

Schools Tree Day – The Nature of Mindfulness – 5 minute activities – Secondary

Teacher preparation

Overarching learning goals: The aim of these activities is to provide hands-on contact with the natural world and to ‘wake up the senses’ of each student, enabling deep focus and engagement.

Teacher background information:

The benefits of mindfulness

We are a culture increasingly becoming addicted to instant communication and ever-changing technologies. While technologies such as mobile phones bring wonderful opportunities, children are spending more and more time being passively engaged in these technologies rather than actively engaging in the world around them. This includes the natural world and our environment. There is growing concern about the lack of time young people spend in nature and the consequences of this disconnection.

The practices of mindfulness and meditation offer people of all ages an effective path to develop healthy responses to the chaotic world around them and often inside of them. The key benefit of meditation and mindfulness is developing self knowledge, or learning about what’s going on inside. This positively influences students' well being, emotional intelligence and resilience. Other benefits include improved concentration, sharpened focusing abilities and simply being calm and still.



It is important to clarify the differences between relaxation and mindfulness:

- **Relaxation.** Activities such as reading a book, eating an ice-cream or lying in the shade can be considered relaxation activities.
- **Mindfulness.** These same relaxation activities can become mindful activities by becoming more aware. Learning to observe the self and bring attention fully to the present moment is key to mindful activities. Mindfulness requires practice (although some would argue that the same could be said of relaxation!)

By practicing mindfulness activities outside, students can enhance their focus, emotional regulation, empathy and happiness through connection with nature. Nature provides us with limitless, enjoyable opportunities to focus and be absorbed in the moment, and offers countless ways to improve our minds. Find out more by reading:

- [Benefits of spending time in nature fact sheet](#)
- [The benefits of mindfulness Infographic](#)
- [Tips for getting your class outside](#)

Hot tips:

- These activities can be done individually or combined as a range of sensory experiences in one lesson.
- If possible, take time to practice and experience the benefits of these practices yourself before you share them with the students.
- Where possible complete these mindfulness activities outside in nature and encourage the whole school to take part during Schools Tree Day.

Teaching sequence

Before beginning any of these activities, explain to students that the senses - sight, sound, smell, taste and touch - are the information



pathways to the brain. If we do not focus, get easily distracted, or multi-task, neurons (brain cells) do not make strong connections. This means nothing much is registered in the brain! Practicing focusing on one thing at a time helps strengthen neural pathways and will help to build a brain that works better. Noticing well builds knowledge and strengthens memory.

Take students outside to a green space and discuss how nature provides us with many opportunities to focus and be absorbed in the moment, and offers countless ways to improve our minds. Explain that mindfulness practice involves cultivating a 'fresh mindset' ... a 'beginners mind'... curious and open to discovering what is possible right now.

What does it feel like to be outside? Notice how your body feels with no walls around you, no roof over your head, no heating/air conditioning, no lights, no furniture and no carpet. Notice the feelings in your brain, in your body and in your heart as you sit in this outdoor space.

Feedback/Reflection after each activity:

- Invite students to share what they noticed and discovered from the experience.
- Ask them if they noticed how they felt during and after the activity.

Activity 1. Touch

Resources: Source a range of natural objects or specimens. These can include simple found pieces from your garden or the school grounds, such as herbs, vegetables, leaves, sticks, bark from trees/shrubs, seed pods, long stemmed grasses, etc. Divide specimens into mixed groups. Create enough 'specimen platters' to allow students to explore specimens in groups of five.

Preparation: Choose a comfortable space outside where students can sit down.



Introduction: Explain to students that this activity is about discovering the 'extraordinary in the ordinary' by feeling with 'new hands' and discovering micro details! Remind students that this is a quiet practice and thank them for not talking until they are invited to give feedback at the conclusion of the practice.

Procedure:

Step 1. Invite students to sit on the grass outside in groups around specimen 'platters'.

Step 2. Bring awareness to how students are sitting and encourage students to sit with their legs crossed. Ask them how different it feels to sit on the ground instead of on a chair.

Step 3. Ask students to notice what the ground beneath them feels like (e.g. rough, smooth, prickly, dry, damp, soft, hard, etc). Remind them that we do not just 'feel with our hands'; we can notice feelings registered throughout our whole body.

Step 4. Ask students to close their eyes, pause and take time to connect to the sense of touch by using their hands to explore each specimen, noticing feelings of smooth, soft, rough, silky, prickly, slippery, bumpy, sticky, damp, dry, sharp, etc. Ask them to notice the responses in their bodies as they touch these textures/surfaces with their fingers. They can even explore feeling these specimens with skin surfaces on other parts of the body, such as their arms, neck, face, etc.

Step 5. Ask students if they noticed whether their minds wandered during this process, or whether they were fully focused on the specimen.

Invite feedback/reflections

Activity 2. Smell

Resources: Source a range of fresh and dried specimens from nature,



ensuring you select some specimens with a scent such as flowers, herbs, leaves and dried spices. Arrange these in platters to be shared by five students per platter.

Preparation: Locate a suitable place for this activity outside, and check out any potential problems with student allergies.

Introduction: Explain to students that the aim of this activity is to discover the 'extraordinary in the ordinary' by smelling with a 'new nose' and discovering micro details! Remind students that this is a quiet practice and thank them for not talking until they are invited to give feedback at the conclusion of the practice.

Procedure:

Step 1. Arrange 'platters of specimens', enough for five students per platter.

Step 2. Invite students to sit on grass if possible. Draw their attention to whatever they can smell in the environment now from both nature (e.g. cut grass, fragrances, flowers, soil, etc) and from human activity (e.g. paint, cleaning products, sprays, car fumes, etc). Ask them to notice personal senses of like/dislike with these smells.

Step 3. Invite students to pause and really focus on the smell of each specimen; noticing their senses of like/dislike, noticing if some smells connect to memories, and even noticing a sense of how far up the nose the smell travels (strong/faint).

Step 4. Ask students if they could 'label' (and remember) the range of smells e.g. musky, sweet, tangy, sharp, astringent, sour, fresh, perfumed, rancid, woody, etc.

Step 5. Ask students if they can notice a sense of the brain responding to these smells.

Step 6. Ask students if they noticed whether their mind wandered



during this process, or whether they were fully focused on the specimen. How did they feel during this process? E.g. calm, happy, relaxed, peaceful, joyful, etc.

Invite feedback/reflections

Activity 3. Taste

Resources:

- Select your choice of seasonal fresh fruit and cut it up into small segments (approx. 2 cm square). You could choose grapes, apricots, pineapples, apples, plums, tomatoes, oranges, mandarins and lemons for contrast!
- Source matching dried fruit (if necessary cut up into small segments) such as sultanas/raisins, prunes, dried apricots, pineapples, apples, and tomatoes.
- Organise fresh with matching dried variations on platters: approximately five students per plate.
- If possible, try and locate some Indigenous bush tucker fruit for the students to try!

Preparation: Gather the fruit before the night before and check out any potential problems with student allergies.

Introduction: Explain to students that this activity is about discovering the 'extraordinary in the ordinary' by sensing and tasting with 'new taste buds' and discovering micro details! Remind students that this is a quiet practice and thank them for not talking until they are invited to give feedback at the conclusion of the practice.

Procedure:

Step 1. Settle students in an appropriate outdoor space to sit around platters.



Step 2. Invite students to bring awareness to any current senses in their mouths now, such as dry, sweet, stale, sour, fresh, etc. Remind them that mindfulness is about noticing with curiosity, even noticing our likes and dislikes and how they can change!

Step 3. Invite students to pick up a piece of fresh fruit. Have them start by feeling the fruit in their fingers, noticing sensations of moisture, softness, stickiness, firmness, etc. Next, they should notice with their eyes, looking at the colour, shape, pattern, etc. Students should then notice the smell (with eyes closed to fully focus). Notice the touch of fruit on the lips. Notice the fruit sitting in the middle of the tongue (without biting immediately!) Notice the flavour and how the mouth responds. Move the fruit to the teeth and bite and notice the sound, touch and flavour. Notice the taste senses in the mouth, on the tongue, teeth and upper palette.

Step 4. If desired, contrast sweet with sour; notice a piece of lemon with the same steps!

Step 5. Repeat the same steps with dried fruit.

Step 6. Ask students if they noticed whether their mind wandered during this process, or whether they were fully focused on the specimen.

Invite feedback/reflections

Activity 4. Sound

Resources: Source simple instruments from the school to provide basic sounds, such as drums, cymbals, rattles, chimes, singing bowls, triangles, rainsticks, beat sticks, etc.

Preparation: Choose a suitable location outside.

Introduction: Explain to students that the aim of this activity is to discover the 'extraordinary in the ordinary' by listening with 'new ears'



and discovering micro details! Remind students that this is a quiet practice and thank them for not talking until they are invited to give feedback at the conclusion of the practice.

Procedure:

Step 1. Ask students to sit in a circle and close their eyes to enable them to effectively focus on just sounds.

Step 2. Begin with your choice of instrumental sound and move as you play it. Ask students to register and notice where the sound is coming from.

Step 3. Change the sound and volume.

Step 4. Fade out the introduced sounds. Invite students to sharpen their sense of hearing ... and notice far off, distant sounds (natural and man-made) ... (pause to allow them time) ... closer sounds ... letting go of distant sounds ... and finally sounds around them, such as the wind, birds, even the tiny, micro sounds of insects!

Step 5. Finally, ask students to notice and rest their attention on the sound of their own breathing. Students can think about which part of the body the sound of their breath is coming from, e.g. their nose, mouth, trachea, lungs, etc. Does the sound change when you take deeper breaths?

Step 6. Ask students if they noticed whether their mind wandered during this process, or whether they were fully focused on the specimen.

Extra resource: Use [The Nature of Mindfulness Guided Mediation 2](#) sound file to complement this activity. Share it with your students so they can put it on their iPods and use it daily.

Activity 5. Sight



Resources: Source your selection of varied specimens from nature, either fresh or dried. These can include sticks, stones, crystals, leaves, herbs, fruit, feathers, bones, vegetables, etc. Even patches of ground could be observed - you could use a hula-hoop or frame to isolate a space. Organise these into containers/boxes for groups of approximately five students.

Optional variations:

- If appropriate, provide small knives to enable students to make incisions and look inside/below the surface of the specimen.
- Source recycled cardboard and organise for students to make 'viewing frames' by cutting board into 15 cm squares and then cut a 4 cm 'viewing space' in the centre of each square (this draws the focus to just one section at a time and encourages the 'micro' detailed view).

Preparation:

Gather resources and sort into containers, then choose a suitable location outside for this activity.

Introduction: Explain to students that the aim of this activity is to discover the 'extraordinary in the ordinary' by seeing with 'new eyes' and discovering micro details! Remind students that this is a quiet practice and thank them for not talking until they are invited to give feedback at the conclusion of the practice.

Procedure:

Step 1. Settle students in an appropriate outdoor setting in groups around platters.

Step 2. Ask them to look at a distant focus, then a closer focus, and finally choose a specimen.

Step 3. Ask students to focus on the shape, size, texture, colour, and



surface of the object.

Step 4. Ask students to notice any connection/feelings that they have towards this object.

Step 5. Ask students to zone in and begin to notice tiny 'micro' details (use knives/viewing frames as appropriate).

Step 6. Ask students if they noticed whether their minds wandered during this process, or whether they were fully focused on the specimen.

Invite feedback/reflections

Reflection

Conduct a class discuss about how students felt before, during and after the activities.

- Did their attention wander?
- Did they feel a certain way?
- Did they feel comfortable?
- Did they feel joy or happiness?
- Would the activity feel different if it was conducted inside the classroom?

Extension

Encourage students to practice a focused state of concentration using their senses each day. Discuss some techniques they might use to ensure they commit to this daily practice. Part of this conversion may include suggestions for students to ensure they get daily nature time.