experience of good times it is often times of struggle that trigger interest in these approaches. If, however, we develop our Friendly Focusing skills during times when life is easier we will find we are much more resilient when difficulties arise.

USING FRIENDLY FOCUSING IN TIMES OF STRUGGLE

Most people find it helpful to follow these four main stages to using the Friendly Focusing practices when seeking to find new ways to respond to distressing or difficult situations. It is important to emphasise that the Friendly Focusing approach is designed to work alongside other approaches. This is particularly important in times of more intense difficulty where Friendly Focusing should not be the only approach used. Friendly Focusing is very powerful but it takes time to build up the skills, especially in the midst of a crisis when other approaches may be of more immediate benefit.

The 4 main phases are:

1. Familiarisation and Attention Awareness.

Here the Connection Practice is the key practice. At this stage we are getting familiar with the Focusing Anchors that work best for us in our daily routines. Short periods of the Planned Practice help with getting familiar with noticing the different phases of the Attention Cycle: the series of events that automatically occur whenever we choose to pay attention to something (see separate information sheet on the Attention Cycle for detail)

2. Skill and Resilience Building

Having become familiar with your own preferred Focusing Anchors and how you experience the different phases of the Attention Cycle you can begin to develop the skills that will become useful in the midst of more difficult or distressing situations. At first we train in low intensity situations before later on deliberately using Friendly Focusing in the high intensity situation.

A key point is to choose a Focusing Anchor that is easily available to you in **both** high and low intensity situations – you can imagine yourself in a difficult situation to help you to choose one that will work for you

In different situations you may find that different anchors become more available or seem easier to use. To avoid confusion you may find just using the Focusing Anchor(s) that fit with one particular situation is helpful in the initial stages of learning these skills. Once you get the hang of it then it is easy to develop a set of Focusing Anchors you are familiar with that you can use in different situations.

Once we have identified a Focusing Anchor that is available in both low and high intensity situations we can then use both the Connection Practice and the Planned Practice to develop our Friendly Focusing skills using this particular anchor. At this stage we usually find we can begin to develop the specific attitude of friendly interest in what we are experiencing, moment-by-moment.

Spending time developing a more regular practice of the Planned Practice is really helpful here as this builds up your background resilience so that you have more resources available in difficult situations and your system has time to recuperate and rebuild its strength.

3. Hot-Spot Practice

Once you have become very familiar with using your chosen Focusing Anchor for Friendly Focusing in low intensity situations you can begin to gently explore bringing Friendly Focusing into the high intensity situations: the 'Hot-Spots' in your life. These are the situations where less helpful automatic reactions tend to be triggered: panicky reactions, feeling overwhelmed, outbursts of strong emotion and/or impulses that seem out-of-control.

Usually it is the Connection Practice that is most useful in the midst of the high-intensity situation as it can be done without anyone knowing, just takes a few moments and it doesn't get in the way of you doing the things you need to do.

Before and after the high intensity situations the Planned Practice continues to be helpful in continuing to build resilience and skills so that you can draw on these in the high intensity situations.

What you are doing is developing new pathways in the brain and this opens up possibilities of new ways of responding that retrain the automatic responses that previously dominated.

It is important to be kind to yourself and take this slowly, knowing there will be ups and downs and that occasional setbacks are an important part of the retraining process.

In time you can begin to gently retrain the automatic reactions to the difficult or distressing situation so that you have more and more options available.

It is also important to realise that Friendly Focusing is not about making unpleasant experiences go away. Rather it is about discovering that by approaching unpleasant experiences in a different way they are not so overwhelming and that we can handle the distress we may be feeling without feeling out-of-control.

This creates a greater sense of inner strength and freedom even when we are experiencing unpleasant, distressing or difficult circumstances.

Overall, this is about cultivating a willingness to allow distressing or difficult thoughts, images, memories and/or feelings to be alongside, acknowledging their presence but **choosing** whether to act on them or not. **Willingness** does not mean **wanting or liking**: we can be willing to allow a thought to be present, giving it room and space even just for a moment, but that does not mean we have to want it or like it.

4. Ongoing Practice

In the longer term you are likely to find that particular practices become integrated into your daily routines. This is particularly true for the Connection Practice as it takes no time out of your day.

People work in different ways with the Planned Practice. Some find that one or more periods of the Planned Practice becomes a regular part of most days and they start to miss doing it if they stop doing it. Others find it is something they do in phases that weave in and out of periods of their life. Some people find they just pick up the Planned Practice during times of struggle or difficulty. For some people they only do the Connection Practice and the Planned Practice never was part of their Friendly Focusing practice.

The point here is that there is no one right way to integrate Friendly Focusing into your life – if in the first place you want to do so. Everyone is different and the key is being guided by what works for you in your life with an emphasis on being kind to yourself.

There are many free resources available on the www.friendlyfocusing.com website, with more being regularly added. Resources include free audio tracks providing detailed guidance on Friendly Focusing and a series of helpful articles.