

Less Afraid to Be Yourself

Slowing down, allowing experience, and discovering a different way to be with yourself

Brian Kennedy, MA, LMFT

Explore Less Afraid to Be Yourself: the pathway and free reflection, or read this article on its own.

There is a moment that can pass so quickly we hardly notice it. Someone sounds disappointed and we feel our stomach drop. A question feels like criticism and we feel a coldness emerge in our belly. We are asked for something when we are already tired. Before we have awareness of or words for what happened inside us, we are explaining, agreeing, defending, or shutting down before we allow the feeling or sensations to be registered in our awareness.

Later, we may understand the interaction quite well. We know our patterns. We can describe our histories. Yet in the next encounter the same thing happens, and knowledge again seems to arrive after the fact.

One possibility for change begins with learning to slow this sequence enough to recognize our experience in the moment it is happening, in our bodies. Something that was implicit - operating without clear awareness - becomes available to notice. But recognition is only the beginning. What happens next matters just as much.

Can we let ourselves fully have the experience we have recognized? Can the feeling exist for a moment without being corrected, explained away, or judged? With enough choice and support, might we begin to discover that an emotion we have feared is something we can tolerate and encounter ever so briefly, without losing ourselves or habitually acting from the feeling - and possibly even learn from it?

Before understanding, acknowledgment

In my work, I am often interested in the few seconds before a person moves away from what they feel. There may be a tightness in their sternum, a felt sense of emptiness in their core, an urgent impulse to move, or a hurried need to explain without knowing why. Sometimes there is no clear feeling at all. The experience is simply unfamiliar, vague, or difficult to locate.

We do not have to know what it means yet. We can begin with the modest acknowledgment that something is happening.

John Welwood's teaching of unconditional presence gives acknowledgment of our direct experience with ourselves an important place. Tara Brach's very similar practice, RAIN, begins with a recognition of the moment. These are related invitations to notice what is here before trying to change it. To just notice, nothing more. Their larger approaches differ slightly, but both help us resist the temptation to hurry past the encounter itself. [1] [2]

One word can sometimes help: sadness, pressure, anger, uncertainty, hot, cold, alone, empty. The word does not have to be exact. Does it have a color, size, texture, or location? Dan Siegel and Tina Payne Bryson's memorable phrase, "name it to tame it," points toward the usefulness of bringing language to emotional experience. Here, naming is an invitation to make contact, not a demand that the feeling become smaller. But, interestingly enough, the moment we begin to put a word to the experience is the moment that regulating the feeling begins. [3]

Sometimes the first name is too general. Eugene Gendlin's Focusing offers an especially useful discipline: let language answer to felt experience. A description is something to try, check, and revise. The felt sense can be a vague bodily sense of a whole situation, rather than an emotion with a ready-made label. [4]

Perhaps "frustrated" or "irritated" does not quite fit. "Crowded," "engulfed," or "claustrophobic" comes closer. Or "I have a vague sense of dread that feels like an unease in my belly." We need time for that difference to become recognizable. And sometimes the honest description remains: I do not know.

Slowing down without making calm another assignment

It can be difficult to notice anything clearly when we feel rushed or overwhelmed. We may need to look around, feel the support of the chair, move our feet, or let our breathing become more comfortable before inward attention is welcome.

One option is to take a long, slow, deliberate, deep breath in while counting gently toward five. Let the breath deepen comfortably, without forcing it or straining to reach the count. Then let the breath fall out in a soft, unforced sigh. You may notice a dropping sensation as things settle - perhaps in your shoulders, chest, or belly. There is no need to fill the lungs completely, hold the breath, or repeat the practice until something changes. If counting or breath attention increases discomfort, ordinary breathing and attention to the room are equally good places to begin. This is a BKL practice option, not a special technique attributed to the authors above. General guidance on gentle, unforced breathing supports keeping comfort ahead of a prescribed count. [5]

The purpose is to have enough steadiness to notice and choose when we are engaging with others. Someone can look quiet while feeling far away. Someone else may be tearful and remain fully present. We are interested in whether we can stay in contact with our internal experience in the present moment, move our attention to the external, and decide what comes next.

Acknowledge. Let your eyes find something ordinary in the room or close your eyes and focus internally. If it feels manageable, notice one mild experience that is already here. Try a word, a phrase, or a simple description. See whether it fits. Nothing needs to be explained.

Box breathing, gentle movement, orienting to the room, and welcome human contact offer other possible starting points. We will explore these in Module 1. You only need one approach that helps you remain present enough to choose; you do not need to master a collection of techniques.

Box breathing: a steady rhythm to return to

Box breathing gives your attention a simple, predictable rhythm to follow. Imagine tracing a square: each side represents one phase of the breath. Some people find that this structure helps them slow down and feel more settled when their attention is racing. The purpose here is to become present enough to notice your experience, rather than to make the feeling disappear.

Breathe in slowly and gently through your nose for a count of four.

Pause for a count of four, keeping the hold easy rather than bracing.

Breathe out slowly and gently for a count of four.

Pause again for a count of four before beginning the next breath.

Try one or two rounds, then let your breathing return to its ordinary rhythm. Notice what, if anything, has changed. A shorter count, such as two, is fine. Let the breath deepen comfortably without forcing it. If holding your breath feels uncomfortable or increases anxiety, leave out the pauses and use gentle breathing instead. Stop deliberate breathing if you feel lightheaded or short of breath. You can always return to looking around the room or feeling the support beneath you. [8]

The difficult generosity of allowing

We may recognize hurt and immediately become impatient with it. We may notice need and begin arguing that we should be more independent. There is the original feeling, and then there is the difficulty we have with letting ourselves feel it.

This is why allowing deserves time of its own.

For now, we are not asking where the feeling comes from or what it protects. We are noticing what it is like to let it be present. How do I feel toward this sensation? Do I want it gone? Am I judging it, becoming frightened of it, trying to perform the exercise correctly?

Even that reaction can be acknowledged without making it another problem. If there is impatience, we can recognize impatience. If allowing feels impossible, we can begin there. We do not have to force acceptance in order to belong in the practice.

Allowing means making some room for experience while retaining freedom about attention and action. It does not mean accepting mistreatment, agreeing with a thought, obeying an impulse, or staying inward when we need help. We can give a feeling room and still choose to stop.

In *Coming Home to Yourself*, I describe the wish for a place within our own experience. Allowing is one way of beginning to offer that place: not everything has to improve before it can be received.

Allow. If something mild is present, see whether it can exist alongside the room, the chair, and the ordinary life around you. You might simply ask, “What is this like?” or “What’s my experience of this moment?” “Can I just let this be?” You can return your attention outward whenever you wish.

Curiosity that waits until it is welcome

Inquiry becomes different when it follows some acknowledgment and room. Instead of interrogating ourselves for the right explanation, we may become interested in the particular quality of what we feel.

What seems most important about this moment? Is there something I want, something that hurts, or something I am expecting? Does the word I chose still fit?

Ask one question, then wait. An answer may come through language, a bodily change, an image, or a clearer understanding of the current situation. It may not come. Whatever emerges remains something to consider, not unquestionable truth.

Sometimes inquiry reveals a fear of disappointing someone. Sometimes it reveals that the task really is unfair. The present deserves attention alongside the past. An emotional interpretation should help us see more clearly, not persuade us to accommodate what needs to change.

Opening the heart, and sometimes becoming more fully present

There can also be a movement that is less about finding meaning and more about how we meet ourselves. We are no longer standing entirely outside the feeling, evaluating it. For a moment, we are present with the person who is having it.

Welwood describes opening and, more deeply, entering experience. In this pathway, that contemplative possibility is offered gently and optionally. Becoming one with experience means less struggle against its felt presence; it does not mean becoming lost in it, making it our identity, or treating every thought it carries as fact. No particular state of consciousness is required.

Warmth can matter here. In a therapy relationship, another person may help us approach experience without having to bear it alone. AEDP gives the therapist’s responsive presence and the careful tracking of experience a central place. A recorded voice can provide guidance, but it cannot supply that live relationship. We keep online invitations modest and leave room to bring the work to therapy. [6]

The small discovery may be enough: I can feel disappointed and remain here. I can need someone and still have judgment. I can feel anger without having to attack. I can stop and return without making the pause a failure.

Letting the difference become part of life

When something helpful occurs, we often move on quickly. There may be value in noticing the difference: what is it like to have approached yourself with less hostility? What happened when you gave yourself permission to stop? Did a clearer need become available?

AEDP's attention to reflecting on helpful therapeutic experience informs this closing movement, while Brach's nurturing step reminds us to consider what care is needed. In BKL, these become invitations to notice and respond, without requiring relief or a story of transformation. [7] [2]

Then there is life beyond the exercise. Perhaps we ask for time before agreeing. Perhaps we repair something we did, seek needed support, take a welcome walk, or tell someone what matters. We review what actually happened, including mixed or disappointing results.

Confidence may grow as we become less anxious about encountering ourselves. The feeling is no longer always an emergency, an enemy, or a verdict. It can be part of a larger life in which we notice, choose, relate, and begin again.

This is the direction of the pathway: a gradual capacity to acknowledge what is here, allow it some room, approach it with curiosity, and discover what becomes possible when we are less compelled to turn away.

Sources and further reading

[1] John Welwood. We Are Buddhas Becoming Humans as Well as Humans Becoming Buddhas, Sounds True interview transcript. A teaching interview on unconditional presence.

[2] Tara Brach. RAIN: A Practice of Radical Compassion (2020). Primary description of the current RAIN formulation and post-practice awareness. Older accounts sometimes use non-identification for N; this draft uses her current nurturing formulation.

[3] Daniel J. Siegel and Tina Payne Bryson. The Whole-Brain Child (2011); official handouts. Attribution for the naming phrase; the adult exercise here is an adaptation. The draft does not use a simplistic left-brain/right-brain explanation as a mechanism.

[4] Eugene T. Gendlin. An Introduction to Focusing: Six Steps, International Focusing Institute, Gendlin Online Library. Primary practice text. BKL does not present its simplified noticing exercise as the complete Focusing method.

[5] NHS. Breathing exercises for stress. General guidance on comfortable, gentle breathing and optional counting. It does not specifically validate the BKL inhale-and-sigh variation.

[6] AEDP Institute. Essential Skills Agenda, Module 3. Clinical distinctions among defenses, anxiety, and core affect inform pacing; educational adaptation is not AEDP treatment.

[7] AEDP Institute. Glossary, and How to Set Transference Into Action. Clinical accounts of metatherapeutic processing inform reviewing the experience of helpful change. No outcome claim is made for this combined pathway.

[8] Veterans Affairs. Relieving Tension in Your Back: Box breathing. Four equal breathing phases with adjustable counts.

[9] Polyvagal Institute. What is Polyvagal Theory? and The Vagus Nerve. Primary accounts of this framework and its proposed practical applications; cited for attribution rather than independent confirmation of all mechanisms.

[10] National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health. Mind and Body Approaches for Stress and Anxiety: What the Science Says. Includes possible unwanted responses to relaxation techniques.

[11] Brian Kennedy. Coming Home to Yourself. Companion article on unconditional presence, embodiment, and belonging.