

A GUIDE TO THE CONNECTION PRACTICE

OVERVIEW

Friendly Focusing is a simple approach that works with the different systems in our brain to maximize our inner resources and resilience and enhance our ability to cope with difficulties. When these simple approaches have been integrated into our daily routines we will typically experience less stress, we won't get so bothered by thoughts or worries and we won't feel so overwhelmed or out-of-control in difficult situations.

We are doing Friendly Focusing when we are really noticing, with friendly interest, whatever is happening right now. A great thing about Friendly Focusing is that we cannot get it wrong because it is just about taking a moment or two to notice what we are experiencing right now - whatever is happening and however it is.

Fundamentally it combines 2 approaches:

- Choosing what we focus the attention on 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.

Periods of Friendly Focusing woven into your day create breathing spaces where the automatic stress response systems can come down from higher alert. This frees up resources for the wiser and more creative parts of ourselves to be more active and responsive.

The **Connection Practice** is the name we give to weaving Friendly Focusing into our daily routines. We find this is the most helpful style of Friendly Focusing to begin to do as it doesn't take any time out of your day – especially important for many people in time-pressured situations. Once you get familiar with this you may like to also start doing some short periods of the **Planned Practice**.

The aim here is not to change anything that we are doing – this ensures that starting to do Friendly Focusing is as effortless and as easy as possible. What we are doing is changing how we experience the routine things that we do.

A good example is somewhere we walk everyday. This could be a flight of stairs, a stretch of corridor or the pavement near our front door. Generally when to do something we do everyday we go into autopilot mode – we slip into thoughts, images or memories such as planning what we are going to do next or running over an argument we had.

Friendly Focusing helps us to direct our resources away from struggles with thoughts, images, memories, fantasies and emotions that we ultimately cannot win and towards what matters to us in life. It takes some time to develop these skills so that we can use them in the middle of intense situations. But the good news is that we can do the training in the less intense times – such as during the everyday activities when we tend to drift off into thoughts, images and memories.

You may find the Connection Practice Planner helpful in identifying easy and effortless times in your day that you can start practicing Freestyle Friendly Focusing. The important thing is to start small doing what feels very easy and only building up in small steps. So, rather than beginning to do the Connection Practice many times in the day, it is much more helpful to choose one activity. Then rather than doing it for the full length of that activity again start small, easy and effortless. So perhaps start with ten steps of that routine walk. Once you get into that routine, explore integrating some Connection Practice into another routine. Many little easy and effortless moments of Friendly Focusing are more helpful than an intense block.

SO HOW DO WE ACTUALLY DO THE CONNECTION PRACTICE ?

Setting up the Connection Practice

1. Perhaps having used the Planner mentioned above, you have chosen a routine activity into which you will weave in some Connection Practice.
2. Identify a sensation or set of sensations that will act as the Focusing Anchor for the Connection Practice. The Focusing Anchor can be any sensation that is easy to tune into and notice. This could be something you can see, hear, taste, smell, or feel in your body. Body based feelings can include contact between your feet and the floor, bottom or back and a chair, sensations in your hands, or sensations of the breath. At least when starting, the Focusing Anchor is best if it is something in your surroundings or a sensation in your body. Thoughts, mental images, memories, emotions are not helpful Focusing Anchors in Friendly Focusing practice. There is a list of common Focusing Anchors below. You may also find the Focusing Anchor Checklist and Planner helpful in choosing an anchor. Everyone is different and you will find different anchors that seem to be most helpful in different situations.
3. Decide on an end-by time: this is the maximum you will do but you may finish before then. This can be timed in a number of ways: a timer, a number of breaths or steps. It depends on the activity and the Focusing Anchor you choose.

Doing the Connection Practice

1. Notice the fine detail of the sensations associated with your chosen Focusing Anchor. Whether your Focusing Anchor is something you can see, hear, feel or a mixture, notice what is there to be noticed each moment and any changes, large or small, from one moment to the next.
2. Notice when the attention is taken elsewhere by the automatic systems that also control the attention. You cannot stop the attention being shifted away but you can notice that it has happened and what the attention has been taken off to. This phase of Friendly Focusing is in many ways the most important – it is where we have the most significant opportunities to offer friendly interest to whatever the attention has been taken to and however it is. So when we become aware that the attention has been shifted it is helpful at times to linger a few moments and notice what is occupying the attention. We can explore allowing there to be some room and space for whatever is there just to be as it is, to be doing what it is doing. This includes thoughts, images, memories and emotions. We can explore just allowing what is there to be there for a moment or two.
3. Notice what it is like to return the attention to the Focusing Anchor. We can notice if there is reluctance to return the attention or a wanting to rush back. Sometimes there can be a feeling that the attention is tangled up in pleasant or unpleasant thoughts, images, memories or emotions. However it is, we can notice what the experience of returning the attention is like as we do it.
4. Continue round steps 1-3 until you feel you have done enough or have reached your end-by time.

It is important to note that the aim of Friendly Focusing is **not** to keep the attention solely on the Focusing Anchor the whole time. The aim is to explore, with friendly interest, the experience of each of the steps above. If the attention stayed on the Focusing Anchor the whole time you would miss out on Steps 2 and 3 above and it is these steps that are particularly important in cultivating the 'Friendly' part of Friendly Focusing. It is Step 1

above that is particularly helpful in cultivating the 'Focusing' aspect of Friendly Focusing.

This means that the more times the attention is shifted the better as we have more opportunities to experience Steps 2 and 3 above. This is like going to the gym – the more repetitions of this circuit the better we build up the inner 'mental muscles'.

EXAMPLES OF COMMONLY USED ACTIVITIES AND FOCUSING ANCHORS

For each of these we can notice:

- Any routine chore at home or at work: cleaning, tidying, filing etc.
- The feeling of bedding and the mattress as you rest in bed; the warmth of a hot water bottle.
- The feel of water on your hands and face as you wash them or the feeling of water on the body in the shower.
- The feel of putting on clothing; the feeling of putting on make-up, the smell of perfume/after-shave.
- The feel of a kiss or hug as you say hello or goodbye.
- The texture and taste of some mouthfuls of food or sips of a drink.
- The warmth on your hands from a hot drink.
- The red of a traffic light, the feeling of the wheel in your hands or pedals under your feet as you wait in a traffic queue.
- The sound of a clock, the hum of a fan, the rumble of traffic, the sound of rain or bird song.
- The sound of a kettle boiling.
- The sensations in the feet (temperature, footwear, contact with the floor) as you stand in a queue.
- The sensations in the feet as you walk a particular route.
- The sensations in the feet as you sit at a desk or sit on a bus.
- The sensations in your sitting bones or back as you sit in a chair.
- The sensations in your hands as you dry them in an air blower.
- The sensations in your hands as you hold an object or move your hands against a surface.
- The sensations of wind on your hands or face as you walk along, or warm sun on your skin.
- The sensations in your belly, back or nostrils as your body takes air in and releases it.
- The colours, shapes and movement of something you can see in around of you.
- The play of light in water, reflections in a puddle, clouds in the sky, sunlight through closed lids.
- The sound of the first 3 rings of your phone before you answer it.
- The sound of music you like and perhaps the feel of dancing to it and/or singing along to it.
- The sensations in certain muscles as you do some stretches or exercise.
- The feeling of water on an area of the body as you swim.
- The smell of coffee.
- The sounds of a computer starting up.

It is important to do what seems an easy and effortless length. So if you are going to choose sensations in your feet as a Focusing Anchor you walk the dog, choose just part of the walk not the whole walk and start with perhaps 20 paces starting at a particular point. If this ends up seeming like an effort, do less.

A handy way to time a practice period where there is not an obvious endpoint (like practicing in a queue where you stop when you reach the front of the queue) is to see how many breaths you take over your chosen practice time. So say you plan to notice the feeling of the water on your body in the shower for a minute. You can time how many breaths you take over a minute and then just count to that number of breaths to give a rough period of a minute without the hassle of looking at the time.

It is much more helpful to do a number of shorter easy practices than a longer one that feels like a chore.

It can be helpful to identify a Focusing Anchor that would be available in a stressful situation and practice using this anchor in non-stressful situations. Once you are familiar with using this Focusing Anchor in the non-stressful situation you will find it becomes natural to use this in the stressful situation.

VARIATIONS OF THE CONNECTION PRACTICE

Once you have become familiar with the process of doing the Connection Practice and have found situations in your daily routine into which you are weaving periods of the Connection Practice you may find one or more of the following variations helpful.

Labelling the Anchor

Almost everyone finds that when their attention is taken off into the thoughts and images in the mind that they can get caught up in mental loops, pleasant or unpleasant, and completely lose track of the Focusing Anchor. Noticing this and then exploring how it is to return the attention to the Focusing Anchor is central to Friendly Focusing practice.

However, there are times when the pull of staying with thoughts and images is so strong that most of the practice period is spent off in autopilot, following loops of thought. Some people find it helpful to silently say in their minds a word or two that links to the sensations of the Focusing Anchor. So if you are walking you could simply have the mind say '*walking*' at every step. Or perhaps '*foot*' with one step and '*step*' with the next. If in the shower it could be '*water, water*'.

The actual word is not important – the aim is to be gently saying the word in the mind. If you find this brings you closer to the physical sensations of the Focusing Anchor then this may be a helpful practice for you at this time. If it seems just to increase the busyness of the mind or you start to focus just on the mental words and lose track of the sensations of the Focusing Anchor then it probably is not helpful for you at this time.

The aim is not to drown out other thoughts and images – the attention will still get taken to other thoughts and images that arise in the mind and we will get caught up in these mental loops as we are carried off with them. This is good as it allows us to notice that this is happening and explore returning the attention to the Focusing Anchor. You may find that labelling the thoughts or images or other sensations that have taken the attention away from the Focusing Anchor is also helpful. So you can label a siren going off '*sound*' or a set of thoughts about some future event you start thinking about '*planning thoughts*' or just '*thoughts*'. Having given a simple, general label you can then return the attention to the Focusing Anchor.

Counting

Similar to labelling, some people find silently counting helpful. This can be counting breaths if you are using breaths to time a practice period, counting steps while walking, counting bites of food while eating. The number can be gently repeated if what you are counting takes awhile such as when counting bites of food that you then chew and swallow. A more physical way of counting can be to stroke a thumb or finger along the sides of the fingers of your hand. This can also be done as you mentally count.

Expanding / Broadening the Attention

This involves cycling through 2 different ways to notice the sensations associated with your Focusing Anchor.

When we first start to practice we will often use the attention to notice the Focusing Anchor as if it was a torch on a narrow beam. If we are looking at an object we notice just the object. If we are being aware of our feet we just notice the sensations in the feet and what is in contact with them.

This narrower type focus helps explore the fine detail of what we are experiencing. However, we can also use the 'torch beam' of the attention on a broader 'setting'.

If we are looking at an object we can broaden our awareness to include what is above,

below and to the sides of the object: a 'widescreen' type of awareness.

If we are listening to a sound we can also notice the other sounds that are present alongside the chosen sound.

If we are noticing a certain body sensation, then the awareness can be broadened to include adjacent body areas.

More generally, the awareness can be broadened through including a sense of the body as a whole. So whatever the Focusing Anchor being used, we can at times broaden the awareness out to have a sense of the body: the feet on the floor, the support from a chair or bed, the air on the skin, the feeling of whatever is in contact with or covering the body. We might also include a sense of the breath in the body.

The breath can also be used with other Focusing Anchors: we can have an awareness of the breath as we notice the feet on the floor or the warmth on the skin from pausing to be in the sun etc.

Finally we can broaden the awareness by holding two or more Focusing Anchors in our awareness. For example we can be aware of both the feet on the floor and an object we are resting the gaze upon. Or we could rest hand(s) or arm(s) on our chest, belly or thighs noticing this body contact alongside another anchor such as the contact points between the body and a seat as we sit in a waiting room or on a bus or train.

The ideas above offer some starting point to experiment with and find what sits well with you.

Once you have found ways to broaden your awareness that fits with a particular Connection Practice then the following pattern for practice can be helpful:- but, as ever, adapt this to what works with your way of practicing.

1. Narrower focus period: bringing the attention in to fine focus on the moment-by-moment changing sensations associated with the chosen Focusing Anchor. When the attention is taken away, notice this and return to the narrower focus on the Focusing Anchor.
2. At some point switch over to a broader focus period. This can be particularly helpful if you are finding there is a sense of struggle arising in the narrower focus practice. Perhaps the mind is full of thoughts about how it should be this way or that way. A broader focus can give you a sense of getting some space around the struggle. It often allows a sense of ease or friendliness to come back in to the forefront of your practice.
3. Return again to a period of narrower focus and cycling round these 2 modes.

In time you will probably find that you can broaden and narrow your attention at will – you are essentially training up the mental muscles that allow you to do this. At some point you may find that you can start adding a moment or two of a sense of broadening out throughout the practice. It can be helpful to do this whenever the attention has been taken away from the Focusing Anchor. Once you notice it has been taken elsewhere, you can broaden the awareness out for a moment to connect into the body and/or breath before bringing the attention back to a narrower focus on the Focusing Anchor.

Once again it is helpful to remember that you can't get Friendly Focusing wrong so all these variations are just options to test out, adopting what seems useful and dropping what is not.

MOUNTAIN STANDING PRACTICE

This is a specific variant of the Connection Practice that is helpful when you want to pause and gather yourself together in situations that have or about to throw you into turmoil. The practice below is a slightly adapted version from Trish Bartley's book *MBCT for Cancer*.

This practice is underpinned by research that shows that specific body positions make certain helpful emotional and mental states more accessible (just as others make less helpful states more accessible).

It can be done sitting or standing – just adapt the guidance below to include sensations for a chair if sitting.

Guidance:

Standing, (with your eyes open or closed) ... feeling the contact of your feet on the floor beneath you ... exploring these points of contact ... the quality of the contact ... the texture and focus ... then when you are ready, moving up through the body, checking that the knees are soft ... the pelvis is slightly tucked ... the spine is aligned and tall ... the chin is slightly tucked ... with awareness of the spine rising up through the body, all the way to the top of the back of the crown of the head ...

Once you have established the posture, bringing to mind a mountain and feeling yourself standing like a mountain ... the base of you rooted and grounded, knitted into the crust of the earth ... the height of you like the peak of the mountain, rising up into the sky above ... feeling the whole of your body standing in mountain ...

Then if you would like, opening your eyes, if they have been closed, and letting your gaze fall softly on the floor or ground in front of you ... feeling a strong sense of grounded presence, a sense of the mountain ... breathing gently but more fully as if into the belly of the mountain: strong ... grounded ... tall ... abiding.

Remembering that you can come back to this mountain standing at any point in your day.

KIND HAND PRACTICE

This is a specific practice to cultivate kindness or friendliness to self. It is a Connection Practice based on noticing the sensations between your hand (or arms) and body – usually in the chest or belly area. It includes offering a sense of kindness to self, of self-soothing.

To initially set up the practice take some explore if there is a particular hand position that seems most resonant with being kind to yourself and/or that seems helpfully soothing. To do this, rest one hand gently on the chest and just notice the quality of the contact. Notice if there is a sense of soothing. Explore different areas in the midline or off to one side. Do the same for the belly and perhaps top of thighs. Then repeat with the other hand. Then explore using both hands in the same place or different places. Finally explore using one or both arms to be lightly hugging chest or belly. You will probably find a specific hand or arm position that has more resonance with a quality of self-soothing.

Once a specific hand or arm position has been found, the practice is very straightforward. Simply rest your hand(s) or arm(s) in your chosen position. Notice the sensations that arise – often growing warmth – as you lightly rest your hand(s) or arm(s) on your body. Allow a sense of warmth or friendliness to yourself to arise – if this is a difficult moment perhaps acknowledging this with some kind thoughts towards yourself.

Just the acknowledgement of '*This is hard right now.*' can be helpful in approaching what you are experiencing with a little more gentleness towards yourself.