

Coping Strategies for Supporting Students

Dealing with chronic stress, anxiety, and/or difficult emotions at school can interfere with students' ability to pay attention, learn new information, and perform at their best. The following activities can help students feel better prepared to cope mentally and emotionally with stress at school.

These activities are designed to:

- 1) reduce difficult emotional states and excessive anxious arousal and/or stress;
- 2) increase energy, stimulate the mind, and improve mood;
- 3) help students be more receptive to learning; and importantly,
- 4) provide coping skills that will be helpful for life.

CALMING STRATEGIES

Overall Goal: To activate the body’s “relaxation response”, which calms the body and helps to settle the mind.
These activities can be used to “dial down” anxiety and manage stress throughout the school day.

Rationale: Uncomfortable physical symptoms (e.g., tummy aches, sore muscles, headaches) can often be a sign of anxiety or stress, and naturally our attention can focus on our physical discomfort. We can “dial down” these physical sensations by intentionally and repeatedly practicing calming exercises. These exercises can induce a more relaxed state and decrease physical tension, so we are able to attend to other important things, such as our teacher or schoolwork.

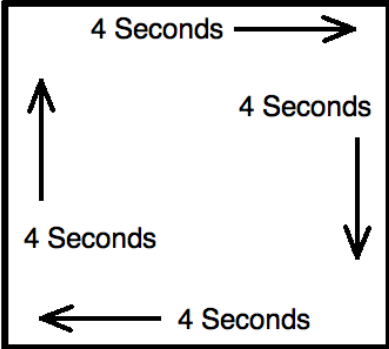
When feeling anxious or panicky, we tend to take fast or shallow breaths (or in extreme cases, hyperventilate). Over-breathing leads to too much oxygen in our system, which can result in dizziness, chest pain, and tingling. These sensations can make us feel even more anxious, starting a vicious cycle of increased anxiety. Practicing **calm or deep breathing** on a regular basis, even when not feeling particularly anxious, can create a healthy habit for life. You can do breathing exercises anywhere, anytime, and they work relatively quickly. **Guided Imagery** (e.g. visualizations) can also help students settle their minds by temporarily shifting focus away from worries and concerns. **Muscle tense and release** reduces tension in the body that students may be holding on to, and creates a looser, more relaxed physical state.

ACTIVITY	INSTRUCTIONS	RESOURCES	EXTRA NOTES
<p>Slow Breathing (or calm breathing)</p>	<p>The focus of slow/calm breathing is simply to slow down the rate of breath, which sends the brain and body the message that there is no emergency. Although you can give students specific instructions around breathing in or out through their nose or mouth, students should be encouraged to do what feels most comfortable. The important thing is to take at least 10 breath cycles (lasting about two minutes) to have a more potent effect. However, even three slow, steady releasing breaths before or during a test can be helpful.</p>	<p>AnxietyBC website instructions and recordings for doing calm breathing *note that the count here is 1-2-3-4, hold, 1-2-3-4, hold.</p> <p>MindShift app recording “Calm Breathing” (under chill tools)</p> <p>GOZEN 4-7-8 Breathing Animation, approx. 3.5 minutes (youtube video)* the counting on this video can feel too slow, may want to warn of this in advance, can speed up a bit</p>	<p>For some, paying attention to their breathing may actually <i>increase</i> anxiety, especially if the sensation of having difficulty breathing is associated with frightening situations in the past (e.g., asthma problems or a panic attack). It can be helpful to check in with students about whether focusing on breathing was hard, and if so, what part was hard and what were they worried might happen, etc. and normalize the different experiences.</p> <p>Important note: For any activity that you invite students to close their eyes, let them know that <i>your eyes will be open and you will make sure that their bodies and their stuff is safe the whole time.</i> For some students, closing their eyes can be uncomfortable or scary. Some students may find it more comfortable keeping their eyes open, but diverting their gaze to something in the room or on the floor in front of them.</p>

CALMING STRATEGIES - cont.

ACTIVITY	INSTRUCTIONS	RESOURCES	EXTRA NOTES
<p>Deep Abdominal Breathing (or “belly breathing”)</p>	<p>In deep breathing, the focus is on breathing <i>from your diaphragm</i>. Abdominal breathing can sometimes give you more energy, as it introduces nutrient rich oxygen to the blood. This is a technique practiced by singers and actors to improve performance.</p> <p>Students can first practice while lying on their backs (with a pillow under their knees, if possible). Invite them to put one hand on their ‘tummy’ or abdomen, and one hand on chest. “As you breathe, make sure the hand on your stomach is moving up and down rather than one on your chest. If the hand on your stomach is moving, you are breathing more deeply.”</p> <p>Once students get the hang of it while lying down, they can try it from seated position (hand positions are the same).</p>	<p>Youtube video of a Physiotherapist reviewing abdominal breathing from lying down position, and transitioning to seated position (~3 min) - for educator reference only*</p> <p>PsychCentral article on more details about the physiology and benefits of deep abdominal breathing - for educators reference only*</p>	<p>You can introduce visual prompts to help, such as imagining blowing up a balloon in the belly, to ensure that the diaphragm is doing the work. For immediate visual feedback, you could also have students place a beanbag or small stones (or similar) on their bellies while lying down, and have students focus on the object moving up and down as they breath.</p>

CALMING STRATEGIES - cont.

ACTIVITY	INSTRUCTIONS	RESOURCES	EXTRA NOTES
<p>Imagery Breathing</p>	<p>Many children prefer having something more concrete to imagine when doing breathing exercises. Below is a list of images you can share with students:</p> <p>Blowing on soup: Imagine that you have a big spoon full of yummy soup in front of you. But it's too hot and you need to gently blow on the spoonful to cool it off. The breath must be steady and gentle enough that the soup doesn't blow off the spoon.</p> <p>Square Breathing: Making a square with your finger in front of you as you breathe in for 4 counts, hold for 4 counts, exhale for 4 counts, and hold for 4 counts (see image)</p> <p>Colour breathing: Breathing in and out a certain colour (e.g., imagine breathing in the colour green, and breathing out red). You can either have the students choose colours, or suggest some.</p>	<p>Origami Breathing visualization (click here) is a nice visualization of a steady design expanding and contracting that the breath can be timed to.</p>	<div style="text-align: center;"> <p>Breathe in</p>  <p>Breathe Out</p> </div> <p>For younger children, you can use toys and visual prompts to demonstrate slow, steady breath (e.g. steadily blowing one big bubble vs lots of tiny bubbles, using a pinwheel, etc.)</p>

CALMING STRATEGIES - cont.

ACTIVITY	INSTRUCTIONS	RESOURCES	EXTRA NOTES
<p>Mental Vacations (Guided Imagery and Relaxing Music/ Visuals)</p>	<p>For guided visualizations, let students know that they are going to take a little vacation in their minds. Invite them to take some slow breaths before, and then follow along to the guiding voice (either your own voice, or a recording). There is nothing they need to do except let go of distractions and focus on the guide.</p> <p>Normalize that it can sometimes be difficult to picture things in your head. If they are having trouble, see if they can let go of striving for a certain outcome - there is no wrong or right way to do this. Whatever they see or experience is what should be happening.</p>	<p>MindShift app 'mental vacations'</p> <p>AnxietyBC - Perspective on Worries: Out of this World Visualization Audio and Script</p> <p>AnxietyBC - Immersive Visualization: Relaxing Beach Visualization Audio and Script</p> <p>Relaxing Music and Visuals: Calm.com (customize background, sounds, time - very good website, also an app). Can have on screen to 'set tone' when students are doing some quiet activities in the day</p> <p>Youtube of relaxing streaming music, which can be played in background. (Many more on youtube, have fun hunting!)</p> <p>Dot visualization (imagining yourself as a dot and the world as a circle)</p>	<p>Students will respond differently to these visualizations - some may find them quite powerful and enjoyable, while others may have a hard time with them or not like them as much. Just normalize these different reactions and let them know that there are lots of different tools to try out and everyone will find ones that work for them.</p>

CALMING STRATEGIES - cont.

ACTIVITY	INSTRUCTIONS	RESOURCES	EXTRA NOTES
<p>Muscle Tense Release (Progressive Muscle Relaxation)</p>	<p>During this exercise you will be focusing on one muscle group at a time, squeezing and then contracting it for about 10 seconds, and then totally letting go of the muscle until it's loose and relaxed. The most important part of the exercise is noticing the difference between the feeling of tension and relaxation. You can either lie down, or recline in a comfortable chair where your head is supported.</p>	<p>AnxietyBC - Script for full instructions of body tense and release exercise (long and short version). Also check out MindShift app for an audio recording.</p> <p>Youtube video of guided progressive muscle relaxation instructions, with nature shots (~6 minutes)</p>	<p>Additional instructions for students:</p> <p>Take care not to hurt yourself while tensing your muscles. You should never feel intense or shooting pain while completing this exercise. Make the muscle tension deliberate, yet gentle.</p> <p>Isolating muscle groups can be tricky at first (e.g. not tensing up shoulders when you are focusing on tensing hands). But this will become easier with practice.</p>

MINDFUL ACTIVITIES

Overall Goal: To help students centre and settle their attention, increase self-awareness, and be more present in the moment.

Rationale: Mindfulness involves intentionally attending to the present moment with acceptance. Evidence suggests that a regular mindful awareness practice can change how our body and brain respond to stress, and support self-reflection and self-regulation. During times of stress, activity increases in the amygdala, hypothalamus and anterior cingulate cortex (the areas of the brain that initiate the body’s physiological stress response). At the same time, there is decreased activity in the prefrontal cortex (the thinking, creative, rational part of the brain). **Mindfulness seems to reverse this** – by increasing activity in the prefrontal cortex and decreasing the body’s stress response. That means less of the stress-related neurochemicals surging through the body and causing trouble. See the mindfulnessinstitute.ca for more information on mindfulness in education, the science, research, and a list of school-based programs.

ACTIVITY	INSTRUCTIONS	RESOURCES	EXTRA NOTES
<p>Mindful breathing activity</p>	<p>Mindful breathing is different from calm or deep breathing as the focus is NOT on changing breathing rate to induce relaxation, but instead, to use the natural rhythm of the breath as an anchor to bring attention back to your breath (and away from distracting thoughts and sensations).</p> <p>Students are encouraged to breath naturally.</p>	<p>AnxietyBC - Script and audio for Mindful Breathing. See MindShift for audio recordings of mindfulness exercises.</p> <p>Dr. Dzung Vo (BCCH) mindful breathing audiotracks <i>*many audio recordings of guided meditations available, including eating a raisin mindfully, walking mindfully etc.</i></p> <p>For more information and an idea of current news on the topic, see recent Article on Mindfulness in Schools (The Atlantic, Sept 2015). <i>for educators reference only*</i></p>	<p>If students could benefit from a more ‘concrete’ sensation to focus on, you may want to have students notice whether breath feels cool coming in through nose, and warmer going out.</p> <p>Here are some notes if you decide to do mindful walking. When walking to or from school, walking the dog, or anywhere, occasionally spend a few minutes paying attention to how your feet connect with and leave the ground. Feel your muscles moving and supporting you.</p>

MINDFUL ACTIVITIES - cont.

ACTIVITY	INSTRUCTIONS	RESOURCES	EXTRA NOTES
<p>Body Scan</p>	<p>A body scan is a guided, mindful activity to help students shift their attention to different parts of their bodies, while noticing any sensations (e.g., tingling, warmth, pulsating, tightness etc.) they experience, without labeling them as good or bad.</p> <p>This exercise is most effective if students are lying down in a comfortable position, but can be done in a comfortable seated position as well.</p>	<p>AnxietyBC Script and audio for Body Scan and see MindShift app for audio recording.</p> <p>Dr. Dzung Vo (BCCH) body scan Audio (two versions, 10 min and 30 minutes)</p>	<p>Additional Instructions: Although you may feel sleepy or your mind may drift while doing this exercise, the goal is to try and remain alert and aware of the present moment.</p>

MINDFUL ACTIVITIES - cont.

ACTIVITY	INSTRUCTIONS	RESOURCES	EXTRA NOTES
<p>Quick 5-4-3-2-1 Grounding Activity</p>	<p>This is a quick mindful activity that forces a spinning, anxious mind to re-orient to the present moment. Grounding skills are helpful in managing overwhelming or intense emotions.</p> <p>Ask students: What are</p> <p>5 things you see in the classroom?</p> <p>4 things you can touch or feel with your body (e.g., the chair on my back, feet on the floor, fingers on the table)?</p> <p>3 things you hear (e.g., a car, the clock, the humming of the vent)?</p> <p>2 things you smell or taste (or like to smell and taste)?</p> <p>And ask them to take 1 mindful breath</p>		<p>This can be particularly good when a child is feeling panicky or full of intense emotions.</p>

SOOTHING/DISTRACTING ACTIVITIES

Overall Goal: These activities are meant to help temporarily soothe or reduce one’s intense or difficult emotions. By engaging in pleasant activities or re-directing one’s attention on a meaningful, focused activity, we can combat the body’s stress response by activating the relaxation response.

Rationale: Our bodies are designed to protect us from potential threats in our environment. However, sometimes the alarm goes off when there is no **real** threat (like a false alarm - smoke detector going off when you burn a piece of toast - no real fire). The amygdala plays a big role in sounding the alarm that gets the body ready to defend itself by revving things up (e.g., increased heart rate and blood flow) so that we are prepared to fight, freeze, or run. But, being constantly on guard for danger feels horrible and exhausting. It can be helpful to learn strategies to calm and soothe ourselves by activating the “relaxation response” which counters the stress response. Engaging in activities that send your body the message that there is no immediate threat, calms the body’s alarm system and enables us to think and attend more easily.

When our stress response is activated, it can also be helpful to intentionally put our focus on something else, such as a repetitive or mentally absorbing activity (e.g. puzzle, knitting) or an expressive activity (playing music, creating art). One of the worst things we can do when we’re stressed or anxious is to passively sit around obsessing about how we feel. Instead, these distracting activities can shift our attention and energy, giving us time to settle and ultimately more able to engage in learning.

Check the [MindShift app](#) or [AnxietyBC website](#) for more ideas on Riding out Intense Emotions

ACTIVITY	INSTRUCTIONS	RESOURCES	EXTRA NOTES
<p>Self-Soothing - 5 senses (activities related to our 5 senses: taste, touch, smell, sight, hearing)</p>	<p>Do things related to your 5 senses that feel pleasant and soothing, and/ or bring some relief if you’re in pain or experiencing difficult emotions. We do this naturally with babies: hold them (touch); talk or sing to them (sound); feed them (taste); make eye-contact with them (sight); and hold them close so they can smell us (scent). Different things will be soothing or comforting for different people. The goal is to experiment with different activities related to different senses to find out what has the most soothing or calming effect on you.</p>	<p>See page 16 for ideas.</p>	<p>Highlight the idea of engaging in these activities mindfully. You want students to really notice what they are seeing, hearing, tasting, etc. To really notice and observe what they are experiencing.</p> <p>Give some suggestions of soothing activities and have students brainstorm some activities that they may find comforting or soothing. Do some activities together (e.g., drinking tea or eating something or listening to music) and then have them experiment with some on their own.</p>

SOOTHING/DISTRACTING ACTIVITIES - cont.

ACTIVITY	INSTRUCTIONS	RESOURCES	EXTRA NOTES
<p>Artwork Painting, drawing, colouring, clay/ play doh, pottery, carving, whittling, beading, jewelry making</p>	<p>Set up an “art/creation station” that includes lots of activities for students to experiment with. Have different mediums available (paints, pencil crayons, crayons, markers, play doh, clay, beads, sands alive, instruments and materials for carving). Encourage students to experiment.</p>	<p>Free Mandala printouts Art Can Be Good For Mental Health - ARTICLE (Article discussing the impact of art on well-being) for educators reference only*</p>	<p>Art can be a wonderful way to express emotions that may be too difficult or vulnerable to put into words. Of course, there are many ideas and resources on using art as a therapeutic tool.</p>
<p>Textiles Sewing, knitting, crochet</p>	<p>Provide students with a “textile station” - which includes materials (e.g. yarn) and instruments (crochet needles).</p>		<p>Doing something rhythmic, methodical, and repetitive can be quite soothing and meditative, and can be taken anywhere.</p>
<p>Focus Activities Cards, board games, puzzles, Lego</p>	<p>Provide an assortment of games or building materials that require sustained attention.</p>		

SELF-REFLECTING ACTIVITIES

Overall Goal: To provide students with the opportunity to reflect on their emotional state and gain some clarity about the things that may be bothering them, as well as a provide a chance to identify positives and create inspiration in their lives.

Rationale: Of course, our emotional state can affect our ability to learn. Difficult mood states (e.g., anxiety, sadness, or frustration) can understandably make it difficult to attend to tasks. When we are having an intense emotion it can absorb our attention and impact our behaviour. For example, if we are feeling upset we may withdraw; when frustrated, we may yell or slam doors. By providing students with a safe, private, non-judging channel to express thoughts and feelings (whether ‘good’ or ‘bad’), we can potentially reduce the negative impact of challenging or overwhelming emotional states in the classroom. In addition, expressing gratitude for what one has and finding inspiration can help produce a more positive view of one’s life and enhance emotional well-being.

ACTIVITY	INSTRUCTIONS	RESOURCES	EXTRA NOTES
<p>Self-Directed Journaling</p>	<p>Write about things that are impacting you and identify your thoughts and feelings related to those things. Write about home, school, friends, relationships, etc. Don’t censor what you write or worry about spelling and grammar, etc. Journaling can give you insight into your feelings and behaviours, and help you better understand why you feel the way you do and why you act the way you do. Journaling can also help you get perspective on things that you are struggling with, process upset events/situation, record enjoyable experiences, and problem-solve stressors.</p>	<p><u>Health Benefits of Journalling - ARTICLE</u> (short article highlighting the benefits of journaling) <i>for educators reference only*</i></p> <p><u>Benefits of Journaling on Stress Management - ARTICLE</u> (another short article highlighting the benefits of journaling) <i>for educators reference only*</i></p> <p><u>Journaling - Getting Started</u> (steps and instructions for journaling) <i>for educators reference only*</i></p>	<p>You can get creative and encourage students to try art journaling - describing events/situations and expressing thoughts and feelings through art (e.g., drawing or making a collage from magazine pictures)</p> <p>Can be fun to have students pick out and personalize a journal or review journal apps.</p> <p>If students are struggling to come up with things to write about or as a way to mix it up have them complete the following sentence stems: “Today, I hope...” “Today, I am anxious about...” “Today, I feel...”</p> <p>*If during this exercise a student expresses issues related to safety (such as self-harm, suicidality, abuse, etc.) it will be important to follow-up. Please notify and discuss protocol with your school counsellor.</p>

SELF-REFLECTING ACTIVITIES - cont.

ACTIVITY	INSTRUCTIONS	RESOURCES	EXTRA NOTES
<p>Emotional check-ins/Mood Meter</p>	<p>Rate how you're feeling emotionally.</p>	<p>Have students experiment with some apps. Examples: Mood Meter App</p> <p>Mood Meter Teaching Emotional Intelligence - ARTICLE (brief article on the science behind a mood meter) for educators reference only*</p> <p>Feeling Wheel Emotion Wheel - youth friendly</p>	<p>The goal is to help students be more aware of their emotions. This can be used in conjunction with journaling.</p>
<p>Gratitude Journal</p>	<p>A gratitude journal involves identifying 3 to 5 things you're grateful for each day. You can identify people, places, moments and achievements that make you happy. They do not have to be big. Or identify positive things you have or have happened to you or something someone did for you or you did for others.</p>	<p>Have students check out some of the gratitude journal apps available.</p>	<p>This can be done as a group and individually.</p> <p>Can be helpful to encourage students to reread earlier entries to help them remember everything they are grateful for.</p>

SELF-REFLECTING ACTIVITIES - cont.

ACTIVITY	INSTRUCTIONS	RESOURCES	EXTRA NOTES
Inspiration	Identify quotes that can lift your mood and inspire you to keep going.	MindShift app “inspiration” section List of Inspirational Quotes Inspirational Quotes for Kids	Have students collect and then share inspirational quotes with each other.
Quiet Reading	Quiet reading on selected topic related to mental health and emotional well-being.		Reading about topics related to mental health can help provide students with some insight around mental health issues and can help them identify things they may want to journal about.

WAKE-ME-UPS/ENERGY BOOSTERS & STRESS RELIEVERS

Overall Goal: To wake-up the brain and increase energy levels, or expel excessive energy and reduce arousal levels.

Rationale: Physical activity can lead to two seemingly incompatible effects: 1) increased production of new and excitable brain cells (neurons) and 2) an overall calming effect on parts of the brain. Physical exercise produces lots of “excitable” neurons, especially in the hippocampus, an area of the brain involved in verbal memory and learning, which can enhance academic performance. Physical activity also leads to an increased production of neurons designed to release certain neurotransmitters (chemicals in the brain), which inhibit brain activity and have a quieting effect on the brain. This process allows us to recover faster from stress and reduces unnecessary anxiety. Given that anxiety impedes our cognitive functioning (e.g., trouble concentrating, problems with attention, poor memory), reduced levels of anxiety will enhance our ability to learn.

Physical activity can also increase your overall energy levels and combat lethargy and boredom, and ultimately improve your mood. Higher levels of energy and an improved emotional state can make it easier to focus on learning. (See references below)

ACTIVITY	INSTRUCTIONS	RESOURCES	EXTRA NOTES
<p>Physical Activity/ Exercise</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Walking/Running (brisk walk around the block/light run around the block) -Dance (Dance, Dance Revolution - Wii or Xbox) -Aerobic activities -Sports 	<p>Research is not clear on the exact amount of exercise necessary for producing benefits, but students should be encouraged to participate in 10 to 20 minutes of physical activity. Best to choose something they enjoy (dance, sports, etc.) as more likely to stick with it. The goal is to try to get their heart rate going to get the most benefits.</p>	<p><u>Physical Activity for a Health Brain - ARTICLE</u> (Explanation of the impact of physical activity and the body and brain and review of the research on the impact of exercise on learning) <i>for educators reference only*</i></p> <p><u>How Exercise Can Calm Anxiety - ARTICLE</u> <i>for educators reference only*</i></p> <p><u>Effects of Exercise on Learning - ARTICLE</u> <i>for educators reference only*</i></p>	<p>Key Research Findings:</p> <p><u>Exercise increases energy and improves mood.</u> For example, experiments conducted at California State University, showed that a brisk 10-minute walk increased energy levels, which lasted up to two hours. And when people continued to have daily 10-minute walks for three weeks, their overall energy levels and mood were improved.</p> <p><u>Regular physical activity has been linked to better academic performance.</u> Studies showed that participation in regular physical activity was related enhanced performance in perceptual skills, IQ, achievement, verbal tests, mathematics tests, and memory.</p> <p><u>A single session of physical activity has immediate benefits on learning.</u> Studies have found that single sessions of physical activity (e.g., 15 minutes of walking) lead to improved attention, better working memory, and increased academic learning time and reduced off-task behaviors. Greatest benefits appear to occur when exercise takes place first thing in the morning.</p>

SELF-SOOTHING STRATEGIES

A way to remember these strategies is to think about soothing or comforting yourself through each of your

FIVE SENSES:

Sight	Go outside and look at nature, look at some of your favourite pictures, watch videos or look at pictures of animals, nature, or art, or watch dance or musical performances.	Your Ideas:
Hearing	Listen to your favourite music, play an instrument (guitar, drums), go outside and pay attention to the sounds around you (birds, rain, rustling of leaves), hum or sing your favourite song, listen to recordings of nature sounds (waterfalls, raindrops, etc.)	Your Ideas:
Smell	Put on your favourite perfume, cologne, or body lotion, light a scented candle, burn incense, smell essential oils (e.g. lavender). Make a cup of herbal tea and smell it. Go outside and mindfully breathe in the smells of nature.	Your Ideas:
Taste	Eat some of your favorite foods, have a soothing or delicious drink (tea or hot chocolate), treat yourself to a yummy dessert, suck on a candy, or chew gum. Really taste the food you eat; eat or drink slowly and mindfully (really noticing and paying attention to what it tastes like).	Your Ideas:
Touch	Sink into a really comfortable chair, hug someone, put on a favorite comfy sweatshirt, play with sand, slowly brush or play with your hair, lightly rub the backs of your hands and arms, ask someone to give you a neck or back massage.	Your Ideas:

*STRATEGIES BASED ON M. LINEHAN'S DISTRESS TOLERANCE SKILLS.