

**Green County Leaders
Leadership and Local Government
Resources for Focusing, Staying Grounded and Present
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In order to engage effectively as a leader and participant in our local government, we need to learn how to maintain focus – staying grounded and present – especially these contentious days in the midst of the divisiveness, negativity and confusion we often find around us. We need to be able to calm down the reactive part of our brain and give ourselves the pause we need before responding with clarity and compassion, even to someone we disagree strongly with, and even to someone who has directed aggressive language toward us. In order to be able to use this skill when we need it, we must practice it and build our “mindfulness muscle.” This is much in the same way that a professional athlete trains and builds their muscles, so that when they need to make that long throw, pass or kick in the middle of a game, the muscles already know what to do.

We can't control what others say or do or even the feelings that their words may evoke in us. But we can learn to control our attitude and actions in response. Here is an exercise you can do anytime. I'd recommend practicing this exercise at least once a day – for 5 or 10 minutes. You can adapt it in any way. For example, you can also do this practice while walking or lying down. Mindfulness, of which this is an example, is an evidence-based practice that has gained traction in virtually every sector of our communities.

Grounding our selves in the five senses:

Get in a comfortable position. I can often concentrate best when my feet are flat on the floor and I sit up straight. If you feel comfortable, close your eyes, or keep them open but unfocused. To help with this, think about shifting to your peripheral vision rather than focusing on a particular point. Begin to notice what is coming in through each of your senses.

Feel your feet on the floor, feel your body supported by the chair. Feel any point of contact between your body and the chair. Feel your hands whether in your lap or resting on a desk. As you become aware of tension anywhere, see if you can let it release.

As you take a few deep breaths, feel the breath going in and out. See if you can feel all the parts of your body that move as you breathe. Feel your belly expand as you breathe in and contract as you breathe out.

Now listen to the sounds in the room. Start with the sounds closest to you. Perhaps you can hear your own heartbeat or breathing. Then move outward to the sounds you hear, in every direction in the room you are in. Finally, what sounds can you hear in the distance, outside the space you are in?

Notice any scents or odor in your space? Can you smell something cooking? Do you smell fresh air? Is there a taste in your mouth? Is there dryness in your mouth?

If your eyes are open, what do you see around you? How light or dark is the space you are in? What colors and shapes do you notice? Can you just see what you see without judgement? If your eyes are closed, what images are forming in your mind? Try to simply be open and see what arises rather than bringing something to mind.

Listening unfiltered: Now, turn to your thoughts and feelings. See if you can just observe. What feelings are present? Be honest with how you really feel. Tiredness, boredom, peacefulness, restlessness? Any feeling is just what it is. Can you just notice the feelings without trying to push it away, without commenting internally on it? Notice when a thought passes through your mind. It's just a thought, a process of the brain. Notice when it begins and ends. See how accurately you can observe whatever is coming up – whether it's a feeling, a thought.

SUMMARY AND TAKE AWAY:

- 1) Practice this exercise or one like it regularly so you develop your mindfulness muscle for when you need it.
- 2) Make a plan. Just like we are asking people to make a plan to vote because we know they are more likely to vote if they have a plan, I'm suggesting you make a plan for how to keep civil and present in a contentious situation. “When I feel myself turn bright red and my fists clench (or however else you know that your stress level is rising), I will...”

There are many helpful apps you can download to your phone to help you practice exercises similar to this one. Each one is a little different and some are great for teens, too. There are also some for young children. Here is a sampling – check them out and see what resonates with you and also check your app store to see more choices. Usually, the apps have some free exercises and then a way to upgrade for more variety.

Got Your Back
Shine
Insight Timer
My Life
Breathe
Smiling Mind
Headspace
Calm

Would you like to bring mindfulness to your work setting? Feel free to contact me at s.myoyu.andersen@gmail.com or 847-951-8472 (cell). I've taught mindfulness in many settings, including schools, prisons, juvenile detention facilities, libraries, senior centers, churches, teen groups, homeschool groups and more.