

Help Students Learn to Manage Their Emotions in a Brain-Friendly Classroom

Martha Kaufeldt

The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) defines social and emotional learning (SEL) as the “*process through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions.*”¹ Integrating the core competencies of social and emotional learning is a key component in classrooms designed with an understanding of how brains learn naturally and most efficiently. Many successful educators use neuroscience research to guide them as they design safe and secure classroom environments and orchestrate instructional variety within a meaningful and relevant curriculum.

Self-regulation is the ability to monitor and control our own behavior, emotions, or thoughts, modifying them as needed depending on the situation. It is a key trait of SEL. We know that children’s brains have the capacity to develop self-regulation (also known as self-management) skills throughout their school years. This includes the ability to manage stress, inhibit impulsive responses, resist interruptions from additional stimulation, and persist on learning tasks even when they don't enjoy them. Explicitly teaching and then integrating ways to manage stress and emotions will also help build student efficacy, the belief in one's capabilities to achieve a goal or outcome.²

One of the foundations of brain-friendly classrooms is the emphasis on the learner (and learning), not the teacher (and teaching). A learner-centered classroom helps students develop self-regulation by creating systems to help them understand

- What should I do if I start to get too stressed, upset, or anxious?
- What are the correct behaviors I should exhibit when working alone and with others?
- What are the goals and schedule for the day?
- How might I check on my progress using a rubric or self-monitoring tool?
- How can I stay motivated and engaged by believing I am competent?

Teachers in brain-friendly classrooms work to reduce the conditions in the learning environment that might trigger the emotional reflex response—our brain’s emergency response system. At the same time, teachers must help students develop strategies to deal with stress and perceived threats. Getting our students to understand how their brains respond to stress and anxiety can help them manage their emotions at school and eventually in their daily lives.

Understand how the reflex response can be triggered by an emotional upset, stress, or anticipatory anxiety. Learn ways to avoid the escalation of the reflex response. Learn easy ways to defuse the stress response once it has been triggered.

1. Teach students *how* their brains react to danger, perceived threats, and stress during the reflex response. The amygdala, the trigger switch in the brain, can be set off by either the presence of true danger or the perception that something is threatening and harmful.³ When switched on, our bodies go through classic “fight-or-flight” responses; we attempt to flee or avoid the situation or become defensive. Help students notice when this has happened to them in the past at school: during a playground altercation, while giving an oral report, when they fail to understand an assignment, etc. Help them realize the symptoms they feel when they are approaching the reflex response. Is their heart rate increasing? Are they feeling nervous, mad, or frustrated? Are they beginning to get “anticipatory anxiety,” worrying about things that might happen or go wrong? It is important to point out that *learning* is minimized when the brain experiences a reflex response. Here are two good resources for more information on this topic: <http://www.mindful.org/how-to-teach-your-kids-about-the-brain> and <http://www.edutopia.org/blog/the-science-of-fear-ainissa-ramirez>.

2. Provide a reflection area or a Take Five zone in the classroom and encourage students to go there when they feel the reflex response.⁴ This can be a special chair in a cozy corner or a chair and desk facing a colorful photo or window with a clock so that students can time five minutes. Depending on the student's age, the space might include a stuffed animal or headphones and music. For many students, a few minutes of quiet down time to get away from the source of stress will help calm them and allow them to return to learning tasks. Providing a dedicated space within the classroom encourages kids to notice the signs of stress and to take action to avoid the escalation of the emotions—a good sign of self-regulation/management. Check out my books—[*Teachers, Change Your Bait! Brain-Compatible Differentiated Instruction*](#) and [*Begin with the Brain: Orchestrating the Learner-Centered Classroom*](#)—for more information on Take Five zones.
3. Just as it is important to teach students metacognition (how to think about thinking), there is great value in learning how to think about our emotions, notice our mental states, and calm our busy brains. Teach students several mindfulness strategies that can help them manage their emotions, destress, and hopefully defuse the reflex response once it is triggered. There are many books and resources available to educators on this topic. One exceptional program is the Mind-UP teaching framework from the Hawn Foundation.⁵ The framework helps students learn how to take brain breaks—short, three-minute breaks where children can quiet their minds to prepare their brains for learning. You can also consider teaching basic breathing exercises such as belly breathing. To do this, take a few minutes to focus on the inhale (breathe through the nose and expand the belly) and slowly exhale through the mouth. Taking time to breathe and observe how one's body is responding in the present moment is key to mindfulness practice. Here are two great resources for more information on mindfulness: <http://www.mindfulteachers.org/p/free-resources-and-lesson-plans.html> and <https://mindup.org/mindup-mindful-classroom-framework-schools>.

Helping students understand how their brains react to stress and then providing simple strategies for avoiding or defusing the reflex response helps to build self-regulation and management. In a recent article in *Educational Leadership*, Bryan Goodwin stated: "In the end, improving social-emotional outcomes may not require complex approaches but may be possible with something as simple as brief meditation sessions, which themselves could be an antidote to the "busyness" of school life—that nagging feeling that we must do more to accomplish more."⁶ Fortunately, teaching self-regulation does not require separate lessons or curriculum. Teachers can model and integrate these important skills during everyday experiences in the classroom.

References:

¹<http://www.casel.org/what-is-sel>

²<http://www.cfchildren.org/second-step/social-emotional-learning/k-5-self-regulations-skills>

³<http://www.dana.org/Publications/Brainwork/Details.aspx?id=43615>

⁴Kaufeldt, Martha. (Corwin, 2010) *Begin with the Brain: Orchestrating the Learner-Centered Classroom*. Pg 50.

⁵<https://mindup.org>

⁶<http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership/oct15/vol73/num02/Promising,-But-Incomplete,-Results-for-Mindfulness.aspx>

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Three Mindfulness Practices to Reduce Stress and Maximize Engagement

High-Impact Talk | Martha Kaufeldt



Breathing Practices

- **Belly Breathing:** Put one hand on the chest and one on the belly. Ask students to take a deep breath through their nose so that the hand on the chest does not move but the hand on the belly does. Explain that when our hands move like this, we know we are taking deep, relaxing belly breaths. Ask students to inhale through their nose slowly to a count of five, and then exhale slowly through their mouth to a count of five.
- **Flower and Candle Breathing:** Hold the left hand in a fist. Imagine it is holding a flower. Hold the right hand in a fist and imagine it is holding a candle. Inhale deeply, pretending to smell the flower. Exhale completely, pretending to blow out the candle. (Holding popsicle sticks may help.)



Focus and Attention Exercises

- **Raisin Eating Activity: Holding:** Take a single raisin and hold it in the palm of your hand or between your finger and thumb. **Seeing:** Take time to really focus on it. Let your eyes explore every part of it. **Touching:** Turn the raisin over between your fingers, exploring its texture. **Smelling:** Hold the raisin beneath your nose. **Placing:** Bring the raisin up to your lips and gently place the raisin in your mouth, without chewing. **Tasting:** Chew the raisin, noticing how and where it needs to be for chewing, without swallowing. **Swallowing:** Swallow the raisin and notice what parts of your mouth you are using. **Following:** Try to feel what is left of the raisin moving down into your stomach.
- **Minute Guess Activity:** Everyone stands (or sit with one hand raised) and closes their eyes. On 'Go' signal from the leader with a timer (or project a countdown on the screen), everyone tries to estimate when a minute (60 seconds) has elapsed while keeping their eyes closed. When you think it has been a minute, you sit down and lower your hand.



Reducing Anticipatory Anxiety

- **Glitter Jars:** Fill a jar to the top with water. Pick three colors of glitter: one to represent thoughts (worries), one to represent feelings, and one to represent behaviors or “urges to do things”. Drop a few pinches of each color glitter into the water. (A little glycerin slows down the glitter settling). Seal the jar with its lid or duct tape. Think of an upsetting event and swirl the glitter around. To get the glitter to settle and see clearly again you must be still! When we are still, we can see clearly again. Also: **Lava Lamps**

- **Calming Stones or Fidget Tools:** Holding and fidgeting with something in your hands can help calm your busy mind. **Stones:** Best—use Hematite stones. Easy—use polished river rocks from a dollar store. **Fidgets**—use small squishy or bendy toys or DIY “stress balls” using 12’ latex balloons filled with Play Dough.

Classroom Resources for Mindfulness Practices:

- Brantley, J. (2003). *Calming your anxious mind*. Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications.
- Carter, C. (2006). *People smarts for teenagers: Becoming emotionally intelligent*. Denver, CO: LifeBound.
- Cohen Harper, J., Gonzalez, M., & Gonzalez, A. (2017). *Yoga and mindfulness: Practices for teens-card deck*. Eau Claire, WI: PESI Publishing & Media.
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- Hanh, T. N. (2008). *Mindful movements: Ten exercises for well-being*. Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press.
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- Hawn Foundation. (2011). *The mind-up curriculum: Brain-focused strategies for learning and living. Grades Pre-K–2, Grades 3–5, Grades 6–8*. New York, NY: Scholastic, Inc.
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- Mason, C., Rivers Murphy, M. M., & Jackson, Y. (2019). *Mindfulness practices: Cultivating heart centered communities where students focus and flourish*. Bloomington, IN: Solution Tree Press.
- Siegel, D. & Payne Bryson, T. (2018). *The yes brain: How to cultivate courage, curiosity, and resilience in your child*. New York, NY: Bantam Books.

Apps

FOCUS 1-2-3 Cards and App: <https://oranda.org/pages/why-focus-1-2-3>

CALM App: <https://www.calm.com>

HEARTMATH—INNER BALANCE 10

Four Ways to Calm Your Mind in Stressful Times

 greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/four_ways_to_calm_your_mind_in_stressful_times

Life throws chaos at us on a regular basis—whether it's our finances, our relationships, or our health. In the work world, around 50 percent of people are burned out in industries like health care, banking, and nonprofits, and employers spend \$300 billion per year on workplace-related stress.

This essay is adapted from Emma Seppälä's talk "Building Resilience in Times of Chaos."

There's another way—a calmer way. Cultivating a more restful, relaxed state of mind doesn't mean we'll drown under all our responsibilities. Instead, research suggests it will bring us greater attention, energy, and creativity to tackle them. And science also points to simple ways we can tap into that calm state of mind to be more resilient in our chaotic lives.

A stressed mind vs. a calm mind

Stress was never meant to be a 24/7 experience. As Stanford professor Robert Sapolsky explains, you're really only supposed to feel stressed in the five minutes right before you die. When you are being chased in the savanna by a wild animal, your stress response is supposed to save your life—it mobilizes your attention, muscles, and immune system to get you quickly out of danger. When animals escape, they come right out of fight-or-flight mode and into "rest-and-digest" mode, where the parasympathetic nervous system is working to replenish their resources.

That stress response is supposed to be short-lived because it wears down your body, your health, and your energy. It also impacts things like your emotional intelligence and your decision making. When you're tightly wound up, you are more likely to react to situations than to respond with reason.

You also perceive the world differently. Stress makes us narrowly focused, preventing us from seeing the bigger picture. When we're calmer, our attention becomes broader. In fact, we literally see more things. In one study, participants went through a three-month meditation training. They then engaged in something called the attentional blink task, in which you watch images appear rapidly one after another. Usually when people do this exercise, their attention doesn't pick up all of the target images. But after that mindfulness training, participants were able to pick up more of the target images than pre-retreat—suggesting that their state of mind had become more attentive.

Being able to attend more means that you notice more things about other people and you're able to communicate with them in more powerful ways. High stress and anxiety (or any kind of negative emotion) make us self-focused, for an evolutionary reason: When our ancestors were stressed, it was because they were in a survival situation. It was good to be focused on yourself so you could save your life.

When we're stressed, we're less likely to notice if a colleague looks burned out or sad and more likely to get irritated if they don't perform as we expect. However, when you're in a calmer and happier place, that's probably the day when you will have more empathy: You'll notice your colleague and take the time to reach out and ask if there's anything you can do to support them.

When you're calm, you also manage your energy because you're not burning yourself up constantly, spending your days with your sympathetic nervous system in overdrive. Calm helps you focus on what you need to do and get it done much more quickly.

Calmness can also impact your creativity. Research suggests that our most creative ideas come in moments when we're not actively focused or stressed. We are most creative when our brain is in alpha wave mode, which is a relaxed state of mind—like when you're in the shower or taking a walk in nature. Indeed, people who go on an immersive nature retreat for four days come back with 50 percent increased creativity.

If you want to get the most out of yourself in terms of your productivity, creativity, and innovation—making progress at work or just solving the basic problems of life that you're faced with—calm is the key.

How to cultivate a calm state of mind

We know how to become stressed. Most of us are really good at activating our adrenal system and getting wound up. The question becomes, then, how do you wind down? Research suggests several practices that not only feel good but also put us into a calmer, more relaxed state—a state from which we can cope better with whatever life throws at us.

1. Breathing. □ Jake, who appears in my book *The Happiness Track*, was a U.S. Marine officer in charge of a Humvee on a convoy across Afghanistan, when his vehicle drove over an improvised explosive device. After the explosion, he looked down and saw that his legs were severely fractured below the knee. In that moment of shock, terror, and pain, he remembered a breathing exercise that he had read about for extreme wartime situations.

It allowed him to do his duty, which was to check on everyone else in the vehicle. It gave him the presence of mind to give orders to call for help, and to then tourniquet his own legs and prop them up before he fell unconscious—which saved his life.

Our breathing is a powerful way for us to regulate our emotions, and it is something we take for granted. Through your breath, you can activate your parasympathetic nervous system—the calming response in your body.

That's why we turned to breathing to help veterans—50 percent of whom don't see any improvement in their trauma symptoms from therapy or medication. The veterans were skeptical, but we began teaching them different breathing exercises. Within a couple of days, some of them started sleeping without medication; after the week-long program, many of them didn't qualify as having post-traumatic stress anymore, and that persisted up to a year later.

Using your breath, you can change how you feel. In another study, researchers observed people feeling different emotions and found that there was a different pattern of breath for each one. Then, they gave other people the different breathing patterns to perform and asked them, "How do you feel?" It turned out that doing those breathing exercises actually evoked the emotions.

One of the most calming breathing exercises you can do is to breathe in (e.g., to a count of four), hold, and then breathe out for up to twice as long (e.g., to a count of six or eight). You can gently constrict your throat, making a sound like the ocean, which is used in deep relaxation breathing. As you're doing this, especially thanks to those long exhales, you're activating the parasympathetic nervous system, reducing your heart rate and blood pressure.

Mindful Breathing

A way to build resilience to stress, anxiety, and anger

Try It Now

2. Self-compassion. Often we are our worst critic. We think that being self-critical will help us be more self-aware and make us work harder, but that's a myth. In fact, according to a good deal of research, self-criticism destroys our resilience. We're less able to learn from our mistakes when we beat ourselves up. Self-critical people tend to have greater anxiety and depression, and an inability to bounce back from struggles.

Imagine someone running a marathon for the very first time in their life, and they trip and fall. Someone on the sidelines says, "You're a loser, you're so not a runner. What are you doing here? Go home." That person is our internal, self-critical voice. Self-compassion is somebody on the other side, who says, "Everybody falls, this is normal. You are so awesome, you're totally killing this."

Self-compassion is the ability to be mindful of your emotions—aware of the emotions that are going on inside whenever you fail at something. It doesn't mean you identify with them; you can just observe and notice them, without feeding the fire. Self-compassion also involves understanding that everyone makes mistakes and that it's part of being human. And it is the ability to speak to yourself the way you would speak to a friend who just failed, warmly and kindly.

When we adopt this attitude, research suggests, we are calmer—we have less feelings of stress as well as lower cortisol levels. We're also more resilient: We're less afraid of failure, and more motivated to improve ourselves.

3. Connection. How often are we actually present for another person 100 percent? When was the last time somebody was 100 percent present with you, even your spouse?

There's a loneliness epidemic in the United States and across the world. We know that those feelings of loneliness are extremely destructive to our body and mind, leading to worse health and even earlier death. And the stress and lack of calm in today's world may contribute to this loneliness because of the way that it tends to make us self-focused.

Our greatest human need, after food and shelter, is to connect with other people in a positive way. From the moment we're born until our last day, we have a deep and profound longing to belong to one another. And when we fulfill that need, it brings us more calm: The oxytocin and natural opioids that we release when we connect may exert a calming influence on our bodies, and the knowledge that we have the support of others can soothe our minds. When we face adversity, research suggests that our relationships and community have an important role to play in our resilience.

So how do we create a state of mind where we feel more connected?

□The good news is that by taking care of yourself and your own well-being with practices like breathing and self-compassion, you are able to turn more attention outward to feel more connected, as well. Positive emotions like calm naturally make us feel closer to other people. You can try specific practices that research has found to boost your sense of connection, as well.

4. Compassion for others. Imagine a day when things aren't going well for you—you spilled your coffee on yourself, and it's raining. And then a friend calls who's having a true emergency in their life, and you jump up and go help them immediately. What happens to your state of mind in that moment?

All of a sudden you have high energy; you're completely at their service. That is what practicing altruism, service, and compassion does to your life.

It increases your well-being tremendously, as many of us have experienced when we perform little acts of kindness. When we feel compassion, our heart rate goes down and our parasympathetic nervous system is more activated.

Kindness and compassion can also help protect us from adversity. In one of my favorite studies, researchers found that people who had been through traumatic life situations had a shorter lifespan. But among these participants, there was a small group of people who just seemed to keep on living. What was going on with these people?

When the researchers dug a little deeper, they found that they were all engaged in helping friends and family in their life—from assisting with transportation or shopping to housework and child care. Service is one of the most profound ways to nourish the community around you, but also to nourish, inspire, and energize yourself. It's like that children's book—when you fill someone's bucket, it also fills yours.

Cultivating calm isn't about avoiding every kind of stressful emotion. In fact, when we make time to breathe, connect, and care, some of the negative feelings we've been running from might catch up with us. But that's the time for self-compassion; it's okay to feel bad. Resilience doesn't mean that we'll be happy all the time, but it does mean we have the energy, the mindset, and the support from others to help us weather the storm.

Watch Video At: https://youtu.be/sZG_ZL7UaxM

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