

Map

Non-Focused Awareness



Non-Focused Awareness is a mindfulness/pain-coping practice that incorporates the senses of sight, sound, and touch with breath. It can be especially helpful during times where there are multiple distractions or sensations, or for people who tend to cope better by noticing things externally.

Mentor Preparation:

Begin to practice and integrate NFA in your daily life. You can do this while holding ice, or during times when you are experiencing overwhelm, discomfort, or distractions.

- Read BFW, pp. 216-222; and AMMB pp 146-148
- Review the NFA resources in module 3
- Suggest to Parents: Read Birthing From Within, pp. 216-222 and/or AMMB pp. 146-148

When to use this process:

It's best to introduce NFA any time after introducing Breath Awareness. In a class series, this may be in the second class, after reviewing Breath



Awareness. It can also be taught at a prenatal appointment or in labor without previous training.

- Time: 30-45 minutes

What to have in advance:

- Ice cubes and towels for each parent
- Timer
- Chimes or bell
- A variety of music (fast/slow, with/without words etc.)

Introduce the purpose of Non-Focused Awareness:

- Use distractions in labor to deepen trance and concentration.
- Enter into a “Quiet Mind” and overcome the downward spiraling of negative thinking.
- Reframe sensation in labor by shifting the focus away from pain or other negative/overwhelming stimuli.

Build a framework for Non-Focused Awareness:

- Tell parents that, in labor, birthing people experience a wide variety of sensory stimuli. You can have parents themselves brainstorm the various sights, sounds, smells, and touches they imagine in labor.

Here’s one way you can talk about the range of possibilities:

“The temperature in the room, bright lights, smells, sounds of birds singing, music, the sounds of encouraging words, loving touch or massage, nausea, exhaustion, thirst, sweating and chills, flickering candlelight, warm water of shower or bath, cold floor (etc.). You may find yourself judging some of these sensations as positive or negative.

Birthing people often focus on the most noticeable or intense sensations, such as contraction pain, physical exhaustion, annoying details of the medical setting, and so on. While this is natural, it can end up amplifying those “negative” sensations, making the birthing person feel as though it is impossible to cope.”



Describe the profound practice of equanimity:

Being equally aware of all sensations, giving no more attention to one over another. In doing so, one's experience and relationship to the pain will change.

When NFA is practiced by partners and birth attendants in labor, everyone benefits. The energy shifts away from problems, fear, pain, and exhaustion, and towards being present.

NFA can be practiced by everyone, everyday, throughout life.

You may tell parents: "NFA may be especially helpful as you adjust to the intense weeks of caring for a newborn, and throughout your parenting years. Many athletes have found NFA enhances their performance and endurance."

Demonstrate Non-Focused Awareness for parents:

Explain: "I will demonstrate NFA by talking out loud through a 'contraction,' but when a person does it in labor, they will usually do it non-verbally. Notice how I cycle through four modalities: SEEING, HEARING, TOUCH, and BREATH."

For the class, you might choose to role-play the practice, concentrating and rocking through an intense contraction while saying: *"Breathing ooouut.....seeing shadow, shadow, ...shoes, shoes, black.....hearing car, car, fan, tapping... ooooooww.... breath...breathing out, out... ooooooww...touching feet on floor, feet on floor, cold...seeing shadow, light...hearing voices, silent, voices, breathing out..."* (Remember to portray the active coping demanded by intense labor, rather than relaxing meditation.)

You might also choose to enact a contrasting contraction that portrays suffering and negative mind-chatter: *"Ohhhhh...Nooooooooo....not another one!! I'm not breathing right. I can't concentrate when the door is open...I can't relax. Ohhhh no...it hurts...Ohhhh....stop talking! Oh those bright lights...I'm too hot!!! Can't everyone just be quiet and close the door!!! Ohhh....this is too hard....Make it stop..."*

Key instructions for parents before they hold ice:



(Please practice with this script, but do not use it when you work with parents - let the words come from WITHIN you. Some mentors like to create a small note card to use as a reminder of key points or words when you are learning.)

In a few minutes, you'll pick up your ice and practice bringing your awareness to what you are seeing, hearing, to what is touching you, and to your breath. Let's try it first with me talking you through it, without holding ice:

Begin by noticing your first outward breath...

Let your eyes become soft, gazing softly downward...

Breathe in the space around you, and everything in it. Notice what you are seeing, but don't look around to see things. Let your eyes be softly open, resting in a downward gaze...

Breathe in what you are seeing... breathe out what you are seeing...

Now, begin noticing what you are hearing...

...Sounds closest to you....

.....and sounds farther away.....

Breathe into what you are hearing...

Now bringing your attention to what is touching you and what you are touching...

Breathe into the space between you and the chair, notice the MANY sensations, from your toes to the top of your head.

Wait a bit, then slowly add a few more suggestions (no ice yet) :

You can focus on one modality throughout a contraction,

or you can intentionally rotate modalities, or notice them randomly.

The order in which you notice doesn't matter; Do whatever works! Notice if it helps to cope with the pain if you notice faster...or more slowly...

Parents practice with ice:

- Have parents practice NFA while holding ice in one hand, while you time exactly one minute, ringing the bell at the start and end of the minute. You can guide the parents for this first contraction, giving a cue word every 10 seconds or so: "Hearing... seeing...touch...breath...hearing..." and so on.



- After they put the ice down, ask parents: “What worked?” or “What are you noticing?”
- Validate their sense of success or resourcefulness.

Troubleshooting:

If you are working with multiple parents at once, it is common that this practice works well for some people and not as well for others. This is a good opportunity to validate each parent's experience and talk about how some people cope better by focusing internally and some cope better by focusing externally. Introduce the understanding that their current coping preferences are not necessarily what their coping preferences will be in labor.

Remind parents that they are trying something new and are stretching a new muscle, so it may take a few times to find their rhythm and get the hang of it. Practicing a series of ice contractions in a row (see below) often helps people find their rhythm.

If a parent says they just want to “go within” and not notice anything outside of themselves, or that their minds are spinning or struggling, start by validating their experience. Then remind them that 1) what works for them in labor might be different than what works for them now; and 2) sometimes the events of labor may demand a more external focus regardless of their preference.

Some suggestions you can offer:

Notice their outward breaths at the peak of a contraction, and then resume noticing Seeing...Hearing...Touch again when they are able.

Don't try to suppress awareness of sensation/pain. It's normal to be aware of intense sensations; we are trying, even if it's only for the space of a breath, to move out of the suffering mindset that those sensations can cause.



Notice when their mind may be looking for a way out, and notice the story they are telling themselves, or the internal dialogue, and simply witness this without judging themselves.

Parents practice a series of ice-contractions:

Next, tell partners they will move into the role of offering support to the pregnant person during the ice contractions, by quietly cueing the words (Seeing, Hearing, Touch, Breath), breathing in and out with them, rubbing their back, or offering quiet presence. Time three one minute ice contractions in a row, with a minute of “rest” in between. Remind parents to alternate hands.

During the time between contractions, encourage parents not to go into a discussion or troubleshooting, but instead practice resting and doing nothing extra, just as they will need to do in labor to allow their body to recharge. To help the partners, out, you may write the cue words on a board: Seeing Hearing, Touch, Breath

Try this:

1. During the FIRST contraction, keep the room quiet and fairly dim. You can turn on some soothing music during the first rest period.
2. During the SECOND contraction, add a little variety to their environment: change the music in the middle of the contraction to something more upbeat; or turn the lights up; or close a door loudly. In the rest period that follows, turn off the music and lights again. Let the parents breathe a sigh of relief!
3. During the THIRD contraction, you'll be mischievous and provide distractions. Recreate sights and sounds they might experience in labor: lights going on and off; door slams; radio set on static; nurses or family members talking loudly about random things; phones ringing; nurse taking blood pressure or adjusting a monitor belt; machines beeping (watches, electronic timers, cell phones are good for sound effects!). Creating surprise distractions in the environment allows parents to notice how they respond to the unexpected and/or unwanted.



Some tips and options to offer Partners:

- Begin with noticing the pregnant person's outward breath and synchronize your breath.
- Timing is everything: going too fast or too slow through the modalities will throw off their concentration. It may be helpful for you, as the mentor, to demonstrate to both parents while they are holding ice what it's like to give and to receive guidance too fast or too slow. When partners experience this for themselves, they are less likely to guide in this way.

As a rule:

Avoid directing the laboring person to notice particular things. Your voice is like a steering wheel, keeping them on the road of concentration during a contraction. Consider switching modalities to acknowledge changes in the environment. For example, if a bright light is suddenly turned on, go to, "Seeing..."; if there's a loud noise, go to "Hearing..." After the peak, when the contraction is starting to get less intense, you can say, "Notice how the sensation is changing with each breath out."

For the Mentor:

End the session with switching roles: Have the pregnant people support their partners through at least one ice contraction. This is a learning experience for both parties, and can grow compassion and patience. Partners get to consider what it feels like to be on the receiving end of support, and pregnant people begin to discover that being a support person is hard!

Home enrichment and practice for parents:

Invite parents to practice Non-Focused Awareness one or two times this week.

- Practice something ordinary that you do every day, like making breakfast, tying your shoes, driving, or showering.
- Practice during a moment of stress or discomfort. Stay with the emotions and circumstances and just notice your breathing and



sensations for at least one full minute before doing anything to change or respond to the situation. See what happens.

- Practice while doing something pleasurable such as eating, making love, walking, or sitting in nature.

Follow up with parents in your next session together:

- “What worked?”
- “What did you learn?”
- “How might this be helpful in labor? Or postpartum?”