What is Mindfulness?

Mindfulness is often defined as the practice of bringing your attention and awareness to the present moment with compassion, love, curiosity, and nonjudgement.

Mindfulness is like a pair of heart shaped sunglasses, encouraging us to see everything around us through a more loving, kind, and nonjudgmental lens. Imagine what could change in your life if you saw things through this lens. By practicing mindfulness, we can learn acceptance as a path toward healing and transformation.
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Think of mindfulness as a light. It helps us see what’s present in our inner world—our thoughts, emotions, and the sensations in our physical bodies. It also helps us see what’s in our outer world—our relationships with others, our community, and the Universe.

**What is Mindfulness?**

SEEING IS A **POWERFUL** POINT OF DEPARTURE.

WE CANNOT **ACCEPT** WHAT WE DON’T SEE.

WE CANNOT **LOVE** WHAT WE DON’T SEE.

WE CANNOT **UNDERSTAND** WHAT WE DON’T SEE.

WE CANNOT **HEAL** WHAT WE DON’T SEE.

WE CANNOT **TRANSFORM** WHAT WE DON’T SEE.
Choosing the path of mindfulness is a **brave path**. The world is filled with both joy and heartache. The heartache of the world, the heartache of our communities, and even the personal heartache of our lives, can be overwhelming to hold. This is especially true for marginalized people who are at the frontlines of injustice. We are often not given or taught the tools to navigate heartache skillfully, so we learn instead to avoid, to distract ourselves from, or numb ourselves against the heartache of the world.

Asking anyone to practice mindfulness is asking them to be brave and vulnerable. When you ask someone to practice mindfulness, you are asking them to walk toward their suffering—that is a big ask. The reward comes when the practice teaches them how to turn inward, and to approach their heartache with compassion, love, forgiveness, and acceptance.

The more you practice mindfulness, you may discover that the more present and awake you are to your heartache, the more awake you can also be for the joy. Often on the other side of being present for the challenges of life, is the gift of being present for the joys.
MINDFULNESS PRACTICE:

Gratitude

One of my favorite mindfulness teachers, Rick Hanson, says our brains are like Velcro for the “bad” and Teflon for the “good.” Our tendency to focus on the challenging, frustrating, imperfect, and negative aspects of an experience is known as the negativity bias. While the majority of an experience with a friend, romantic interest, homework assignment, or test may go well, we might obsess over a single aspect of it that didn’t go quite so well. This is normal! This is our brain’s way of helping us survive. It’s the brain’s job to look for things to improve and fix, but this negativity bias can get a little too loud and feel like criticism at times.

Gratitude can act like the antidote to this negativity bias. Here are a few ways to practice gratitude and create new neural pathways, change our brains, and be thankful for the many hundreds of things that go well, rather than dwell on the few that are challenging.

GRATITUDE SIT

As you guide this sit, be aware of who your students and clients are. All of them may have different experiences and layers of privileges. Not all students will answer the guiding questions the same way. Know your students and be thoughtful about how you can best guide them into a place of gratitude for all the gifts of their life and day.

Some students may experience sadness, frustration, anger or other painful emotions if they feel they have nothing to be grateful for. Offer them heartfulness and mindful breathing practices, and invite them to notice how it feels to feel ungrateful or sad.
MINDFUL SIT SCRIPT

- Find a comfortable place to rest.

_Ring the bells a few times, taking a breath with each ring._

- Gently close your eyes, if that feels nourishing, or softly gaze at a point in front of you, preferably something that isn’t moving. It’s your choice.

- Lean back against your chair, allowing your body to be supported.

- Maybe press your feet into the floor, pressing your toes, then your ankles, so that you feel grounded.

- Maybe roll your shoulders a few times.

- Perhaps roll your jaw back and forth.

- Feel free to breathe as loudly or as quietly as you would like, being mindful of your classmates.

- If it feels good, take three intentional deep breaths.

- Listen to anchor words.

- Breathe in…

- Breathe out…

- Breathe in…

- Breathe out…

- Breathe in…

- Breathe out…
Sit quietly for a moment or two, allowing some silence, perhaps occasionally bringing folks back to the anchor words, breathing in and breathing out.

- Continue to breathe naturally, in and out, and begin to bring something to mind that you feel thankful for. Maybe a person, a place, or a thing.

- What is something you feel grateful for?

- As you bring this picture to mind, notice what emotions you feel in your body.

- Take a moment to notice and name them.

- What sensations do you feel in your body?

- What do you notice?

- You might even whisper softly or silently to the thing you feel grateful for. “Thank you ________ for ________.”

- Notice, how does gratitude feel in your body?

- You might try taking some deeper intentional breaths with gratitude, imagining that with each breath you grow the gratitude and it moves throughout your heart.

- Feeling that gratitude in your body, can you think of one thing you are grateful for about yourself?

- Notice, how does it feel to feel thankful for you?

- Maybe it’s uncomfortable to feel gratitude for self. That’s okay, it’s like a practice, the more you practice gratitude, the easier it becomes.

- Take a few inhales and exhales with your gratitude.

- In a moment, I will ring the bell. See if you can follow the sound until it completely stops, putting a thumb up when you can’t hear any more sound.

*Ring the bell to close the sit.*
Gratitude Practices

Appreciation Notes
- Pass out a piece of paper (preferably cardstock or a nice notecard) to each staff person.
- Invite them to write their name in big letters on their paper.
- Invite them to celebrate and appreciate one thing about themselves this week.
- Ask each person to leave their paper on their desk as they begin to circulate the room and write brief appreciations for their colleagues.
- Encourage them to write appreciations for at least 3 staff members.
- Invite staff to practice inclusion and be mindful of appreciating a variety of people.
- If you practice this exercise more than once, encourage them to appreciate a different person each time.

Gratitude Wall
- In your staff room or in a virtual document (we love padlet!), invite staff to share photos, appreciation notes, or celebrations with the staff.
- Sometimes these boards can get stagnant, so taking a moment during staff meetings to invite folks to add to them is a great way to keep the board fresh.

Gratitude Coffee
- During your morning coffee, take a moment to reflect on what you are grateful for today as you are getting ready for work. If you are on the go and in a rush, take 3 minutes in the car as you drink your coffee in your morning commute to reflect on your gratitudes.

Gratitude before Meals
- Many folks enjoy giving thanks before they enjoy a meal. This might be an ongoing ritual you can implement to incorporate at least one moment of gratitude a day.
- This exercise can be as simple as taking a breath or closing the eyes for a moment.
- You may thank all the hands- the farmworkers, the truck drivers, the grocery store workers who helped bring the food to you.
- You may thank the plants and animals that contributed to your nourishment.
Gratitude Letter

- Write a thank you note to yourself, acknowledging all the unique and special parts of you that you want to celebrate.
- Imagine you are your own best friend- how would you appreciate a dear friend and lift them up?
- Write a letter or pick out a special card to a loved one in your life. Mail it to them! You can choose to write a long letter appreciating their amazing qualities or just leave a simple note letting them know you appreciate them.

Gratitude Walk

- Take 5-10 minutes to take a stroll in your neighborhood or school community.
- As you walk, take notice of at least 5 things you feel grateful for.
- Notice how you feel as you encounter these items.

The Appreciation Chair

- This exercise requires some trust and vulnerability with your staff members, so before you implement it you might consider what the staff may need to feel comfortable and safe to practice it.
- Ask all the staff members to write their name on a little piece of paper and put it in a bowl.
- Invite someone to pull a name out of the bowl.
- If they feel comfortable, (sometimes it can feel edgy to sit in the middle of the group) invite them to sit in the front of the room.
- Popcorn style, the other staff members share out loud things they appreciate about this person.
- Every person has the right to pass.

Gratitude Lists

We invite you to record a list of all of the things you are grateful for today. You can pull out this list when you are experiencing a challenging moment and remind yourself of the things you recorded on previous days. Or you can add to the list in the midst of the challenge. Practicing gratitude is not about ignoring or forgetting what has been difficult. It is about honoring our challenges and remembering that right next to our challenges are blessings.
GRATITUDE BLANKET

This practice is a fun, light-hearted practice that I learned from a nature-based leadership institute, Ecology of Leadership, in Bolinas, California. It is a great practice at the beginning of a session or class to set the tone of thankfulness. This activity works best in a group of four or more participants.

Invite everyone to gather in a circle, standing up or sitting down. You may choose to lead folks in a mindful sit for a minute or two, or you might invite folks to take a few breaths and reflect on one thing they are grateful for. Once folks have their ideas, you can each take a turn sharing what you are grateful for.

You can do this a few different ways depending on your time frame and intention. Here are a few options for sharing:

- Each person says one word encompassing their gratitude.
- Each person says one word and shares a movement representing that word.
- Each person has a minute or so to thoughtfully share their gratitude.

Of course, each person has the right to pass, or be skipped and returned to when they are ready to share. You may choose to use a talking piece to move around the circle.

Once everyone has shared, you might say:

*Imagine we have woven a blanket of gratitude. It’s like a quilt with all these little images of the people and places and things, spoken and unspoken, that we feel grateful for. Take a look around, isn’t it beautiful? How do you feel when you see these images?*

*In a moment we are going to toss this blanket up into the sky and imagine it wraps around the shoulders of our loved ones, our friends, our family—near and far—and our community.*

*Grab the edges of the blanket, and on the count of three we are going to toss it up!*  
*Ready, 1-2-3!!!!!*
GRATITUDE