

Mindfulness

A Key Component of Social-Emotional Learning



Equipping students with the mindsets, skills and habits they need to succeed

Contents

1. Introduction to Mindfulness
2. Defining Mindfulness
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Image: Mindful Schools

Objectives

This toolkit is designed to:

- Promote a **deeper understanding of mindfulness**, a practice that may help build social-emotional skills
- Present **key considerations for teachers and school leaders** planning to introduce mindfulness into their schools
- Provide **specific classroom activities and practices for teachers** to share with their students, as well as specific practices for staff to cultivate their own personal mindfulness practice



Opening Activity | Part One: Experiencing Mindfulness

Mindfulness is best understood experientially. In this three-minute opening activity, a facilitator will use a script* to guide participants through an exercise which aims to provide an introduction to some basic elements of mindfulness: posture, relaxation, body awareness, and breathing.



* SEE PAGE 5 OF FACILITATOR'S GUIDE

Opening Activity | Part Two: Discussion



Turn & Talk, Whole Group Discussion:

1. What was that like for you? What did you notice?
2. Was it difficult? Easy?
3. With this experience in mind, why do you think mindfulness has recently risen so rapidly in popularity?
4. (question on next slide)

Opening Activity | Part Two: Discussion (con't)

4. These people are all practitioners and advocates of mindfulness. Do you recognize any of them?* For each, why do you think they practice mindfulness?



*ANSWER KEY ON PAGE 6 OF FACILITATORS GUIDE

Defining Mindfulness: Overview

Mindfulness is a state of awareness and a practice;¹ it involves attending to the present moment and cultivating an attitude of curiosity, openness and acceptance of one's experience.² It is a secular (non-religious) practice and is backed by compelling scientific evidence.^{3,4}



Defining Mindfulness: Overview

Mindfulness generally describes a state of awareness and a set of practices and skills which center around four qualities: attention, intention, presence, and openness.⁵

What does mindfulness actually look and feel like?:

- **Attention**: listening, watching, or considering what naturally exists (e.g. directing and sustaining attention on a selected object, such as the sound of a chime or the sensation of the one's breathing)
- **Intention**: purposefully increasing awareness of experience
- **Presence**: being in the moment, here and now
- **Openness**: being curious, objective and non-judgmental about experience⁶ (e.g. simply observing, with no explicit focus on particular objects; noticing thoughts, emotions and physical states).⁵



How does it actually work?:

- Different practices are thought to activate different mechanisms. For example, sustained attention practices may enhance executive function, while sensory experiences of one's breathing may reduce stress.⁷

Challenges and Frequently Asked Questions

The initial challenges associated with the practice of mindfulness are often the result of misconceptions and misunderstandings. Below we try to address some of these:

Are mindfulness and meditation the same thing?

Mindfulness, meditation, and mindfulness meditation are often used interchangeably, but meditation more commonly refers to a stationary practice, whereas mindfulness is more of an umbrella term under which fall the set of states and practices described on slide 8.

Is mindfulness from the Buddhist tradition? Does it conflict with other religions or atheism?

While it is *an aspect* of many religious and spiritual traditions, there is nothing inherently spiritual, religious, or anti-religious about mindfulness. In this presentation, we focus on mindfulness as a secular (non-religious) practice to enhance well-being, which is backed by compelling scientific evidence.^{3,4}

I don't feel comfortable practicing mindfulness; it's just not my type of thing.

No one should be forced to practice mindfulness if they do not wish to, but it is helpful to bear in mind that mindfulness does not need to have anything to do with yoga and meditation postures or spiritual ideas. It is a practice for the mind and body which can be totally invisible to the outside world.

In some mindfulness practices I can't keep my mind from wandering.

This statement comes from perhaps the single most pervasive misconception about mindfulness. While the practice of mindfulness *may* result in reduced mind-wandering, the aim of mindfulness should never be to suppress thoughts. Instead, the aim is to simply notice thoughts arising— or notice that your attention has been drawn to them— and then, without judgment, to return to the initial goal of your practice, whether it was to focus attention on something or to openly monitor your experience. This practice of bringing the mind back once it has wandered is the essence of mindfulness.

Mindfulness Matters



Why Mindfulness Matters: Research Findings



Attention to mindfulness has risen exponentially in recent years, largely thanks to encouraging research across a wide range of fields and institutions.³ Below are some of the findings which are of particular interest for those in educational contexts. Mindfulness leads to:

Academic

- Improvements in cognitive performance, school self-concept, and engagement⁴
- Greater attention⁸
- Reduction of anxiety in high-stakes testing⁹

Mental & Behavioral Health

- Decreases in stress levels⁸, emotional over-excitement and depression symptoms¹⁰
- Increases in emotional well-being and self-compassion¹¹
- Lower self-harm¹²

Social Behavior

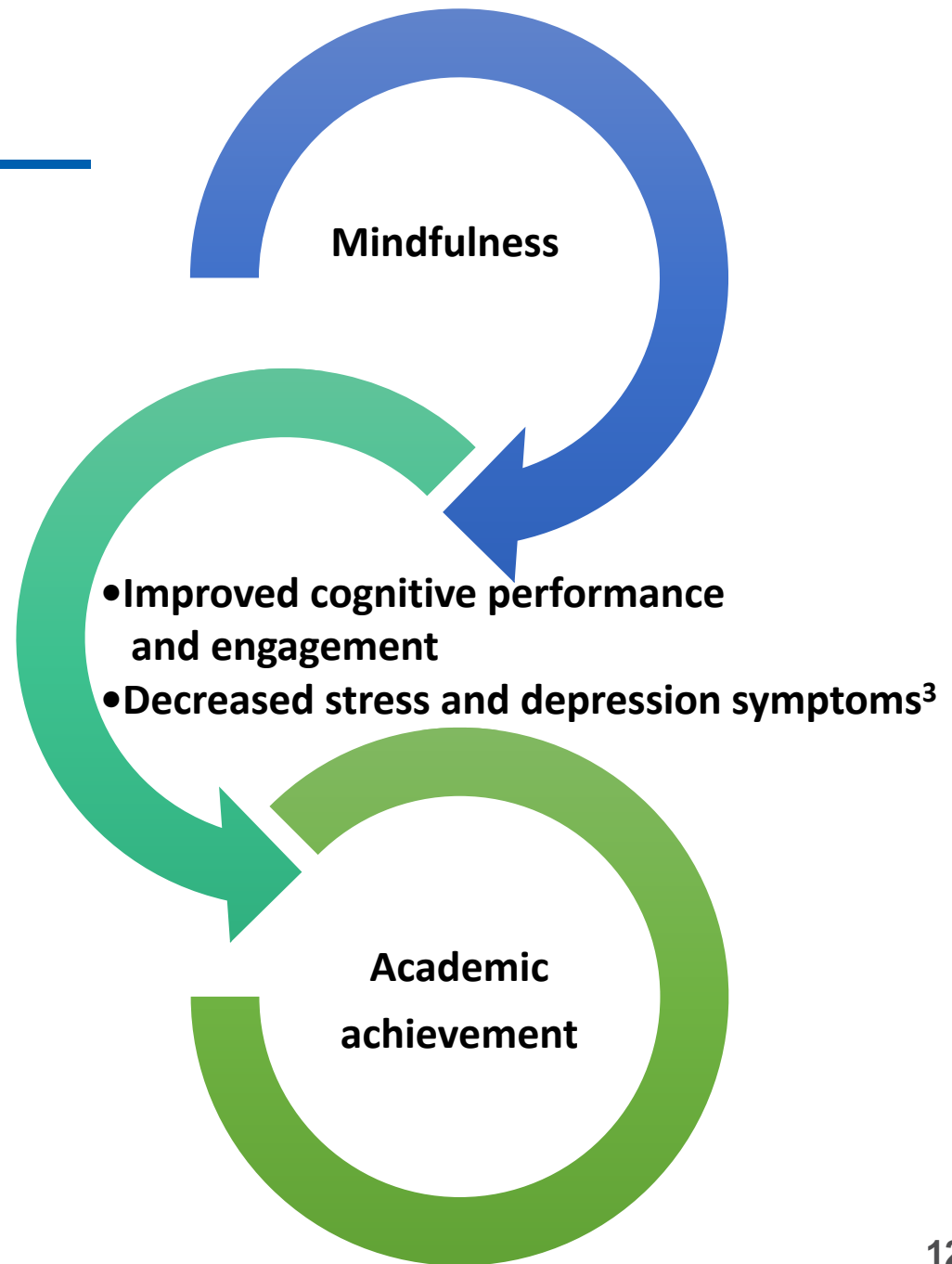
- Healthier responses to difficult social situations¹³
- Reduction of implicit bias¹⁴
- Increases in compassionate responses to others in need¹¹

Why Mindfulness Matters: Academic Achievement



Mindfulness and Academic Achievement:

Because mindfulness is shown to mitigate some of students' most common impediments to learning, several studies suggest that mindfulness can have a positive impact on academic outcomes.



Why Mindfulness Matters: Mindfulness and Specific Populations

Mindfulness and Specific Populations:

Trauma and Stress

Mindfulness interventions may improve students' ability to cope with traumatic experiences. Furthermore, students with significant stress and/or trauma often experience greater overall benefits from mindfulness interventions compared to their peers. ^{15,16,17}

TRAUMA



Executive function difficulties

Studies indicate that students with executive control difficulties not only benefit from some mindfulness interventions, but actually tend to improve *more* than their peers who experience the same interventions. ¹⁸

Bullying

"[Thinking mindfully] allows children to consider other perspectives, recognize situation novelty ... and generate and consider appropriate reactions in physically or socially threatening situations." ^{19, 20}



Group Activity #2: Mindfulness and Reactivity

This visual offers an excellent illustration of how mindfulness can impact behavior. Take a moment to consider it, and then try the activity below.

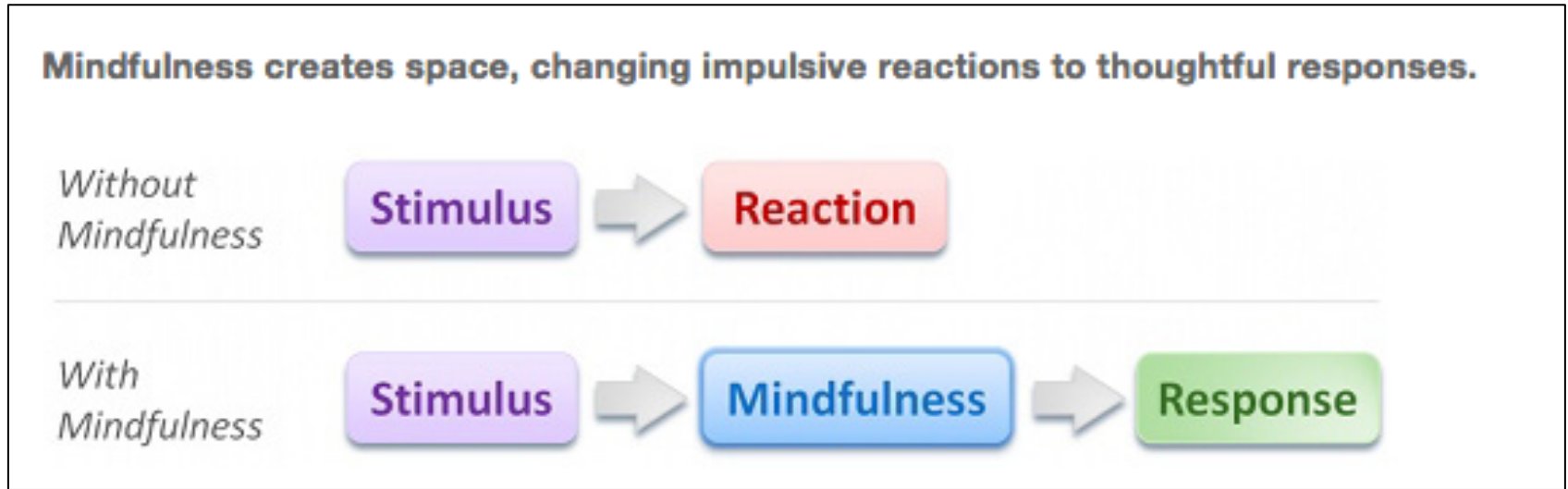


Image: Mindful Schools

THINK-PAIR-SHARE:

1. Take a minute or so to think of an experience you've had in the classroom (or elsewhere) when you reacted in a way that you later regretted. Share it with your partner, trying to use the language from the diagram: "The stimulus was ____ and my reaction was ____."
2. Now imagine how things might have unfolded differently if you had been more mindful before reacting. Take four or five minutes to discuss with a partner or small group, then share out in the large group.

Video: Student and Parent Perspectives on Mindfulness



Ethan's Mother

Mindfulness in the Classroom



Image: Mindful Schools

Mindfulness in the Classroom: Key Considerations

Do teachers need personal experience with mindfulness?

While teachers do not need extensive training or experience before introducing mindfulness, many experts recommend that schools start with teachers, either through a direct training program or by supporting them in starting and maintaining a practice in their own lives. In fact, training teachers—before or even rather than students—may cause a self-reinforcing cycle of “positive reciprocal relationships between [teachers and students].”²¹ Clearly this has tremendous implications for improving classroom climate and easing burdens of behavior management.

See slide 21 for suggestions about beginning one’s own mindfulness practice

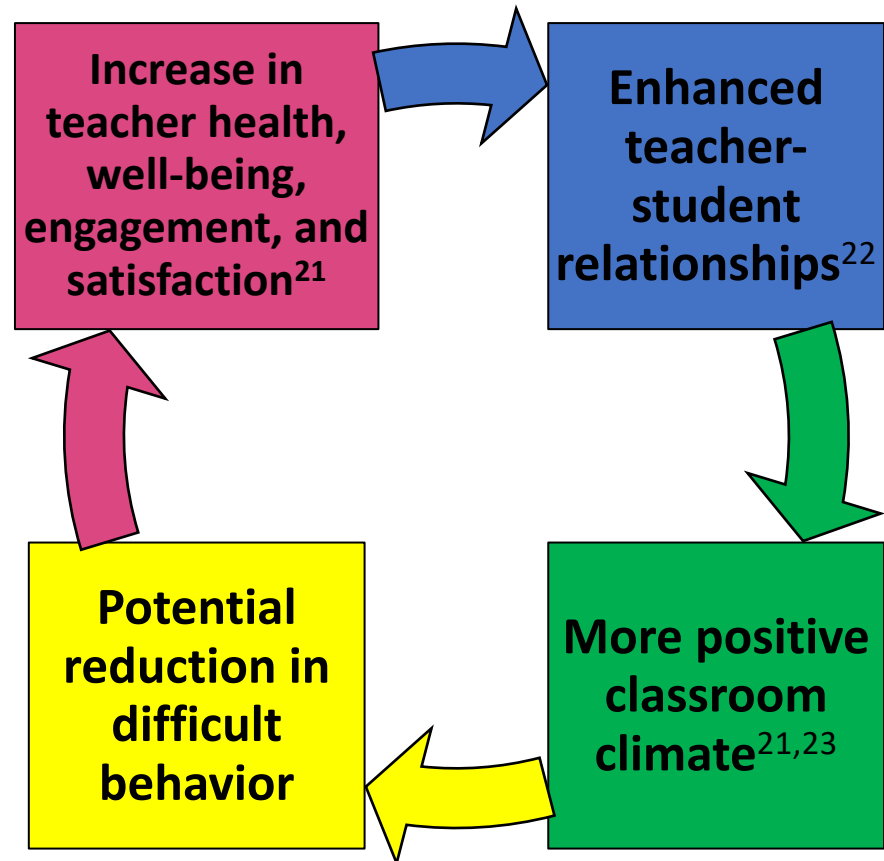


Image adapted from a model hypothesized by Roeser (2012)

Mindfulness in the Classroom: Key Considerations (con't)

Religious and cultural implications

Some students or families may express opposition to practices associated with mindfulness due to a belief that it impinges on their religious traditions or that it promotes certain religious beliefs (e.g., Buddhism). Be sensitive to these concerns, but reiterate that mindfulness can be taught in a way that has no religious, spiritual, or metaphysical dimension.²⁴ The practice of mindful awareness is actually found in almost all the world's classical traditions and philosophies, and the motivation and justification for introducing it in education is based in medical science.

Surfacing of trauma

School staff should be cognizant that as students become more aware of their experiences—especially in a new and “embodied” way—latent trauma may surface, and this may be painful or unpleasant to observe.²⁵ This is helpful to keep in mind, both in terms of understanding students' resistance and as a means of more fully understanding students and communicating with school counselors as necessary.

In light of these potential concerns, *students should always feel free to opt out of any mindfulness activities.* As an alternative, they can observe, rest lying or sitting down, or read quietly.

Classroom Strategies and Activities

A variety of mindfulness practices and curricular lessons exist at every grade level. The following suggestions and **research-based strategies** are some approaches to developing the many aspects of mindfulness.

These will be divided into two sections:

Section 1. **Practices and Routines**

Section 2. **Dedicated Lessons and Curriculum**

We use the following key to indicate the grades for which each strategy is most relevant:

E

Elementary Grades

M

Middle Grades

S

Secondary Grades

Classroom Strategies and Activities

Section 1:

Practices and Routines

Sample Strategy: Start with Yourself

The best way to teach mindfulness is to be mindful. This is why nearly every mindfulness-in-education program or curriculum advises staff (teachers especially) to cultivate a personal practice.^{21,26} Below are some suggestions for getting started.



- 1. **Schedule five minutes of mindfulness** into your day, ideally first thing upon waking:
 - Find a quiet space to sit comfortably with an erect spine and relaxed body
 - Set a soft timer so that you aren't distracted by looking at the clock
 - Focus on your breathing, putting your awareness in your chest and lungs
 - Scan your body from head to toe, relaxing each part as you become aware of it
 - When your thoughts bring you away, simply bring your awareness back to your breath; remember that the aim is not to stop or suppress thoughts, but rather to practice bringing awareness back once it has gone away
- 2. **Make space for mindfulness moments** throughout the day; for example:
 - Take three deep breaths at the beginning of each class, before a meal, or to calm yourself when you notice that you are tense, stressed, frustrated or angry;
 - Feel the sensation of your feet on the ground as you walk to lunch;
 - Make eye contact and be still while listening fully to another person



Integrate some or all of these exercises at your own pace, and remember that as long as you make an effort, there is no such thing as failing or doing it wrong.

Sample Strategy: The Practice of Presence (For Teachers / Staff)

Maintaining a calm, steady presence can be a very powerful practice, both for the person trying to do so, and for the people one is surrounded by. There are two key opportunities in a teacher's day that are ideal for experimenting with this practice of presence: 1) transition time between classes, and 2) when a classroom is in a state of chaos. Teachers can try to the following:

Use transition time between classes as a reminder to do one or more of the following:

- Take three deep breaths, observing how each one feels in your body
- Sense the physical state of your body, scanning it for tension
- Try to notice your emotional state (ask: "how do I feel right now?")

E

M

S

When a classroom is in chaos:

- Be aware of your breathing: if you notice that it is elevated or uneven, observe several breaths or wait for it to slow down before addressing the class
- Speak firmly if necessary, but without anger if possible

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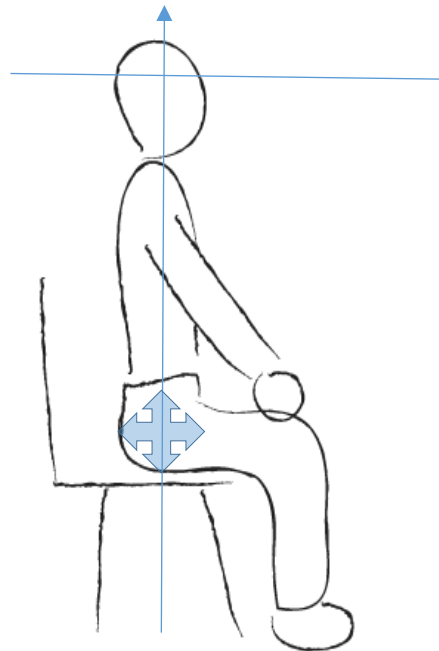
S

Sample Strategy: Establishing Mindful Posture

Establishing Mindful Body Posture is a simple but powerful strategy. Using a set of verbal directions,* this strategy can be integrated into the daily routine as a way to begin class, begin a new activity (e.g., prepare for a group discussion), or as a way to return a group to focus and attention. Below is one starting place.

Foundations of mindful posture:

- Spine erect, perpendicular to the ground
- Head level or slightly down
- Muscles relaxed, not tense
- Entire body still, not fidgeting
- Eyes closed or gently open



Posture Matters:

“Adopting an upright seated posture in the face of stress can maintain self-esteem, reduce negative mood, and increase positive mood compared to a slumped posture. ...Sitting upright may be a simple behavioral strategy to help build resilience to stress.”²⁷



* SEE PAGE 3 OF HANDOUT

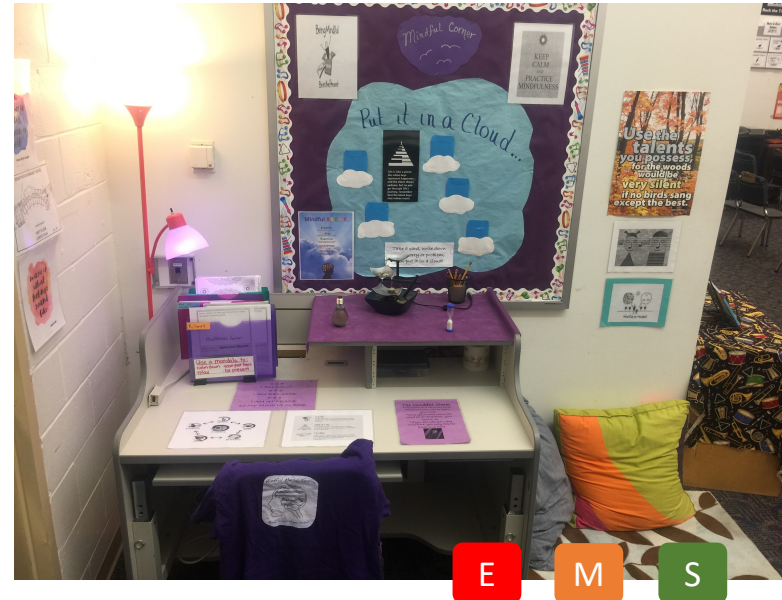
Sample Strategy: A Mindful Break Area

Schools such as the Breakthrough Magnet School in Hartford, CT have experienced positive results from their use of a dedicated room where groups of students can go with an adult facilitator to practice some form of mindfulness in order to relax, regulate their emotions, regain focus, re-energize, etc. It may not be possible to dedicate an entire room for this, so it may be best to reserve a corner of a room. Below are images from the Breakthrough Magnet School in CT.

The Mindfulness Room



One classroom's "Mindful Corner"



Sample Strategy: Auditory Reminders

There is likely no practitioner of mindfulness who is permanently present and aware of their state; therefore reminders can be very helpful. **Teachers can use a sound-producing device as an auditory reminder for students to try to return to a mindful state.** When introducing the idea to the class, teachers should be clear about what the intention is. They may choose to connect the sound to one or more questions or concepts. For example, the sound may be a reminder to 1) return to a mindful posture, 2) refocus on the task at hand, 3) sense their breath, 4) ask themselves if they are being kind to themselves and others, and so on. Below is a Vibra-tone, a simple device that produces a pleasant sound.



Vibra-tone

E

M

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Classroom Strategies and Activities

Section 2:

Curriculum and Dedicated Activities

Sample Strategy: Preliminary Activity

Generate Interest

Some students, especially those in middle and high school, may feel resistant to experimenting with mindfulness practices, either because they feel it is pointless or too unusual. One option is to play this 10-second YouTube clip of NBA player LeBron James 'meditating,' and pose the question: Why do you think he's doing that?



[Lebron James 'Meditating'](#)

As an iconic athlete, Lebron James carries a great deal of credibility among young people.



[Another excellent video, called Mindfulness Basics, which features celebrities talking about Mindfulness and related topics \(3 minutes\)](#)

Sample Strategy: Mindful Eating Activity

Mindful Eating, which can be defined as being as aware as possible to one's physical sensations while eating, is an engaging way for people of all ages to experience mindfulness as a practice in life. Typically, students are given a raisin or some other small, simple item of food and are then prompted to practice consuming it in a way that is maximally attentive. Mindful Eating is used in clinical psychology as a supplemental treatment for overeating and thus may be helpful in developing students' physical awareness and impulse control.²⁸

Example Prompts for Mindful Eating Activity

- Hold the raisin before eating it, imagining you are from another planet and didn't know what it was*
- Examine it visually very closely; count the wrinkles on it*
- Smell it, being aware of any changes in your body (e.g., stomach growling, salivation, etc.)*
- Taste it as sensitively as possible*
- Chew it in super-slow motion, trying to take an entire two minutes to eat it*

A discussion of observations would usually follow that activity.



E

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S

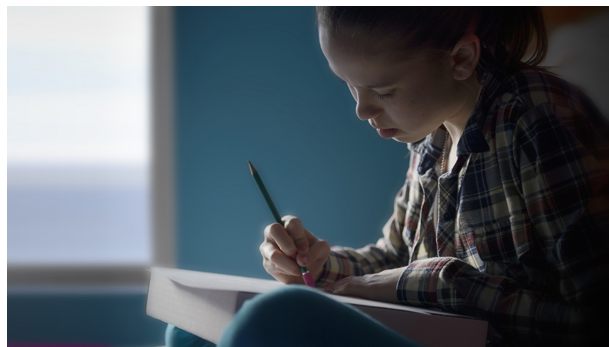
Sample Strategy: Mindful Journaling

Mindful Journaling is a fun and unique way for students to experience the practice of mindfulness in a way that is directly connected to their academic development. This practice will encourage students to be reflective about their lives and actions, and will also enhance their ability to express themselves in writing.²⁹

Mindful Journaling asks students to track their experience and emotions *moment-to-moment*, rather than writing about what happened in the past or what might happen in the future. This could be part of a routine (e.g., every Friday morning) or a one-time activity.

Example prompts:

1. *“Describe what each of your five senses are experiencing right now. Use as much detail as possible.”*
2. *“Try to notice how you feel inside your body at this moment— your emotions and sensations. Try to describe the sensations in words.”*



Sample Strategy: Mindfulness as Part of Curriculum and Standards

Mindfulness literature and information spans nearly every discipline, from neuroscience and psychology to sports and business. Students can fulfill curricular requirements while learning about mindfulness through in-class activities or homework assignments. Below are some ideas.

- ELA: A research paper about a popular figure's relationship with mindfulness (Sports: LeBron James; Business: Oprah Winfrey, Russell Simmons; Politics: Tim Ryan)
- Science: A lab about how stress affects the human body and how mindfulness may mitigate the effect
- Health: A discussion about coping with stress and/or addiction and how mindfulness may impact those efforts
- Music: Activities with mindful listening*
- Art: A mindful creation activity where students draw or paint while listening to a music recording
- Physical Education: Mindful movements activity such as yoga or mindful walking



*FOR THE LINKS TO EXAMPLE
LESSON DESCRIPTIONS, SEE SLIDE 32

Closing Activity: Planning for Implementation

Of the various strategies we've discussed today, which one could you commit to trying?

Questions to consider:

- What planning / preparation is required?
- How do you plan to address anticipated challenges?
- How might this strategy be integrated into your existing practices, strategies, or lesson planning?



Routines and Practices

The Practice of Presence

Mindful Break Area

Mindful Posture

Auditory Reminder

Activities

Generate Interest

Mindful Eating

Mindful Journaling

Want to Know More?

Additional Resources on Mindfulness

- [Mindfulness for Teachers: Simple Skills for Peace and Productivity in the Classroom \(Book\)](#)
- [Headspace \(Meditation Platform\)](#)
- [Greater Good Magazine](#)
- [Mindful Eating Lesson Description](#)
- [Mindful Listening - MINDUP \(Prek-2\)](#)
[Mindful Listening - MINDUP \(6-8\)](#)

Partner with an Outside Organization

- [MindUP \(Curricula for Educators\)](#)
- [Calmer Choice \(Massachusetts-Based Prevention Program for Schools\)](#)
- [Learning to BREATHE \(Curriculum\)](#)
- [CARE for Teachers \(PD Course\)](#)

Additional Resources on Social-Emotional Learning

- [Transforming Education toolkit on Growth Mindset \(Free PD Resources\)](#)
- [Transforming Education toolkit on Self-Management \(Free PD Resources\)](#)
- [Transforming Education toolkin on Self-Efficacy \(Free PD Resources\)](#)
- [A National Teacher Survey on How Social and Emotional Learning Can Empower Children and Transform Schools \(Article\)](#)
- [Smart Hearts: Social and Emotional Learning Overview \(Video\)](#)
- [The Heart-Brain Connection: The Neuroscience of Social and Emotional Learning \(Video\)](#)

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Looking for Some Quick Feedback

Please share your feedback in this 2-minute survey so that we can improve the free tools we create for teachers! <https://goo.gl/54xcjU>





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