

Centering: Maintaining Focus in Stressful Situations

Centering is an ancient visualization technique that is popular in Aikido – the Japanese defensive martial art of "spiritual harmony." It teaches you to focus on the here and now, taking power away from outside concerns and negative thoughts, and helping you remain stable and grounded. Aikido trains your mind to control your body's reactions using the concept of "ki." This holds that all physical and mental power comes from the flow of energy around your body. Energy is lost when you are tense or stressed, but Centering redirects negative energy in a beneficial way.

Think back to a time when you were feeling stressed or afraid. What physical reactions did you experience? Tense muscles, rapid breathing, sweating palms, and a racing heart are all common reactions to a stressful situation. Now, imagine that all of these feelings are the result of energy flowing through your body. Centering uses your mind to redirect this energy to the center of your body, giving you a sense of inner calm.

You can use Centering to improve your focus and manage stress before a speech, musical recital, exam, job interview, negotiation, or sporting event... whenever you need to keep a clear head in difficult circumstances. Centering can also be useful in more common situations. If you need to gather your thoughts before a difficult conversation, or if you have to deliver bad news, use Centering to calm your nerves so that you can communicate clearly, compassionately and effectively.

There are three steps to Centering:

Step 1: Focus on Your Breathing

Concentrate on breathing deeply, using your diaphragm to draw air all the way down into your lungs.

Tip: If you're not familiar with deep breathing, try this exercise: Lie on the floor, or somewhere comfortable but supported. Place one hand on your stomach, and take a deep breath in through your nose. Use the air you breathe in to push against your hand. Your chest and shoulders shouldn't move – only your stomach. Exhale slowly and deliberately through your mouth. Spend a while completely focusing on your breathing. Mindfully release the tension in your body. Continue to breathe slowly and deeply, while scanning your body for feelings of tension. Start with your toes and work your way up your body, paying attention to each group of muscles as you go. Relax any muscles that feel tense by clenching them and then releasing them.

Step 2: Find Your Center

Locate your "physical center of gravity" which, in Centering, is visualized as being about two inches below your navel. Become familiar with where your center is, and remember what it feels like – you'll probably find that you feel grounded and stabilized by focusing your mind on this part of your body. When you begin to feel stressed, turn your attention to your center to remind yourself that you have balance and control. Once you've found it, breathe in and out deeply at least five times. Continue to concentrate on your center and feel the sensation of being stabilized and on the ground.

Step 3: Redirect Your Energy

Finally, channel your energy into achieving your goal. Imagine all of the energy in your body flowing into your center. Find some imagery that works for you, for example, picture this energy as a glowing ball, or perhaps a balloon. Visualize putting all of your negative thoughts into the balloon and then releasing it. As you inhale, say "I let..." and as you exhale, say "... go." If you picture your energy as a ball, imagine throwing it far into the distance. If you see it as a balloon, imagine it floating away above your head. Let go of everything that is causing you to feel stressed. Imagine your center filled with calm.

On your next inhalation, think about what you want to achieve, and focus on thinking positively. Use affirmations like, "The job is mine," or "I give great presentations," while letting your tensions go. You could even repeat one word to yourself, such as "success," or "confidence."

Practice Makes Perfect

Using Centering confidently takes some practice. It's useful to start learning how to use it long before you actually have to do something very stressful. Try using the technique during situations that cause you stress on a smaller scale – perhaps with something you experience at work each day.

Another way to practice Centering is to put your body through a stressful experience, and then try to center yourself. For example, musicians often practice Centering before they give a performance. To put themselves under stress, they might run up and down several flights of stairs, and then immediately play their piece, either alone or in front of others. Physical exertion is a good way of simulating the symptoms of stress because the physical reactions – a pounding heart and shortness of breath – are very similar. Try this approach, and then center yourself using the steps above so that, when you're really feeling stressed, you'll know what to do.

Once you've mastered Centering, you can use it any time you feel stressed and out of control. It will also teach you to trust your instincts when faced with a difficult situation.

Key Points

Centering is a technique that is widely practiced in the martial art Aikido and in other types of sport and performing arts. It's useful for remaining grounded, calm and relaxed in stressful situations, but it works best if you practice using it beforehand. Learning how to use Centering is as simple as 1, 2, 3:

1. Focus on your breathing.
2. Find your center.
3. Redirect your energy.

By becoming skilled at Centering, you can learn to master stress, rather than stress mastering you. The technique was adopted as a power-enhancing tool by sport psychologist Dr Robert Nideffer in the mid-1970s, and he outlined it in his 1992 book, "[Psyched to Win](#)." It was also championed by performance coach Dr Don Greene in his 2002 book, "[Fight Your Fear and Win](#)."