

Six Basic Exercises.... to focus, quiet your thoughts and reflect

Begin by choosing **one** exercise...don't even try to do them all right away. Find one that resonates and begin by bringing it into your before bedtime routine.

1. Concentration

Choose an object, observe it and then with your eyes closed focus on thinking about the object without letting other thoughts in. Do this for a few minutes each day, using the same object each time.

Try doing this for about 2 weeks. If you wandered off, look back and see where and when you wandered off. You may also notice how you think, in dialogue, in images or in concepts, and so be able to intentionally practice what is less natural to you.

This exercise helps to be alert and wakeful to our thoughts. We are so inundated with advice about parenting that we can begin to doubt our own capacity to know what our child needs.

For parents this exercise is particularly helpful in our efforts to discern the essential from the non-essential and to trust our abilities to meet the challenges we face each day with a heightened sense of self-control.

2. Initiative or Will

It can be very useful at the end of the day to reflect on the following questions: How centered was I today? What moved me, outer obligations, inner intentions, the needs of others, my own desires..? Did I have a plan? Was it realistic? Did I follow through with my real intentions? Was I aimless or scattered?

So much of our daily activity is motivated by outside requirements. We respond to what we must do but are often unable to follow through on aims that arise within us. Perhaps we are unsure of what we want to do, or we feel cramped in our efforts to be self-determining.

A will exercise involves doing one specific thing each morning and evening. Whatever it is should not be determined by outer necessities...like laundry or dishes...but something quite insignificant, like retying your shoelace or scratching your ear. The central requirement is that we consciously follow through with our own intention...and repeat it over and over again for a number of days. You will probably forget a day or so, but just continue when you do remember. The point is that in accomplishing this small act of initiative, we gradually strengthen our will for more significant activity, not only in those intentions which are required for outer life, but also those which arise within us.

3. Equanimity or Feeling

We have so many habitual feeling responses, echoes of our own parent's edicts and memories of social pressures that may play into even the simplest situation. We have all had moments of losing ourselves in intense feeling, being "beside myself", or "panic stricken". When we can be centered in a moment of genuine feeling and let its expression be appropriate to the moment, how much richer is our experience. We are awakened and our feeling can reveal unexpected truths beyond the merely personal. How do we catch the habit of snapping at a whining child, or becoming depressed at another's unintentional slight?

As with the will exercise, it helps to bring attention to one's feeling experience by reviewing at the end of the day. Where was I in my feeling life? What threw me off center? Was I authentic

or false in my expressions? In reflecting on a particular situation we can often realize where we stepped away from appropriate and genuine expression. Gradually we can become more in tune with that moment when we feel ourselves slipping off, and we find we have a choice to become more centered. We can also recognize our own tiredness and irritation and know that to inflict this mood on our child is useless. Then we may find the inner strength to find another method of encouragement for the task.

4. Positivity

In this exercise you seek out, even when it's difficult, to find something that is good or true or beautiful. All too often we take the good for granted and focus on the flaws – in another person, in a relationship, in nature and social phenomena. This exercise challenges us to expand our thinking and guide our feelings in order to seek out qualities we admire. This does not mean simply ignoring the bad, the ugly or what needs improving...it simply asks to notice something good.

We can become aware of how positivity lives in us by reviewing our day to see where we exercised it, and where it was lacking. This practice can also be very helpful in trying to accept some of our older children's interests or friends. Often we can be aghast at their choices, wondering where we have gone wrong. But choosing to look deeper at their compassion and initiative brings the negativity into balance.

5. Freedom from bias, openness

This exercise is to practice being open and receptive to new experiences, to things one does not yet know. Often, we go through our days with an attitude of dismissal towards anything that might contradict our previous experience. Are we ready to learn? Are we open to new impressions? In our daily review we examine if there were times when I closed down or became judgmental. Can I get in touch with why? Habit, fear, lack of awareness....And when was I open to something new. What prompted this? Can we be open to our new possibilities to grow, to become more than we are at present? And can we grant the same possibilities to others? Do we meet people in our lives with ever-renewing interest, ready to experience something unexpected in them, open to their small or large steps in development?

6. Persistence

The final practice of these six exercises is to bring the previous five together as a part of daily life.

All our life experiences are substance for our inner development. The question is: will we let ourselves be overwhelmed or dulled, made hopeless or violent or apathetic by the troubles of modern life, and more specifically, by the challenges of modern parenting? If we are not to be mercilessly buffeted by the pace and complexity of life, we need to strengthen our inner core, our ability to perceive the real need around us, and our capacity to be self directing.