

Cool as a cucumber – using the garden for mindfulness

Mindfulness is very much a buzz word right now, and is basically a very simple form of meditation. It is about being aware of what is happening around you and in your mind *right now*. It is said to have originated among Buddhists more than 2500 years ago.

If you need convincing of its usefulness and have time to find out more, these explanations and Ted Talks explain the practice further as well as exploring a few exercises.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6mlk6xD_xAQ

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mKJlshHiEyA>

Here's a good kid-friendly explanation from Mindful Aotearoa:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=awo8jUxlmoc>

Doing meditation has been shown in clinical studies to lower stress, anxiety, pain and depression, improving quality of life by increasing a sense of calm and happiness.

Many mindfulness activities start with breathing exercises because they are a good way for the brain to start focussing on just part of the body, concentrate on that closely and push thoughts to one side for a moment. From a breathing exercise, a student can move to being more present and aware of the things around them **right now** and not be concerned with negative thoughts or thoughts that may not be helpful to learning, calming down or being happy.

Students will need practice to feel comfortable with mindfulness activities and encouragement to stop thinking and just focus on the present. It can be initially uncomfortable to be silent and alone with thoughts, and then be told to stop thinking. Feeling uncomfortable might make some students display disruptive or silly behaviour. Gently acknowledge that emotion and that it is caused by the intensity of the situation and then refocus them to the task and know that practice and familiarity with techniques will help over time.

Breathing exercises can be difficult to engage with at the beginning and so it is easier to introduce deep breathing as a useful technique by giving students a technique to follow.

Practicing breathing exercises all throughout the day will help students turn to them as a calming down mechanism when they feel distressed, stressed or under pressure. The whole class can pause for a quick 10 breath exercise before moving on to a new activity or to calm down after lunch. It can be used at the beginning and end of the school day to make a conscious break between school and home. When practiced often, an angry or distressed student can be encouraged to take some breaths before acting and explicitly encouraged to use breathing as a calm-down strategy.

Breathing

Being able to control your breathing can help you control your thoughts and emotions. Slow breathing can help reduce feelings of stress, increase positive emotions and give a sense of calm. It can help you focus and recharge and is an important component of mindfulness.

To breathe well you should:

- sit comfortably
 - relax your tummy muscles
 - slowly breathe in, hold your breath for just a second, slowly breathe out
 - close your eyes if it helps you focus
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- **Belly breathing** – Directing breath into the stomach is very calming, and focusing on your breath slows your breathing down and helps you to notice any stress you are under. Even though the stress and its triggers might still be there, breathing deeply lets you control and let go of its effect on the body. Elmo can help you out here: https://youtu.be/_mZbzDOpylA
 - **Flower breathing** – Imagine smelling a beautiful flower. Breathe in deeply through the nose to take in the smell and then breathe out through the mouth. As you breathe out, start to let go of tension, dropping the shoulders and relaxing your muscles.
 - **Bunny breathing** – good for a child who is crying and can't regulate their breath. Take 3 quick sniffs like a bunny sniffing out carrots to eat, and then breathe out slowly through your nose.
 - **5-finger breathing** – hold up one hand and spread your fingers. Using your pointer finger from the other hand and starting at the base of your thumb on the outside of your hand slowly trace around each finger, breathing in as you go up and out as you go down. Also known as Take 5 breathing. Good for a quick, finite calm down because it is over when you have traced all of your fingers.
 - **Dandelion clock** – Imagine you have a dandelion in your hand. Slowly and deeply breathe in and then blow the seeds all around as you breathe out. Make a wish. Repeat 5 times.
 - **Lazy 8 breathing** – Imagine the number 8 is being lazy and lying down on its side. Use your finger to trace the 8 and when you cross the midline, change from breathing in to out.
 - **Breathe like a dragon** - Sit up straight and breathe in to fill your lungs with air. Stick your tongue out and breathe out like a dragon. Repeat 5 times.
 - **Rocket breathing** – Stand up as tall as you can with your arms down by your sides. Breathe in slowly through your nose and as you breathe out through your mouth, throw your arms high in the air and blast off like a rocket into space.
 - **Bumblebee breathing** – close your eyes and put the tips of your pointer fingers in your ears. Breathe in slowly through your nose and when you breathe out slowly, hum quietly like a bumblebee. Good for focussing on the right now, because the sensation of humming as you breathe out takes all of your attention.
 - **Square breathing** – use your finger to trace a square slowly, 4 seconds on each side. On the first side – breathe in, on the next - hold your breath, on the third side – breathe out, on the last side – hold your breath. Repeat.

There are hundreds of breathing exercises out there. Pick and choose the ones that suit your class or a particular student and use the ones they enjoy. Here we have focussed predominantly on ones that are related to gardening or the outdoors as much as possible. If students are using breathing to calm down when they are feeling angry and giving themselves a minute to think before acting, they may need to be shown how to subtly draw a square

Cool as a Cucumber, Hot as a Chilli Mindfulness Ideas for all school staff to use the garden as a space of calm

on their leg to guide their breathing, or imagine the analogy rather than actually do it, to avoid inviting comments from others.

For a student that is particularly struggling to engage with breathing as a technique it might be helpful to lay a piece of grass on their hand and explore using breathing to blow it off. They can start by blowing as hard as they can and then begin to use more gentle breaths as they regulate their breathing. How gently can they breathe and still manage to blow the grass off? Can they lift the grass up with their breath and make it hover but not blow it off? Then ask them about what the breathing has done to their body. How are they feeling? Are they feeling calmer? Can they use the same strength of breath without the grass? When would this be a useful technique for them to use?

Mindfulness

- **Take a Mindfulness break** – Sit in a comfortable position and relax your body. Close your eyes and focus on slowly breathing in and out. Try not to think of anything in particular. If a thought pops into your head, just let it go and blow it away with your next breath. Continue slowly breathing in and out.
- **Body scan** – a body scan is just a way of checking in with each part of the body and seeing what it is feeling like and letting that take over the whole of your attention, squeezing out other thoughts. It is easier with your eyes closed and starting with an appropriate script can help you get started. There are many scripts for body scans available. Make sure you use ones that are suitable for children and explain any unfamiliar vocabulary for them (e.g. terminology like sensation and reconnect).
<https://www.mindful.org/beginners-body-scan-meditation/>
- **Garden gratitude** – People who can express gratitude are shown to have increased happiness. Ask students to sit comfortably with their eyes closed and take them through a breathing exercise such as flower breathing to focus their breath and slow their thoughts. Ask them to imagine walking into a gratitude garden, a place where they can grow things they are thankful for. Their mind is full of gratefulness and their pockets are full of seeds. As they walk through the garden they can plant seeds and acknowledge what they are grateful for. At first, students might need help to think of things they might be grateful for so you can begin by telling them some things to plant seeds for, e.g. for the person who provided their lunch today or for the blanket that makes their bed a warm place to sleep, for the person who said hello when they first arrived at school, or invited them to join their game, to the classroom helper that sharpened the pencil or the sun for shining and letting us go out at playtime. As time goes on, it will be easier for students to think of things they are grateful for. You only need to plant 3-4 seeds each time you follow this activity. At the end they can imagine the seed germinating and shoots pushing through the soil, reaching up towards the sun and the moon, and then blooming into a myriad of colours. Before you leave the garden, think about what you can do to nurture the plants – water them, feed them with compost and pull out the weeds around them. Quietly pack your tools up and leave the garden before opening your eyes.
- **Mindful eating** – Being present while you are eating is something we often forget to do. You might like to do this for one GTT session or when the new season of cherry tomatoes are ready or if you have some fragrant herbs. Get students to hold and look closely at the food in front of them. Get them to notice but not to share their ideas. Ask students to close their eyes and smell the food closely, noting anything that it reminds them of. Does it remind them of something they have eaten before, or does it give them a feeling of something familiar? Did anything surprise them about the smell. Ask them to put the food in their mouth and concentrate on how it feels on their tongue, what it feels like to bite it, how the taste gets to their tongue, what it actually tastes like. What is familiar, what is unexpected, what is new? Do they know that their nose tastes more than their tongue? Chew slowly, deliberately and swallow gratefully. Can they share their experience and thoughts? Why would this be useful? Do they know somebody who eats incredibly fast? What do you miss out on if you gobble your food instead of savouring it? When is this a useful skill? Should

Cool as a Cucumber, Hot as a Chilli Mindfulness Ideas for all school staff to use the garden as a space of calm

we do it more often? Perhaps we could start morning tea with a minute of silent, mindful eating every day straight after saying our karakia kai? Can we link the mindful eating to gratitude for our food, echoing the sentiments of our karakia kai?

5-4-3-2-1 mindfulness

- Using the space around you to lie or sit still in, focus on
- 5 things you can see
- 4 things you can touch
- 3 things you can hear
- 2 things you can smell
- 1 thing you can taste.

You may need to move around to do the last two. Move slowly and calmly. Breathe in deeply as you move around.

- **Take a Mindful Minute** – Take one minute, breathe deeply and fill your mind with what is happening right now. What can you hear? What can you smell? What can you feel? What can you see? What can you taste? Continue for one minute or until you feel calm and relaxed.
- **Ant safari** – Lie face down on the grass. Pretend you are an ant. Keep your head down close to the grass and see the world from the ant's view. What do you notice? What looks different from down here? Remember to breathe and relax as you notice the world from an ant's eye view.
- **Be a kereru** – sit comfortably with your eyes closed. Imagine you are a kereru sitting on a high branch. Feel your weight grounding you in the tree. Imagine what you can see, smell, hear, feel and taste as you sit in your tree.
- **Change into a karearea** – a New Zealand falcon. Fly high and soar through the valley. What can you see, feel, hear now?
- **Sky writing** – stretch your arm out high in front of you. Using your pointer finger write your name in the sky. Join your letters together in a flowing movement. How big can you write? How small can you write? Can you sky write like a dance? Continue for at least 30 seconds. Stay in control by writing slowly.
- **Watering can** – use the watering can to water some plants in the garden. Take close note of what happens. What does the water look like when it lands on the plant? On the soil? Can you smell it? What does it sound like? Afterwards, sit comfortably with your eyes closed. Imagine the water still pouring out of the watering can. Can you see the droplets falling onto the plant and soil? What happens to the water? What can you see, hear, feel and smell?
- **Plant Close-up** – choose a plant in the garden, any plant, even a weed. Focus all of your attention on that plant. Look closely to find small details you hadn't noticed before. What shapes can you see? What colour is it? Do the leaves have tiny hairs on them? How does it make you feel? What did you see that surprised you? Continue looking closely for 2 minutes.
- **Cloud cushion** – sit comfortably with your eyes closed. Imagine you are sitting on a cushion of cloud. Slowly relax every muscle of your body and let your weight sink into the cloud.
- **Weather report mood** – sometimes it might be easier for a child to explain their feelings based on the weather; “thundery with a chance of showers” or “cloudy” can give a good insight into current emotions without having to explain. It could be non-verbal - they could draw the weather in a thought bubble above a picture or photo of themselves and, when appropriate, be drawn into a conversation about what might need to happen to improve the weather for the day.

Cool as a Cucumber, Hot as a Chilli Mindfulness Ideas for all school staff to use the garden as a space of calm

The process of **seed saving** requires patience, dexterity and organisation. This activity might provide a moment of quiet, solace and success to the right student.

There are many **yoga poses** that are suitable for children and can provide a refocussing break during the learning day. Try the tree pose: Stand up tall. Bend one knee, lift that leg up and put the bottom of your foot on your inner thigh. Balance and breathe slowly. If you have trouble balancing, push your big toe downwards into the floor and focus your eyes on one spot. This pose improves your balance, concentration and focus until you can say you are rooted to the spot and feeling grounded.

Grounding

What is grounding? Grounding is a mindfulness technique that brings you back to the moment and away from wandering thoughts. It focuses the mind on what is actually happening right now. The following exercises can be useful to use to help students develop their mindfulness skills.

- **Focus** on what you hear, see, smell and feel to bring the attention back to your body.
- **Stand up tall.** Bounce on your toes. Feel your body standing on the Earth. Concentrate on that and feel connected. Sitting or standing up tall is important to align your bones and get your blood and energy moving effectively.
- **Zoom in, zoom out. Zoom in** – Make your hand into a camera lens. Zoom in on something close up that is really beautiful. Take some time to examine it in detail. What makes it beautiful? What do you like about it? Zoom halfway out. The scene in your hand camera lens will be bigger and have more in it. Find something beautiful, still viewing through your camera lens. What makes it beautiful? What do you like about it? Zoom right out. Take in the whole scene around you. Move slowly from side to side like a panorama lens. Think about what makes your world beautiful right now, today.
- **Run your hands** through some soil. **Squeeze** and crunch a handful of soil and let it fall to the ground. Repeat. Now go and wash your hands for 2 whole minutes, paying attention to how the water feels.
- **Mashed potatoes** – screw your hands into fists, tense your whole body and stamp your feet hard. Relax your entire body. Repeat 3 times.