

## Teacher Wellness Practice #4: Listening to Silence

By Sarah Rosenthal | Categories: Classroom Community, Wellness

The world has become remarkably still in the past several weeks, with shops, eateries, and sports arenas closed, streets deserted except for occasional walkers and runners, and fewer cars and trucks rumbling by.

Yet in other ways, the noise continues full blast.



Through our screens, we hear and read a virtual Babel of news, opinions, suggestions, reassurances, and accusations as this anxiety-ridden, resource-strapped world struggles through another day of the pandemic.

Those of us sheltering in place with others may be climbing the walls at times from noise generated by family, partners, or roommates. Those of us living solo may find ourselves filling our time with media distractions more than ever to replace the congenial hubbub of cafés and other gathering places we're now missing.

And let's not leave out the noise so often present in our own minds. Even as we try to coach ourselves through these strange days with grace, our mental noise can get in the way. Sometimes our thinking resembles the periodic buzz of a pesky mosquito, disturbing an otherwise peaceful scene. Other times it's akin to the steady, annoying whir of a leaf blower or a fire siren's panicked scream as we cogitate on our own and others' needs, strategizing schedules and resources.

Inner and outer noise jangles our nerves. And a jangled nervous system reduces concentration (already in short supply these days!) and increases impatience. All of that makes it harder to operate at our best.

Besides, when we're jangly, it just doesn't *feel* good.

So what can we do about it?

A practice I like is to become very quiet for a few moments. When I do that, the inner chatter—the seemingly endless replays and rehearsals—momentarily ceases. That silence is so delicious, like discovering and drinking from a natural spring.

I like reflecting for a moment that some part of me—that hidden spring—is still pre-language, as I experienced during infancy, and which I can still experience when I reconnect with my basic animal nature.

To be honest, sometimes it's almost unnerving to get quiet, even for a moment, because I'm so used to inner self-talk and a focus on forward momentum. But that discomfort makes it even more compelling to explore. Discomfort is a requirement for growth. If I'm feeling uncomfortable, that's often a sign that I'm stretching my capacity to deal effectively with life.

A meditation teacher I adore calls this kind of quiet the “sound of silence” (and yes, I think he came of age in Paul Simon's heyday!). I like that phrase. It's interesting to think of silence as something we can tune into, instead of just the absence of sound.

Here's a simple and enjoyable practice to try. Logistically speaking, this one's probably easier to do by yourself than with a buddy, but it's nice to do with a buddy, too. To make sure it really happens, plan ahead and decide when during your day you will do it, and where. If necessary, alert others that you are taking this time for yourself.

### **Listening to the Sound of Silence**

- Find a spot to be alone for three minutes. Get creative: your bed; the bathroom; a quiet nook outside.
- Sit or lie comfortably (or as comfortably as you can) and close your eyes. Quiet your body: take three slow, deep breaths, or scan yourself from head to toe, inviting tense parts to relax.
- Notice points of contact and support (for example: hands on knees, feet on floor, torso on chair, tongue resting against roof of mouth). Some people find it soothing to reflect that gravity and the Earth are holding them.
- Absorb the fact that for right now, your eyes are not busy, your mouth and throat are not gearing up to form language, your face is not organizing itself into a smile or frown, your breathing is not pressured. You are simple, a resting animal. Focusing on this inner quiet will give your mind a safe, rejuvenating haven.
- If you hear noises from the world around you, see if you can observe them as neutral sounds. If there are any moments of stillness between the noises, notice those, too.
- Continue till the three minutes are up. If you wish to extend the practice for another few minutes, feel free to do so.
- Before segueing back into activity, take a final moment to scan your body and mind. How do you feel, compared to before you started?
- Reenter your day's activities, consciously carrying any sensations of greater groundedness and presence into your actions and interactions.

I suggest you check in with yourself or your buddy after you do this practice to reflect on how it went and troubleshoot any problems. After a week, reflect on the overall impact of the practice on your sense of well-being, and decide how you want to proceed.

**Q** *How did it feel to experiment with tuning into the sound of silence? Turn to your imaginary or real partner!*

**You might be thinking:**

*"Doing this practice makes me feel even more aware of how wound up I am. My mind is just going strong at every moment. I felt like I failed at this practice. Help!"*

*"I did it several times. Sometimes I too was disheartened by how loud my thinking was. Other times I fell into this instant state of calm, like I was plunked onto an island with a Mai Tai in my hand!"*

*"I also felt unable to quiet my mind. But I'm wondering if that in itself is good information. I'm sending myself appreciation for even being willing to entertain the discomfort. I like the idea that discomfort is part of growth."*

*"I love being reminded that we're animals. I mean, we are! We're mammals! How would life be different if we remembered that more often?"*

*"This was a crazy day! I shrank the practice down to one minute. I felt the benefit. I'm just going to shoot for one minute a day this week. Maybe next week I'll up it to two minutes a day."*

*"I felt like my day went really well today. Possibly the fact that I did this a few times during the day kind of cleared my mind and ended up making me more effective."*

Does this practice seem right for you? Are you willing to commit to trying it for one week?

If so, I encourage you to approach it with curiosity, compassion, and dedication to increasing your overall capacity and well-being.

Next week's post in the Teacher Wellness Blog Series will address a topic on everyone's minds these days: dealing with constant change.

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