

Sound Scan Practice

The Sound Scan Practice cultivates our capacity for conscious attention. It also helps develop our capacity to let what is in the mind be present without getting tangled up in repetitive mental loops. This is because the way sounds come and go is quite similar to the way thoughts, memories, images, and feelings in our mind come and go. Just as the changing stream of sounds we can hear flows through our awareness, so the ever changing stream of mental contents passes through our awareness. The Sound Scan Practice helps us be selective about what we chose to engage with from what is streaming through our awareness at any one time. Some things we can chose to engage with, while other things we can just let flow through. What we learn with sounds can be applied to anything else passing through our awareness; so we can learn to allow thoughts, images, memories, and feelings to pass through our awareness without getting so caught up in trying to block them out, change them, or distract ourselves from them.

Consider practicing the Sound Scan Practice twice a day, on most days, for a month.

Setup. Choose any situation where you will be relatively undisturbed for 5-10 minutes. This could be sitting, standing, or lying down. There is no need for this to be a private place – sitting on a bus or in a café can be a great location for this practice. Maximise the sounds available by choosing a place with different sounds present, so perhaps opening a window. You can experiment with having different noises in the room. For example, you could play music (ideally chose instrumental music as voices can easily take you into thinking about the meaning of the words). You could play recordings of natural sounds, or have a clock present or set a windup timer going for a ticking sound. It is good to have a mix of sounds present both from in the room and coming from outside the room. There are free audio tracks, some with timings, at: <https://soundcloud.com/resilienceplus/sets/soundscan>.

Note that if you are practicing in a quiet place, the natural sounds your body makes can become more noticeable. While you could use these as sounds to focus on, it is often more helpful to focus on sounds coming from the external environment to be the focus of for the practice; letting internal sounds just come and go in the background of your awareness.

Look. During the practice have your eyes open. Choose a spot to comfortably rest your gaze on, with your head in a comfortable position. This could be near or distant spot. Blink whenever you need to. If in public, you could rest your gaze on your phone or something to seem to be reading.

Practice Outline

1. **Listening Out – 30 seconds.** Listen to all the sounds you can hear. Notice any that are more constant and any that come and go. If there are quite a few sounds to choose from, identify 3 to 5 sounds that are constantly or fairly frequently present. For those that come and go, get familiar with listening out for them when they are here and listening into the ‘gap’ or ‘space’ they leave when they are not here.
2. **Listening In – 2 minutes.** Pick one sound from those you can hear. For 30-40 seconds, allow that one sound to fill the foreground of your awareness, focusing in on the moment-to-moment details of that one sound. Every 30-40 seconds switch to another sound. Listen in to 4 different sounds over 2-3 minutes (repeat sounds if there are less than 4 present).
 - a. Each time your attention drifts onto something else (whether a thought, another noise, or anything else) gently refocus on the chosen sound. Allow whatever else is present to be in the background, flowing through the background of your awareness. If you find yourself trying to block out other noises or thoughts, just refocus on the chosen sound. Give the chosen sound all your attention, as best you can.

- b. Aim to listen in to the noise of the sound: it is easy to focus more on thinking about the sound or mentally name the sound. Have the noise of the sound in the centre of your awareness while allowing any thinking about the sound to be in the background.
 - c. It can help to have a sense of the chosen sound coming to you, flowing in to your awareness.
 - d. You might find it helpful to have what you are hearing with one ear more in the centre of your attention – as if listening more from that ear. Then swap to the other ear for the next sound and so on.
3. **Switching Sounds** – 1 minute. Start rapidly shifting your attention from one sound to another, briefly listening to one sound before shifting your attention to the next sound. Focus in on one sound for only a few seconds. Listen to the noise of that sound, allowing everything else to flow through the background of your awareness; then, once you have spent a few moments with the chosen sound, swap to another sound. Compared to the previous step, this is like doing rapid repetitions at the gym! If there are only a few sounds, just keep shifting the attention between those available. You can listen into the ‘gap’ where a sound has been for those few seconds or so and then move on to the next sound, even if you didn’t hear the actual sound. Once you shift to another sound, let go of the previous sound so that it moves into the background of your awareness.
- a. As with Step 2, allow the noise of the sound to be in the centre of your awareness. You may find the speed you are doing this step changes the degree to which you find your attention wanders compared to the previous step. Just work with your attention in the way it is, whether it is wandering more or less than before. It is easy to get stuck on one sound and forget to shift: if this happens, just gently shift your attention onto another sound; letting any thoughts flow into the background of your awareness.
 - b. The order of sounds you switch between doesn’t matter – it is the rapid switching and refocusing that is the aim of this stage. So it doesn’t matter whether you swap randomly, in a set sequence, or do some mixture.
 - c. You might find it helpful to have what you are hearing with one ear more in the centre of your attention – as if listening more from that ear. Then swap to the other ear for the next sound and so on.
4. **Soundscape** – 1 minute. Open out, expand, and broaden your awareness to listen to all the sounds you can hear. Explore making more room, space, or depth for all the sounds to be present in your awareness. Experiment with absorbing all of the sounds from the different locations you have identified in the previous Steps. Experiment with being aware of all the sounds you have been listening to, inside and outside the room, at the same time; so you are aware of different sounds simultaneously.
- a. Alongside listening to all the sounds, explore silently counting in your mind how many sounds you are distinctly aware of as separate sounds, heard together. This is more of a sense of knowing than having to repeatedly count in your mind: if you are distinctly aware of 2 different sounds then there can be a mental knowing that 2 sounds are being heard together.
 - b. As in the previous steps, let the noise of the sound be in the centre of your attention and allow everything else present flow through the background of your awareness. Each time your attention gets caught up in something else or drifts off, gently return to this open awareness of all the sounds you can hear.

- c. This part of the practice is often the most unfamiliar and takes practice to begin to get a sense of it. While we are often used to letting all the sounds we can hear flow through us, perhaps like when we listen to music, we can find simultaneously listening to a select number of distinct sounds harder to do. It is common, at the start, to find that only 2 or 3 sounds can be listened to simultaneously for a few moments before our attention gets caught up in just one sound or we just let all the sounds flow through. Regular practice helps cultivate this skill. If there is frustration, tiredness or boredom present at times, this is actually helpful as we can practise bringing our attention back to listening while allowing these feelings to be present in the background of our awareness.
5. **Small Sounds – 1 minute.** As the last part of the practice, listen out for the quietest sounds you can hear, and pick one as the focus for your attention. Quiet sounds are often drowned out by other sounds, commonly triggering flares of thoughts, feelings or other reactions. If such flares happen, allow these to flow through you and go into the background of your awareness. For the time you can't hear the quiet sound, experiment with listening in to 'place' the sound had been coming from.
- a. As you listen in to a quiet sound, you might notice even quieter sounds within or linked to your chosen sound. You can then start to focus in on these even quieter sounds.
 - b. It is easy to strain when listening out for a quiet sound. If you notice you are straining, perhaps with a frowning brow or tense shoulders, invite the tense muscles to ease up a little, perhaps as you are breathing out.
 - c. Each time your attention drifts onto something else (whether a thought, another noise, or anything else) gently refocus on the chosen sound. Allow whatever else is present to be in the background, flowing through the background of your awareness. If you find yourself trying to block out other noises or thoughts, just refocus on the chosen sound. Give the chosen sound all your attention, as best you can.
 - d. Aim to listen in to the noise of the sound: it is easy to focus more on thinking about the sound or mentally name the sound. Have the noise of the sound in the centre of your awareness while allowing any thinking about the sound to be in the background.

End. Each cycle of the practice lasts just above 5 minutes. Once you are familiar with each step and beginning to find the steps a little easier to do, you could consider doing 2 cycles over about 10 minutes. Another alternative is to double the time spent at Steps 2-5.

With more familiarity, you can keep cultivating your capacity for conscious attention by weaving shorter or longer periods of Sound Scanning into many of your daily routines. While you are walking, sitting on a bus, or doing daily chores can be great times to practice.