

Schools Tree Day – The Nature of Mindfulness – 15 minute activities – Secondary

Teacher preparation

Overarching learning goal: The aim of these activities is for students to make sense of mindfulness. These activities provide opportunities to enhance student focus, emotional regulation, empathy and happiness through connection with nature. Students are given the opportunity to cultivate present moment awareness so that calm, considered and conscious choices can begin to replace impulsive, unconscious reactions.



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 student 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. There are many other benefits to taking your students outside.

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:

- Have a go at these practices and feel the benefits for yourself.
- Where possible complete these activities outside in nature and encourage the whole school to take part during Schools Tree Day.

Teaching sequence

Activity 1. Making Natural 'States of Mind' Bottles

'Let the waters settle. You will see stars and moon mirrored in your being.' - Rumi

Resources:

- Source empty, clean plastic 1-1.5 litre bottles (spring/mineral water/soft drink). Gather enough bottles for students to work in groups of 3-5; each group will need one bottle.
- Source a range of soils, sands, mulch from outside.
- Source funnels to feed materials into bottles, or simply use a sheet of curled paper as a funneling device.

Preparation:

- Gather materials and organise into containers.
- Locate a suitable space outside with access to a tap.

Introduction: Explain to students that we all constantly experience different 'states of mind'. If we do not practice being mindful, the most common state of mind can be busy and messy! If we are not aware, we can 'bottle up' messy, emotional states of mind in our body and feel like we are permanently 'stuck' with them.

The bottles are 'symbols' of our mind, to help us remember that mindful practices help our bodies and mind return to being clear, calm and balanced, and just like in nature, storms eventually pass away. These 'States of Mind' bottles can remind us that in nature darkness,

turbulence and chaos are finite, and states of calm and harmony are always restored.

Procedure:

Step 1. Organise students into groups (3–5 students per bottle).

Step 2. Divide material into groups.

Step 3. Instruct students to carefully pour (using funnels or paper) about $\frac{1}{2}$ cup of materials into each bottle.

Step 4. Fill bottle with water.

Step 5. Ask students to carefully tighten lid.

Step 6. Ask students to vigorously shake bottle.

Step 7. Line bottles up and notice the time it takes for the water to return to being clear.

Step 8. Relate to students the symbol of the storm passing: the more we practice mindful skills, the more quickly we are able to enjoy reclaiming a focused, calm, effective mind.

Step 9. After the lesson, these bottles can be returned to the classroom and lined up along the window ledge as a ‘mindful reminder’ of mind states and how stillness always returns the contents to settle and stabilise.

Invite feedback/reflections

- Ask students if they can recognise times when they feel like their mind is a ‘storm in a bottle’?
- Ask students if they are beginning to notice that simple, nature-based focuses (like the ones in the previous sessions) can return the mind to calm and clarity.

Activity 2. Nature Awareness Walk

'The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeing new landscapes, but in having new eyes.'

- Marcel Proust

Preparation:

- Find a suitable time and outdoor location for this quiet, reflective practice with your students.
- Try out the course yourself beforehand, so that you can work out timing and be aware of any challenges with the path!
- If appropriate and possible, it is great to do this with bare feet. You can even dampen some areas in preparation to create more sensory contrasts!

Procedure:

Step 1. Explain to students that they have been engaged in a range of practices to help them build their awareness skills.

Step 2. Share this quote: "The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeing new landscapes, but in having new eyes" - Marcel Proust.

Step 3. Emphasise to students that this practice is like a 'moving meditation'. It is done in silence, with a deep respect to the self, to others and to the natural environment.

Step 4. Explain that it is necessary to observe each other's space during this walking meditation (allowing everyone to enjoy their own space and their own peace). So when walking, keep a comfortable distance.

Step 5. Remind students to walk in a mindfully spaced, single line. Invite them to silently walk in wonder to connect with all of their senses, noticing tones/shades of green in grass/bushes/leaves; verticals of tree trunks; patterns in bark/leaves; sounds of grasses/leaves moving in the wind; the sounds of birds; touch of air on skin, sound of feet on grass, dirt, paving; and sensations through the body as it moves and breathes.

Invite feedback/reflections

- Ask students how they feel when they return to the classroom. Did they notice that just being aware of what they can see, hear, smell, touch and feel gives rise to feelings of being calm and happy?
- Ask students to share things that they noticed on the walk.
- Ask if students were aware that when we are truly focused on nature, our mind is not drawn to our worries, regrets and stressors. This allows our minds to be calm and settle (just like the sediment bottles!)

Suggest that students take simple opportunities to walk mindfully and connect to nature: walking to and from school, during breaks, etc.

Activity 3. Discovering a Personal Natural Mindful Talisman or Totem

'Sometimes a symbol holds more power than the thing it represents.' - Jarod Kintz

Preparation:

- Definition of 'Talisman': "species of charm, engraved on metal or stone, supposed to exert some protective influence over



wearer" - Webster's Dictionary.

- Definition of 'Totem': "A type of animal, plant or object chosen as the badge of a clan or group and treated with superstitious respect as the symbol of an intimate and mysterious relationship" - Webster's Dictionary.

Introduction:

Spend some time reflecting and searching for your own Natural Mindful Talisman or Totem. You may like to share your choice with your students and explain what it means to you and what it symbolises to you, what strengths, values and virtues it reminds you of and how you intend to use it.

Procedure:

Step 1. Introduce the concept of a Talisman or Totem and provide examples throughout history. For example, how were they used in ancient civilizations? How are they a part of Indigenous cultures in Australia? How they are used in religions and sport?

Step 2. Follow the same precepts for the Nature Awareness Walk. During this silent walk, invite students to discover and find their own natural Talisman or Totem: stone, pebble, rock, stick, feather, etc. Ensure students respect the natural landscape and don't damage any plants or animal habitats.

Invite feedback/reflections

- Ask students what qualities they feel their Totem or Talisman symbolises for them.
- Discuss with students ways to use their Talismans as a 'mindful reminder' to be used at school and at home before tests and exams, in their bedroom, as an aid to focus and sleep, etc.

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 differently outside as opposed to inside the classroom?

Extension

Encourage and remind students to practice these activities each day, if possible. Discuss some techniques they might use to ensure they commit to daily practice. Part of this conversation may include suggestions for students to ensure they get daily nature time.