

PEER-REVIEWED

FOUNDATIONAL PRACTICES FOR MINDFULNESS IN AND OUT OF THE CLASSROOM

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Abstract

One can practice being mindful through conscious awareness and focused attention at any given moment throughout the day. Further, incorporating a formal mindfulness practice can be viewed as a valid strategy for helping to improve overall well-being. The purpose of this article is to provide teachers with four foundational mindfulness practices and four additional tips for using these activities in and outside the classroom. The foundational practices and tips provided are arguably some of the more basic mindfulness techniques, yet there is strong empirical evidence to suggest these activities can be useful in promoting a wide range of mental and physiological health benefits. The four foundational practices include Feel the Connection of Feet to the Ground, Find your Breath, Sense the Space Around You, and Hand on Heart. The four tips include Simple but not Easy, Sound Therapy, Processing Questions, and Mindful Self-Compassion Practices. We believe that a wide variety of individuals may be able to promote their social and emotional health from use of these contemplative practices and are hopeful teachers will find them to be personally and instructionally beneficial.



Foundational Mindful Practices

The following four mindfulness practices are considered foundational or fundamental activities to any contemplative regimen. Mindfulness makes available to the participant a clear, open, and nonjudgmental mindset in focusing on tasks that occur during the present moment. These four practices (connection of feet to the ground, attention to the breath, sense of the space around you, and hand on the heart) can be considered core elements in helping an individual develop a deeper intra-personal connection with self as it relates to being present and fully aware of the here and now (i.e., mindful). These self-care practices can either be done as a personal practice outside the classroom or used as part of a teacher's pedagogical repertoire in helping students find heightened focus, equanimity, and compassion.

Foundational Practice 1 – Feel the Connection of Feet to the Ground. First, in a standing or sitting position, place feet shoulder width apart. Start to notice the connection of the feet to the ground. Settle in and continue focusing attention to the feet, bring awareness to the sensations or lack thereof as the feet connect to the ground. Be curious and ask yourself how does this feel? Focusing undivided attention to the sensations of the feet connecting with the ground is in essence a form of mindfulness in and of itself.

Foundational Practice 2 – Find your Breath. Start by allowing the body and mind to relax. Bring attention to posture. Is the body sitting or standing upright, rather than a slouched position? Is there tightness throughout the shoulders or back? Next, bring full attention to the breath (air coming in and out, or the belly/chest rising and falling). Take three slow and relaxed breaths as the focus shifts to the sensations of breathing. These breaths should be diaphragmatic in nature (i.e., deep breathing that fully engages the diaphragm). Finally, bring attention to the feeling in this present moment. Is there a feeling of relaxation? More alert and focused? Honor your feelings at this present moment. If breathing is labored and not relaxed, then take the time to repeat these

steps to help center the body and mind.

Foundational Practice 3 – Sense the Space Around You. At the start of this practice, scan the current environment, three to five feet in all directions. Ask yourself, what do I see? Then bring full visual attention to the items in your space. Next, listen to any sound or lack thereof in this space. Focus complete attention on the sensation of the sound(s). Scan, listen, and take a moment to process objects in this space. What are you hearing and how is the sound affecting you? This practice brings focus to the here and now by directing consciousness to the present moment within the current physical space.

Foundational Practice 4 – Hand on Heart (with or without movement). In a standing or seated position, place the left or right hand over the heart with an open palm touching the chest. Feel the sensations of your clothes on your hand. Can you feel your heart beating? Continue to feel the gentle pressure of your hand over your heart. Now, take 2-3 deep diaphragmatic breaths. Can you feel the rise and fall of your chest with each breath? Try moving your hand in slow circles on your heart. Don't be afraid to linger with the feeling(s) or indifference that you are experiencing as you try this practice. Be curious to the degree for which this practice comforts you. Additionally, instead of placing your hand on your heart, you can consider placing your hand on your cheek, stroking your arm, or even crossing both arms and giving yourself a gentle squeeze (i.e., self-hug).

Tips that Compliment Mindfulness in the Classroom

Teachers interested in creating social and emotional learning opportunities can consider several didactics to help shape desired prosocial behavior with students. Provided in this section are four additional teaching tips to consider when implementing mindfulness practices with students.

Tip 1 – Simple but not Easy. Learning about and practicing mindfulness takes patience. As Kabat-Zinn reminds us, “While it may be simple to practice mindfulness, it is not necessarily easy. Mindfulness requires effort and disci-



pline...we tend to be particularly unaware that we are thinking virtually all the time” (1994, p. 8-9). Mindfulness is not about clearing out the thoughts in our mind or stopping the thought process completely. Rather, to practice mindfulness is to be curiously aware of our thoughts and shift focus and attention to the present. Rather than being stuck thinking about the past or future we should check in with ourselves and see if the focus is in the here and now. One cannot stop the wandering mind; however, we can become aware of the mind and more consciously awake to life experiences. Teachers should encourage students to be patient with themselves when practicing mindfulness. One simple activity that helps become more aware of the current moment is to ask students, “where is your mind right now?” and have them reflect on what they are currently thinking about or feeling. To remind students to check in with themselves regarding “where is their mind” can help students be conscious of the here and now. Those students who attend to the present moment have a higher probability of staying engaged in learning tasks for longer periods of time.

Tip 2 - Sound Therapy. Music is often referred to as the universal language because it can be enjoyed by anyone regardless of race, gender, culture, or religion. Music is used all over the world as a complementary tool of self-expression through singing, dancing, and even meditation. In physical education, music has also

been used as a method to increase satisfaction with the lesson and to improve motivation (Digelidis et al., 2014). Furthermore, other studies conducted in physical education have indicated better student engagement when music is used within the classroom (Barney & Pleban, 2018; Brewer et al., 2016).

Sound is essentially a form of energy. As an object vibrates, it creates waves that travel through the air and into our ear, thus creating the sound we hear. Every sound that is produced has its own frequency that is measured in hertz. As we receive these frequencies our bodies naturally want to synchronize and align our energy with what is being heard. Sound therapy is a beneficial mindful practice that incorporates music with specific frequencies to achieve mental, emotional, and physical well-being (Boyd-Brewer & McCaffrey, 2004; Salamon et al., 2003).

Sound therapy can be conducted using instruments such as a singing bowl, pan flute, didgeridoo, wind chimes, or tuning fork. Solfeggio frequencies are specific frequencies that also can be used during meditation for well-being. There is an abundance of Solfeggio healing frequency resources throughout the internet that are free to use. A few examples of healing frequencies that can be found online are 396 HZ, 417 HZ, 528 HZ, or 639 HZ. Searching keywords (e.g., positive frequencies, healing frequencies, or relaxation frequencies) on the internet is an-

other way to locate sound therapy frequencies for a mindfulness session. See the instructions provided in Table 1 for an example on how to conduct a sound therapy session.

Music (including sound therapy) can be utilized during mindfulness activities to help enhance the experience (Giobbi, 2020). Using sound therapy tools (such as a singing bowl, pan flute, didgeridoo, wind chimes, or tuning fork) with mindfulness practices can assist with heightening attention and self-awareness (Giobbi, 2020). Teachers can consider implementing sound therapy as a further means to help students practice self-care.

Tip 3 - Processing Questions. Having students sit down and reflect upon their experience with a mindfulness practice can be valuable and offer potential transfer of learning with intrapersonal and interpersonal relationship skills. Self and group reflection are both important tools to help students develop healthy relationships in and outside the classroom. When we take time to stop and reflect on our experiences, we invite the opportunity to learn more about ourselves (self-reflection) and others (group processing). Presenting questions for students to reflect on is one method to help students gain a deeper meaning of their experience(s) in the lesson or activity. We have included sample instructions and a list of 10 potential questions (see table 2) to consider when planning for self-reflection and group processing with students.

Start each day by asking your students three questions and having students write down their answers. When starting this journey, we suggest starting off with more simple questions and gradually lead to more complex ones. If students are having trouble answering any question you have given them for the day, remind them to try their best or provide the student(s) with an alternative question or choice of questions. Reflection, whether self or group, is not meant to be overwhelming or daunting. Additionally, we recommend students keep a journal or notebook with the date, questions posed, and the student's answers. Keeping a self-reflection journal promotes deeper metacognition of thoughts, emotions, assumptions, and possible future action tendencies. Deeper reflection is a pathway toward potential self-care and future social and emotional growth.

These are sample questions teachers can ask students to think about toward becoming more mindful. Processing questions can be asked before, during, or upon completion of a mindfulness practice. These questions can be completed individually or in a group processing format. Additionally, a quick Google search of keywords such as empowering, mindful, or self-reflection questions can provide other potential ways to reflect with students.

Tip 4 - Mindful Self-Compassion Practices. The work of educating our youth will continue to comprise a need to create learning environ-

Table 1. Sound Therapy Scripted Guide

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1. At the beginning of class, dim or turn off the lights completely.
 2. Instruct students to close their eyes and bring their body to a position that feels comfortable to them. While they are doing this, start your sound/frequency chosen for the activity.
 3. Guide them to check in with themselves and bring awareness to how they are feeling in this present moment. Instruct them to pay close attention to their breathing.
 4. As the healing vibrations play, instruct students to take deep breaths in through their nose and out through their mouth. Repeat these deep breaths about 3-5 times.
 5. Guide students to relax and let everything go, into a relaxed yet alert state. If they feel their mind wander, that's okay. Remind them to bring awareness back to their breath to reset.
 6. Next, stay silent and allow music to play for 5-7 minutes or however long the allotted time.
 7. At the end of this session, turn off the music and instruct students to open their eyes and return to the presence of the whole class, slowly and comfortably.
 8. Allow students a moment to stretch their arms in whatever way feels comfortable for them.
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Table 2. Sample Reflective Questions

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• How do you feel today and why might you feel this way?• How would it feel if you were more accepting of others? Notice how this feels.• What do you love most about yourself?• What are 3 words that best describe you?• What are you most proud about? Why?• What are 3 items you are grateful for in your life? | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• How will you build better relationships with your fellow classmates today and throughout the school year?• What are 3 core values you feel are important to live by each day?• How does stress and anxiety present itself in your body and how can you work toward lowering these responses?• When do you feel at your best? |
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ments that are both emotionally and physically safe. Trauma can create conditions that have a profound effect on an individual's emotional and physical safety (National Institute of Mental Health, 2022). Students face an assortment of events and variables that can create trauma and potentially have a negative impact on their education. Trauma induced events include poverty, neglect, abuse, violence, bullying, and even COVID-19. Teachers should be encouraged to adopt a trauma-informed framework as a potentially transformative and highly encouraged pedagogical practice when working with students. Two important strategies in delivering trauma-informed pedagogy include building relationships and helping students further develop social and emotional growth (Sutherland & Parker, 2020).

Using mindful self-compassion practices (MSCP) can be a useful tool in helping students navigate toward stronger social and emotional growth and positive interpersonal relationships. According to Neff, self-compassion

...involves being touched by and open to one's own suffering, not avoiding or disconnecting from it, generating the desire to alleviate one's suffering and to heal oneself with kindness. Self-compassion also involves offering nonjudgmental understanding to one's pain, inadequacies, and failures, so that one's experience is seen as part of the larger human experience (2003, p.87).

Helping students become more aware of the present moment, developing greater empathy for others, and learning ways to be kind and forgiving in the classroom are three hallmarks toward self-compassion (Neff, 2003; Neff, 2016). Developing self-compassion brings added opportunity and has been shown to increase highly desirable attributes such as connectedness,

confidence, and optimism (Zessin et al., 2015).

MSCP can allow an individual to continue to develop stronger social skills toward coping with and navigating trauma in their lives. More specifically, MSCP can create space to help students: treat themselves with care and understanding rather than harsh judgment, actively soothe and comfort themselves, to "be" with painful feelings as they occur and avoid extremes of suppressing or running away from painful feelings. Table 3 lists three MSCPs from the Community Resiliency Model that teachers can incorporate into the classroom as an effort to build self-compassion (Miller-Karas, 2015).

A teacher can plan to incorporate the use of these three MSCPs as an initial strategy prior to completing a longer instructional task. For example, envision leading students through a simple 30 second grounding practice where the teacher invites them to intentionally pay attention to specific body sensations as they are sitting or standing in class. These practices can also be an excellent precursor or anticipatory set prior to the start of any physical education lesson, and beneficial in helping to elicit calm, pleasant, and peaceful feelings.

Final Thoughts

Whether as a personal practice or a pedagogical tool in the classroom, mindfulness can create space for meta-awareness. Some have argued that heightened awareness of the present moment can lead toward less stress, anxiety, and a greater sense of happiness (Kabat-Zinn, 1994). Furthermore, mindfulness creates the opportunity to develop compassion, and this conscious concern for self and for others makes available opportunity for strong social connec-

Table 3. Mindful Self-Compassion Sample Practices (adapted from Miller-Karas, 2015).

Resourcing. Start by thinking about any person, place or thing that makes you feel calm, pleasant, peaceful, or resilient. This practice is a resource intensification method that can help elicit a pleasant thought or feeling as a means for self-care. For example, who are people in your life that help make you feel calm, pleasant, peaceful, or resilient? Or another example, what “thing” can make you feel calm, pleasant, peaceful, or resilient (e.g., cup of coffee or tea, particular smells, or images)?

Grounding. Start by making direct contact with the body and something that provides support in your present environment. Grounding provides an opportunity to gain a sense of “self” in relation to the present time and space. An individual can practice this grounding exercise while sitting, walking, or lying down. The key is to pay close attention to the body contacting the object and toward being aware of the body being present (i.e., in the moment awareness) in the space it occupies.

Gesturing. This practice is any movement of the body as a means of a soothing expression. There are all sorts of different types of gestures (e.g., protective, calming, universal gestures). The self-soothing gesture can be called to mind to help enter resiliency and become calm. Examples: hand on heart, touching a ring on a finger, walking.

tion (Zessin et al, 2015). As Kabat-Zinn reminds us, “The practice of mindfulness immediately makes available to us both the world’s and our heart’s intrinsic goodness and beauty, revealing through our direct experience power and solace of resting in the present moment in awareness... (1994, 274). By observing thoughts, feelings, and sensations an individual can start to develop situational awareness and compassion toward what is happening in the here and now and create conditions for optimal mental health. Through mindfulness we recognize that education is a human endeavor where strong social and emotional connection with our students is paramount, for meeting their needs in the classroom and beyond.

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