

Classroom Activity

Mindfulness Muscle

Time

45 minutes

Overview

Research shows¹ that action and emotion are deeply connected. Think about how your day takes on a different tone if you don't get a full night's sleep—you may be more likely to feel irritable, which could impact everything from your ability to learn in class to what you choose to eat for lunch. It may seem obvious that your emotions impact your actions, but scientists now understand that it works the other way, too.² Actions like writing in a gratitude journal or drinking more water have the ability to influence our emotional state.

In this activity, students will examine how actions like mindfulness help us regulate our emotions and create a personal plan for building their own “mindfulness muscle.”

Objectives

Students will be able to:

- Evaluate how habits and actions impact well-being
- Practice mindfulness to enhance emotional well-being

Materials

- **Mindfulness Muscle** student capture sheet
- Internet access
- [Mindful Breathing](#)

Procedure

1. Engage students in a critical thinking activity by asking the questions below in one of three following ways:
 - Pose to the class and facilitate a wider discussion.
 - Divide students into pairs and instruct them to devise answers together and report to the class.
 - Allow students time to reflect on the questions individually and write down their responses.

Critical Questions:

1. What does well-being mean?

¹<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3203022/>

²<http://www.businessinsider.com/how-to-improve-your-relationship-2014-12>

2. **Do our emotions affect our actions or do our actions affect our emotions?**
3. **How are emotions and physical health connected?**
4. **Whenever we are stressed, upset, anxious, frustrated, sad, confused, and/or in a bad mood, what, if anything, can we do to experience a more positive outlook?**

2. Ask students to raise their hands if they have heard of the term mindfulness. Ask a few student volunteers to define the term. Reward all answers with positive feedback. List their answers on the board.
3. Share this definition with the class:
 - **Mindfulness** involves focusing our awareness on the present moment. This state allows us to calmly acknowledge and accept our feelings, thoughts, and bodily sensations without judgment.

Being mindful has been found to help us reduce stress and improve our overall happiness. Mindfulness helps us get to know ourselves, slow down, and connect. It allows us to take a break from doing and just be.

4. Inform students that lots of research suggests mindfulness is one of the best tools we have for noticing and managing our emotions. The more we practice mindfulness, the more aware we become of our emotions, allowing us to work with them in healthy ways. For example, rather than letting our emotions drive our behaviors and decisions, mindfulness helps us to slow down, take a few breaths, and choose how we want to respond.
5. Mindfulness can be practiced anywhere, at any time. Whenever you find yourself getting upset, anxious, sad, frustrated, confused or stressed, consider taking a deep breath, and trying out one of these mindfulness strategies:
 - Eating meditation—When you take the first bite, really pay attention to the taste. Look at the food. Feel the textures in your mouth. Smell it. Notice how your body reacts to it.
 - Focus on sounds—Close your eyes and listen. Separate each sound in your mind and notice each one by one. If you don't like what you hear, observe your response and let it go. Give yourself permission to be present and curious about the sounds—as if you've never heard them before. Listen, and if you find yourself starting to think about something else, notice that and then refocus on listening.
 - Experience routine activities mindfully—Think of something you do every day that you take for granted, like opening a door. When you touch the knob or handle, stop for a moment and be mindful of where you are, how you feel at that moment and where this door will lead you. Likewise, the moment you open your computer, take a moment to appreciate the hands that do this, and the brain that understands how to use the computer. You can do this with negative thoughts, too. Each time you think a negative thought, for example, you could notice it, label it, and let it go.
 - Experience nature—Whenever you're outside, try to become more aware of nature around you. Pay attention. Notice the wind and the distant rumble of traffic. Sense

the air moving over your skin. Hear the birds. Feel the sun on your face. Your mind may wander. That's okay. Be kind to yourself: gently bring your awareness back to nature and your surroundings. Focus on the present moment.

6. Let's give mindfulness a try. Instruct students to do the following:
 - Choose any nearby object.
 - Place it directly in front of you.
 - Watch it for a minute or two.
 - You do not have to do anything except notice it.
 - Focus your attention. When your mind wanders away from the object, that's okay. Just redirect your attention to the object with curiosity.
 - Look at it as if you are seeing it for the first time.
 - Connect with its energy and purpose.
 - Explore the object by touching it and smelling it.
 - Be consumed by its presence.
7. Option: Have students draw or write a description of the object once they've focused intently on it for two minutes.
8. Debrief the students' experience of really focusing on an ordinary object. Did they notice anything unusual about the object that they perhaps hadn't noticed before? Did they notice anything new or different about themselves? What was the experience of paying such close attention to the object like for them?
9. Distribute the **Mindfulness Muscle** student capture sheet. Explain to students that the class will engage in a Mindful Breathing exercise.
10. Play the [Mindful Breathing](#) meditation. Once the meditation is completed, ask students to write down a method they could use for building up their mindfulness muscle. Provide students with 5–10 minutes to record these steps on their **Mindfulness Muscle** student capture sheet.
11. Ask students to share their thoughts and feelings about the meditation exercise. Use questions such as the following to promote discussion:
 - What was the experience like for you?
 - What did you like about it?
 - What was challenging?
 - Did you expect to be great at it the first time? Why or why not?
 - Did your mind wander? What did you do when that happened?

- What did you notice while you focused on your breath?
 - People often refer to meditation as a “daily practice.” Why do you think that is?
 - Teacher Note: It is important for students to understand the importance of practicing mindfulness. Mindfulness is a journey and is about the moment, rather than perfection.
 - How might you use mindfulness in your daily life?
12. Close the activity with a reflective discussion: When each group has presented their plan, revisit students’ initial impressions by asking the questions below in one of three following ways:
- Pose to the class and facilitate a wider discussion.
 - Divide students into pairs and instruct them to devise answers together and report to the class.
 - Allow students time to reflect on the questions individually and write down their responses.

Critical Questions:

- 1. What does well-being mean?**
- 2. Do our emotions affect our actions or do our actions affect our emotions?**
- 3. How are emotions and physical health connected?**
- 4. Whenever we are stressed, upset, anxious, frustrated, sad, confused, and/or in a bad mood, what, if anything, can we do to experience a more positive outlook?**

Standards

CDC Healthy Schools: National Health Education Standards

- 1.12.1 Predict how healthy behaviors can affect health status.
- 1.12.2 Describe the interrelationships of emotional, intellectual, physical, and social health.
- 1.12.3 Analyze how environment and personal health are interrelated.
- 1.12.5 Propose ways to reduce or prevent injuries and health problems.

Additional Resources:

- [Mindfulness](#)
- The [Inner Explorer](#) program is a series of daily 5–10-minute audio-guided mindfulness practices. The program focuses on key areas of development, to help students and teachers prepare for learning.



Mindfulness Muscle

Now that you've completed the mindful breathing exercise, take a moment to write down how you feel:

What small steps can you take to bring more mindfulness into your life over the next week or month? Which mindfulness practices are you most likely to use regularly? Why?