

MINDFULNESS OUTDOORS

A Conservation Nation Academy Lesson

Please visit www.conservationnation.org/lessons for lesson materials and vocabulary list.



TIME REQUIRED

10-25 minutes per prompt (5 prompts are provided)

SUMMARY

Mindfulness is paying attention to what is occurring in the present moment with openness, curiosity, and kindness for ourselves. In our busy world, it can be important for us to schedule the time to be present with our own bodies and minds. Simply sitting outside in nature can allow room for noticing and appreciating the natural world around us as well as taking notice of our own thoughts, feelings, and sensations as they arise in the body. We can slow down and pay attention to everything we experience through different senses as we improve our concentration and let go of distractions. Practicing mindfulness outdoors also allows students to cultivate a relationship with the natural world and develop empathy for all living creatures. Experiencing a sense of belonging in nature is important for all of us, and it's essential if we are to be good stewards of nature. This lesson includes five simple ideas for slowing down and practicing mindfulness with your students. Many thanks to our friends at [Inward Bound Mindfulness](#) for their input on this lesson!

OBJECTIVES

- Students practice mindfulness by observing their breath, body sensations, and open awareness of their sensory experience.
- Students practice mindfulness by making outdoor observations and asking questions.
- Students practice mindfulness by pretending to be trees.
- Students practice mindfulness by observing clouds.
- Students practice mindfulness by using their sense of touch to observe natural objects.

MATERIALS

- For each student: pencil or pen and blank paper, clipboard, or notebook
- Comfortable place to sit for each student such as a blanket, towel, or carpet square
- Nature objects such as seeds, leaves, shells, rocks, pinecones, etc.
- Timer
- Vocabulary list available at www.conservationnation.org/lessons

INSTRUCTIONS & REFLECTIONS

You can use these prompts in any order or separately on different days. We recommend starting with *Open Awareness* as an introduction to mindfulness that you can do in the classroom. Practicing this activity a few times before going outside will help you get to know your students' needs and help them feel more comfortable when you take the lesson outdoors. *Noticing* is done just a few steps outside the door, so you may want to try that one next. Each mindfulness activity has instructions, but you can adapt the prompts to suit your surroundings and your students' needs. For instance, you can give students the option to stand or sit, or you can repeat a prompt in a different place or at a different time so students can compare their observations and experiences.



The most important thing to remember is that we all sense the world differently, and there are no right or wrong answers when practicing mindfulness.

1- OPEN AWARENESS

This activity can be done indoors as an introduction to practicing mindfulness. Simply ask your students to be seated and take a moment to adjust their bodies in any way they need to feel most comfortable.

- Invite students to slowly look around the room and simply see what they notice and hear -- objects, shapes, colors, textures, smells, sounds, etc. Remind them to also look up, down, and behind them. What do they notice that they haven't before or in a different way? Does it feel different to pay attention to their surroundings in this way? Are any thoughts or emotions arising? What do they hear, both inside and perhaps even outside? Are sounds softer or louder? Do they notice anything different when they listen this way? If there is silence, what does silence sound like?
- After a few moments of noticing and being curious, invite students to close their eyes or gaze downward and let the eyes soften (because closing eyes in a group setting may be uncomfortable for some students).
- Read the Meditation Prompt: Today we're going to focus on something we naturally do all the time -- breathing. Let's start by taking one deep breath together. Now let's continue to breathe together, but just breathe the way you would normally. You aren't trying to do or change anything. You're just breathing naturally. Notice where you feel your breath the most in your body. Is it in your belly, chest, or the nostrils? Once you notice where you feel it the most, see if you can pay attention to the feeling of the breath in the place you feel it the most. What does the breath feel like in your body as you breathe in and out? Don't worry if you forget or get distracted by a thought. It's ok, you can just start over by paying attention to the breath. [Allow a few minutes for students to continue with breath meditation while periodically reminding them to breathe normally and notice the sensation of the breath in the body.]
- When you are ready to end the meditation, invite students to open their eyes slowly and gently (or look upward if eyes weren't closed) when they feel ready. Remind them that they can practice this anytime and anywhere when they want to bring more awareness to the present moment. They can stop, breathe, and pay attention to the feeling of the breath as it moves through their bodies.
- Gently remind students that mindfulness practice (giving our present-moment experience and whatever we are doing and hearing our full attention) can be done any time, even while doing things like speaking with each other, packing up our supplies, and walking to the door. As students gather their belongings, ask them to see if they can still pay attention to the present moment (such as giving their full attention to packing up their things, what it feels like to touch their materials, noticing the colors and textures, the sensation of moving their arms and hands, the sounds around them as everyone is moving around the room, and the sensations in their legs and feet while they are walking to the door).



Note: If there are any students who seem to exhibit discomfort with working with the breath, you can give them the option of working with sound instead. For example, instead of following the breath, they would pay full attention to the sounds they hear in that moment. Is the sound pleasant, unpleasant, neutral, loud, quiet? Is there silence between sounds? What thoughts and reactions arise? Another option would be to have students focus on one part of the body. For example, bring your full attention to the back of your hand (noticing weight of the hand, hot or cold, dry or clammy, feeling of contact with your leg, desk, etc., feeling of the air on your hand and sensations in the hand such as stiffness or tingling).

2- NOTICING

For this activity, you will take students outside with paper and pencil, but don't go any farther than 10 feet from the door. Students can sit or stand, but they will be writing. Make sure you have a timer with you.

- Tell students that many of us walk by the small details of nature without realizing them. Being in a hurry, looking down, or being lost in thought keeps us from noticing things. [This is an opportunity to reference the *Open Awareness* exercise they did in the classroom and how they might have noticed some things for the first time.]
- Tell students you will be setting a timer for five minutes while they silently notice and write a list of everything natural that they see and hear. What are the sights and sounds of nature just outside the door?
- Allow students to wander a bit within that 10 feet to touch and smell a few things and write about their observations.
- Invite students to notice any emotions that arise (such as a moment of calm, peace, joy, curiosity, happiness, or sadness).
- When you return to the classroom, ask for volunteers to share what they noticed and wrote about. Invite a discussion of how our mental and emotional lives are impacted by our direct experience and contact with the natural world.

3- PLANT YOURSELF

Did you know that there are more than a trillion trees on Earth? It can be very powerful to take a moment to get to know the ones in your own schoolyard. For this activity, find a spot outside where students can stand or sit quietly and observe trees. No paper or pencil is needed for this activity.

- Invite students to look around outdoors and choose a spot where they can “plant” themselves in the schoolyard. If there are trees, you can invite each student to choose a special tree to connect with and observe.
- Explain to students that they are to become trees for five minutes. Imagine that they have deep roots under the ground anchoring them to the soil. Imagine that their arms are branches, and their fingers are leaves. Invite them to notice the shapes of different trees around them and how they move in the wind. How does the wind feel? What direction is it blowing? How does the sun



feel? What do they notice? Give students at least five minutes to experience the stillness of being a tree before gathering to share their observations and feelings that arose.

4- LOOK UP

Many cultures around the world have given meanings to clouds of all types. People see different types of clouds as metaphors for feelings of happiness, fear, anger, transformation, or luck. Clouds are the subject of speculation about the weather and upcoming events. Clouds in artwork, movies, and songs are sometimes used to set the mood for those creative expressions. In this activity, students will sit quietly outside with paper and pencil to observe clouds. You can have students sit comfortably in a large circle or let them choose a spot to sit within a defined area of the schoolyard.

- Tell students that this will be their time to sit and watch the clouds. Suggest they think about these questions: Do the clouds look heavy and dark, or light and fluffy? Are they moving fast? Are they forming shapes that remind you of something? What emotions are you feeling as you watch the clouds today?
- Give students time to write about their thoughts, observations, and questions. When you are ready, invite students to share what they have noticed and written about.
- We can think of clouds as teachers of impermanence. If we are patient, the clouds will pass, and the sun will eventually shine again. The sun is always there, even when we cannot see it or feel it when it is obscured by clouds. When challenges arise in our lives, we can take comfort in knowing that we are not "wrong" or "bad," but that we are experiencing feelings that will eventually pass just like the clouds. Invite your students to think about the phrase "weather the storm" and what that means to them. As they watch clouds transform and change, how can they relate that impermanence to their own lives?

5- MYSTERY OBJECTS

This activity will focus on the sense of touch. To prepare, collect nature objects such as seeds, leaves, shells, rocks, pinecones, etc. ahead of time but do not show your students. Or, have your students collect the nature objects and place them all in a bag. Spread out and sit in a large circle outside with paper and pencil. Students should be facing outward from the circle with their hands behind their backs inside the circle.

- Tell students to close their eyes or gaze downwards and put their hands behind their backs.
- When they are ready, walk around the circle and place a nature object in the hands of each student.
- Instruct students to gently explore their object, keeping their hands behind their backs.
- Ask them to think about these questions: Can you describe its texture? How does it feel? Is it light or heavy? How delicate does it feel? Do you think it has a scent? What color(s) do you think it is? What is your guess about what your object is? They can put their objects down behind them and write some notes on their paper.



- When everyone is finished writing, invite students to look at their objects.
- Have everyone remain seated in the circle but instruct students to turn inward towards each other.
- Invite students to discuss the thoughts and feelings they had upon seeing their object.
- Ask students to think about how we form assumptions with limited information, even if unconsciously. We often come up with ideas and conclusions based on preexisting associations and what we know. The practice of mindfulness can open us up to things we don't know, help us to have a broader view or perspective, and invite us to be more curious.
- Ask students if anything surprised them once they were able to see the objects. When we truly pay attention, what do we see, learn, or discover that is new or different?

We hope you enjoyed this lesson!
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