Leaves on a stream script

Step back from overthinking with optional stream imagery or non-visual noticing.

Settle into a comfortable seat and feel where your feet meet the floor. Let your hands rest lightly. Leave your breathing alone; allow it to move at whatever rhythm it chooses today.

Notice that your mind is probably generating words, plans, reminders, or opinions right now. That is what minds naturally do. During this pause, your task is not to make your mind go blank or to argue with what shows up, but to practice noticing a thought without immediately following it down the road.

If visual imagery suits you, imagine sitting comfortably on the bank of a gentle, moving stream on an autumn day. Leaves of different shapes and colors occasionally fall onto the surface of the water and drift steadily downstream at their own pace. If you prefer not to visualize, stay aware of the chair beneath you and imagine a simple notepad or ticker tape where a short phrase can appear and pass by.

As you sit quietly for the next few breaths, notice the next thought that arrives—whether it is a worry about work, a comment about this exercise, an image, or a reminder to do an errand.

When you notice that a thought has arrived, imagine placing those words or that picture gently onto a single leaf on the water, and let the current carry it along at its own speed. You do not need to push the leaf away faster, and you do not need to fish it out of the water to examine every detail.

If your mind says, "I am doing this wrong," or "This is boring," treat that sentence the same way: acknowledge that a thought is present, place it on a leaf, and return your attention to the bank of the stream or the physical support of your chair.

More than once, you will probably realize that you have been swept into the story of a thought and forgotten about the exercise entirely. That is not a mistake. The moment you notice you were carried away is the exact moment of mindfulness. Gently step back onto the bank, feel your feet on the floor, and begin again with the next thought.

If a thought points to a real, practical task you need to handle today, you do not have to pretend it does not matter. You can acknowledge that the reminder is there, jot it down if helpful, or return to it once this short pause is finished.

Before ending, let the image of the stream fade and widen your attention to the room around you. Notice the floor beneath your feet, the chair supporting your back, and two or three objects in your field of view. Take your time as you return to your day.

BEFORE YOU PRACTICE

Use this script at your own pace

1. Sit in a supported position where you can pause safely for a few minutes. Leave your eyes open with a soft downward gaze, or close them if you prefer.
2. Keep your breathing at its ordinary pace. Do not add breath holds or forced slow counts.
3. Read the script slowly, leaving a quiet pause of three to five breaths between paragraphs.
4. If picturing a stream feels difficult or distracting, use the non-visual alternative in the script—such as noticing thoughts as brief lines of text or simply returning to the feel of your chair.
5. Stop at any point if watching thoughts increases distress, and shift your attention to visible objects in the room.

If you prefer a spoken eight-minute practice for working with a busy mind, visit our meditation for anxiety guide, or use the meditation timer for a quiet sit.

Who should be careful

Observing internal thoughts with quiet pauses can sometimes feel overwhelming if you are experiencing acute panic, severe rumination, trauma flashbacks, or distressing intrusive thoughts. Stop the exercise immediately if you feel more anxious, disconnected, or stuck, open your eyes, and engage in an outward, concrete activity.

Do not practice while driving. Reading a defusion script is a general wellbeing skill, not a substitute for psychotherapy. If intrusive thoughts, obsessive-compulsive symptoms, PTSD, or persistent anxiety affect your daily life, seek care from a licensed mental health professional.

NIH / NCCIH: Evidence and safety overview

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