

# Scanning for Strength

## *Symptoms Addressed*

- Stress response
- DSM-5 PTSD avoidance symptoms
- DSM-5 PTSD arousal and reactivity symptoms

Scanning for Strength is a body scan that helps individuals connect with their body and locate areas of the body containing strength. When an individual can identify and connect to their own strength, they become resourced and able to use that strength during difficult emotional times. In this exercise, participants focus their attention on different parts of their body, one at a time. As Kabat-Zinn (1990) instructs, the participant must, “maintain awareness in every moment, a detached witnessing of your breath and body, region by region, as you scan from your feet to the top of your head” (p. 89).

The purpose of a body scan is to teach participants to notice and fully experience any sensations – neutral, painful, or pleasant – that are occurring in their body, without judgment. Moreover, participants will learn over time not only to notice bodily sensations without judgment, but also to gain an awareness and acceptance of accompanying emotions and thoughts (Teasdale et al., 2000). With this awareness, it becomes easier to shift attention away from unhelpful or maladaptive thoughts, while still remaining connected to areas of strength in the body.

Finally, Scanning for Strength helps participants regulate physical sensations and emotions, which can reduce feelings of emotional numbness or dissociation that are common in PTSD.

## SCANNING FOR STRENGTH TIPS

- The entire exercise should take participants 10-15 minutes.
- If possible, participants should complete this exercise sitting in a chair or lying down.
- If participants feel comfortable with closing their eyes during this practice, this is recommended. If not, they can find a place on the floor to gently focus their eyes on.
- An alternative way to practice this tool is to have clients imagine that they are breathing into each area of the body. For instance, while attending to the sensations in the feet, they can imagine that they are breathing into the feet during the inhales or exhales.
- When participants have completed this exercise for the first time, it can be helpful for them to write down the areas of the body that contained strength, so that they can remember these areas in the future.

- Connecting to areas of strength in the body can be helpful when in stressful situations, when completing trauma-focused therapy sessions, or when participants need the courage to try something new or difficult.
- Clients who have experienced trauma to certain parts of their body, either sexual or physical, often feel symptoms of the trauma when that part of the body is focused on. It's recommended that clients be given permission to stop this exercise, or skip certain areas of the body, if they feel uncomfortable or unsafe.

## **KEY RESEARCH FINDINGS**

- Reduces overreaction to anxiety signals in the body (Wald & Taylor, 2008)
- Improves concentration and attention abilities (Kabat-Zinn, 1991)
- Increases the relaxation response (Ditto, Eclache, & Goldman, 2006)

## Scanning for Strength Script

*Begin by closing your eyes or gently gazing downward on one spot. Focus your attention on your breath, breathing effortlessly, not trying to change your breath. Notice what it feels like as you breathe in, and as you breathe out.*

*Now begin Scanning for Strength. As you go through this exercise, you may notice various sensations. When this happens, simply experience and acknowledge the sensations, as well as any accompanying thoughts or emotions you may notice.*

*To begin, shift your focus to the soles of your feet, just noticing any sensations that may arise as you attend to this area. Feel into the soles of your feet, without judgment, noticing what the heels, balls, and arches of your feet feel like. Stay here for a moment.*

*Still focusing on the soles of your feet, ask yourself, "Is there strength in this area?" If the answer is no, begin to redirect your awareness to the next area of the body – the toes and tops of your feet. If the answer is yes, remain focused here for a few moments, connecting more deeply with this area of the body and intentionally experiencing the strength this area is providing. Remember that you can connect with this strength whenever you need it.*

*Now gently shift your awareness to your toes, and the tops of your feet, noticing what this area feels like, without judgment. Notice any sensations that are present in your toes or the tops of your feet. Stay here for a moment.*

*Still focusing on your toes and the tops of your feet, ask yourself, "Is there strength in this area?" If the answer is no, begin to redirect your awareness to the next area of the body – the lower part of the legs. If the answer is yes, remain focused here for a few moments, connecting more deeply with this area of the body and intentionally experiencing the strength this area is providing. Remember that you can connect with this strength whenever you need it.*

*Let awareness begin to shift upward to the lower part of the legs, above the feet but below the knees. Notice the sensations occurring in your calf muscles, and in the front areas of your legs. Just feel into these areas with a calm awareness. Stay here for a moment.*

*Still focusing on the lower part of your legs, ask yourself, "Is there strength in this area?" If the answer is no, begin to redirect your awareness to the next area of the body – the upper parts of your legs. If the answer is yes, remain focused here for a few moments, connecting more deeply with this area of the body and intentionally experiencing the strength this area is providing. Remember that you can connect with this strength whenever you need it.*

*As you complete this exercise it is okay to stop, or skip certain areas of the body, if a region does not feel safe or comfortable to connect with.*

*Withdraw your attention from your lower legs, and begin focusing on the upper parts of your legs, above your knees but below your hips, noticing what your hamstrings and quads feel like. Become a non-judgmental observer of these areas, simply accepting any sensations that may be present. Stay here for a moment.*

*Continue this exercise, moving your awareness through several major muscle groups and different regions of the body. Which specific areas you choose to focus on is up to you, but it is recommended that most of the following areas be scanned in this exercise:*

- *Feet*
- *Lower legs*
- *Upper legs*
- *Buttocks/hips/pelvic area (any or all of these areas)*
- *Abdomen*
- *Lower and/or upper back, or entire back*
- *Arms*
- *Hands*
- *Chest area (with a focus on the breath)*
- *Shoulders*
- *Neck*
- *Head*