

Quick Mindful Check-ins and Brain Breaks for Students

Promoting Positive Student Mental Health

This guide provides faculty and staff with simple and quick methods for supporting students' mental health. The activities are designed to help build community, incorporate mindfulness, build motivation and practice compassion. The guide is intended to provide very short activities that can be incorporated anytime during class or when working with students.



BUILD COMMUNITY AND CONNECTION

Building community can support students' mental health by helping them feel connected to others and to feel a sense of belonging. Each of the following activities can help you build relationships with and among students.

Ask students to turn and talk with a partner or a small group, or if virtual, share in the chat or in a breakout group. Topics that can be discussed include:

- New restaurant you've tried
- Positive thing that has happened recently
- Goal you're working toward achieving or recently achieved
- New hobby you've tried recently
- A high and a low
- Place in Austin (or wherever you are) that you like to take visitors
- How you're practicing self-care this week
- A self-care resource you use
- Something you've read, listened to, or watched that others might enjoy

Ask a few [This or That](#) or [Would You Rather](#) questions. (If in person, have students move to one side of the room or the other depending on their answer. If virtual, use a poll.)

In a small group, look at objects/photos. Share one that connects with how you're currently feeling.

Choose a Mindful Connection Activity/Ice-Breaker to do from [this list](#).

BE MINDFUL

Practicing mindfulness can positively impact both mental health and academic performance. Each of the following activities provides a script that you can use to model while you have students practice mindfulness.

Breathe.

Use the scripts below each breathing practice to guide your students.

Calming 4-8 Breath

Breathe in through your nose for 4 seconds, breathe out through your mouth with pursed lips for 8 seconds. 5 of these breaths takes 1 minute.

Calming 4-7-8 Breath

Breathe in through your nose for 4 seconds, hold your breath for 7 seconds, breathe out through your mouth with pursed lips for 8 seconds.

Up-Regulating Breath

Take 3 quick sips of breath in through your nose and 1 big exhale out through your mouth.

Counting

Either take deep or natural breaths based on what you need in this moment and count along. 1-inhale, 2-exhale, 3-inhale, 4-exhale, etc. Count to 10 with your breath and repeat.

Notice Body Movement

Either take deep or natural breaths based on what you need in this moment and notice your body movement with each breath. Notice your chest, abdomen, shoulders, mouth, etc.

Get moving.

Use the scripts below each movement practice to guide your students. Remind your students as they do these stretches that if something feels painful, stop or modify the stretch so they don't experience pain.

Side stretch

Script: Sit or stand and lean to the right with an upright and relaxed back. Take 2-3 breaths and repeat on the left side.

Video with similar movement: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EHL-xr3OPaQ>

Back bend

Script: Sit or stand and gently lean back and look towards the ceiling and slightly behind you. You can do this with your hands down or bring your arms above your head and point towards where you are looking. Take 2-3 breaths and come back to your original position.

Video with similar movement: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SUmn9MMHpSw>

Forward fold

Script: Sit or stand with your hands on your hips. Gently bend forward at your hips with your knees slightly bent. Look down at the floor or between your legs. Take 2-3 breaths and come back to your original position.

Video with similar movement: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=62-M44Q7HJw>

Twist

Script: Sit or stand and twist by gently moving your right shoulder to the back, bringing your back of your right hand behind and resting on your lower back on the left side, and your left hand on your right hip. Take 2-3 breaths and come back to center. Then twist by gently moving your left shoulder to the back, bringing the back of your left hand behind and resting on your lower back on the right side, and your right hand on your left hip. Take 2-3 breaths and come back to center.

Video with similar movement: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NshXcgvliFk>

Shoulder rolls

Script: Sit or stand and gently bring your shoulders up and back, then down and to the front. Do a few rolls to the back and then rotate and do a few shoulder rolls going in the opposite direction. Take some deep cleansing breaths as you do these shoulder rolls.

Video with similar movement: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ayGKw8JFqMo>

Body scan w/ flex and release

Script: Sit or stand and we're going to move through our body by flexing certain areas as we breathe in and relaxing certain areas as we breathe out. (You can go in this order or modify.) Left foot-right foot-left calf-right calf-left thigh-right thigh-abdomen-left hand-right hand-left arm-right arm-shoulders up-shoulders down-face squinched-face relaxed.

Video with similar movement: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q7OAlcyE5M8&t>

Stretch in a way that feels good

Script: Take a few moments to stretch in a way that feels good. Listen to your body and give your body what it needs in this moment. I invite you to take some deep cleansing breaths as you stretch.

Video with similar movement: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z9v8karpAAs>

Listen to music.

Instrumental

Play some instrumental music and ask students to share their thoughts or feelings about the experience.

Notice lyrics

Play a song and bring all attention to the lyrics. (You can focus on all of the lyrics or certain parts like the chorus.)

Notice instruments

Play a song and bring all attention to certain instruments being played.

Encourage creativity.

Coloring

[Online coloring](#)

[Coloring pages to print](#)

Doodling

[Benefits](#) and video with examples

Drawing

Draw something that makes you smile.

Draw something that represents how you feel in this moment.

Incorporate nature.

Walk and notice

Take a walk and notice movement, sounds, smells, growth, and/or something new to you.

Notice from inside

From inside a building looking outside, notice movement, details of nature that you can see, and/or something new to you.

Nature video

Use a nature video and bring all of your attention to the details within the video. Below are a few examples.

[Forest](#), [Mountain Stream](#), [Beach](#)

Nature sounds

Use a nature video/sound clip and bring all your attention to the details within the video/sound clip.

[Forest](#), [Mountain Stream](#), [Beach](#)

Check in with emotions.

These can be done at any time of the year and is helpful in supporting our students to name how they're doing. This will also get them in that habit, but could be even more helpful during heightened times of stress such as mid-terms and finals time.

Feelings wheel check-in

Based on the [feelings wheel](#), what are you experiencing in this moment? Write down or share with a partner. Dr. Dan Siegel says, "Name it to tame it and feel it to heal it." when it comes to strong emotions.

1-5 check-in

On a scale of 1-5, how are you doing in this moment? 1=current not good, 5=excellent. Write down or share with a partner.

Song/type of music

What song or type of music best represents how you're doing in this moment? Write down, share with a partner or make a class playlist.

Character/movie or show check-in

What movie or show character best represents how you're doing in this moment? Write down, share with a partner or make a class list.

Temperature check

How are you feeling today based on the images provided? Write it down, share with a partner, or discuss as a class. On Zoom, you can use the chat box, or you can share your screen and use the annotate feature to have students circle the numbers/pictures.

Examples of pictures you can use:

- [On a scale of Baby Yoda, how are you feeling?](#)
- [On a scale of Nicolas Cage, how are you feeling?](#)
- [On a scale of dogs, how are you feeling?](#)

Notice with your senses.

5-4-3-2-1

Notice 5 things you can see, 4 things you can feel, 3 sounds, 2 smells and 1 taste. [5-4-3-2-1 video](#)

Notice sight

What do you notice that you see right now? Objects, colors, details, patterns, size, etc.

Notice sounds

What do you notice that you can hear right now? Near, far, loud, soft, rhythms, random, etc.

Notice smells

What do you notice that you can smell right now? In the air, your hands, your clothes, your coffee/tea/water bottle, etc.

Notice touch

What do you notice that you can touch right now? Texture, temperature, similarities, differences, etc.

Notice taste

What do you notice that you can taste right now? Something you are currently eating, something left over from an earlier snack/meal, etc.

Journal.

Examples of journal prompts

- Day's intention setting
- Future goal setting
- Stream of consciousness
- How am I?
- What am I noticing?

Use self-care videos.

Show a [self-care video](#) by Kirsten Bradbury, a UT psychology professor, and have students practice what's in it. Example videos with activities include:

- Show the [Savoring](#) video and practice with raisins or another healthy snack.
- Watch the [Doing Nothing](#) video and challenge students to try it later in the day when they need a break.
- Play the [Bubble Meditation](#) video and follow along with Dr. Bradbury.

Share other mindfulness or stress-reduction strategies/resources.

Examples

- [mindful UT](#) a resource for mindfulness-related opportunities and programs at UT Austin
- [UT's MindBody Labs](#)
- Kristen Neff's [Guided Meditations](#)

INTEGRATE GRATITUDE

Practicing gratitude is a simple way to boost well-being. Here are a few quick activities to aid in integrating gratitude into your learning environment.

Have students write 1 to 3 things they're grateful for. (Download free [gratitude journal](#).)

- What/who are you grateful for in this moment
- List of who/what you're grateful for

Encourage students to write a short gratitude letter to someone they're grateful for.

Share the video [A Grateful Day with Brother David Steindl-Rast](#)

Ask and have students respond to one of the [Daily Questions](#) at [gratefulness.org](#).

SUPPORT STUDENT MOTIVATION

Students often discuss how difficult it is to maintain motivation across all their classes throughout the semester. This list provides simple ways to help boost students' motivation and keep them engaged in their academic learning.

- Acknowledge when things are difficult and staying motivated is difficult.
- Share strategies you use to maintain or adjust motivation during difficult times.
- Have students write a short-term mastery goal for the week or month.
- Share a time you've struggled or failed to normalize these experiences.
- Give students a few minutes to start an assignment, project, etc. in class.
- Show students how to break large assignments, projects, etc. down into smaller tasks.

PRACTICE SELF-COMPASSION

Teaching students about self-compassion and giving them a bit of time to practice it can have a positive impact on their well-being while demonstrating that you care about them not just as learners but as human beings. Here are a few brief activities you can do with students to practice self-compassion.

Go over the three components of self-compassion:

- **Self-kindness:** Be warm and understanding with yourself.
- **Common humanity:** Feel connected to others in that everyone experiences suffering while honoring that not everyone's suffering is the same.
- **Mindfulness:** Be present and observe thoughts and feelings as they are without trying to deny or suppress them.

Practice one of Kristen Neff's [Self-Compassion exercises](#) as a class.

Model and have students practice changing self-talk:

- Think about a flaw or inadequacy that you tend to focus in on yourself. How does this aspect of yourself make you feel inside?
- Now, think about an imaginary friend who knows you well. Write a note that this friend would say to you about your "flaw."
- Read your note aloud to yourself.
- In a day or two, pick up the note and read it aloud to yourself again.

Create a self-compassion mantra:

Neff's Mantra	Component	Your Mantra
<i>This is a moment of suffering.</i>	Self-kindness	
<i>Suffering is a part of life.</i>	Common humanity	
<i>May I be kind of myself in this moment.</i>	Mindfulness	
<i>May I give myself the compassion I need.</i>	Self-compassion	

Teach students that when they're stuck in negativity, think...

- "It's hard to feel (fill in the blank) right now."
- "Feeling (blank) is part of the human experience."
- "What can I do to make myself happier in this moment?"

PRACTICE AND DISCUSS GENERAL SELF-CARE

Often, students need reminders to take care of themselves – physically, mentally, and emotionally. The following list provides examples of things you can do to help students remember to practice self-care.

Have students download the [Thrive at UT](#) app on their phones.

- Go through one of the modules.
- Have students find and share a resource that they like.
- Practice one of the activities in the app.

Talk with students about the importance of sleep and share research-based strategies for improving sleep:

- Try to get 7 to 9 hours of sleep every night.
- As much as possible, follow a regular sleep schedule.
- Make the room that you sleep in dark and a bit cooler (around 65 degrees).
- Wind down 30 to 60 minutes before you go to bed by turning off screens and focusing on activities that promote rest.
- If needed, take a short nap (20 to 30 minutes) in the early afternoon (1:00-4:00 p.m.)

Share [UT's sleep diary](#)

- Have students fill it out over the course of a week, and have them write a brief reflection on what they learn from it
- Handout sleep kits. Request them [here](#).

- Share [UT's sleep website](#) and provide time for students to peruse it.
- Share a list of self-care practices and have students identify one to try over the next week/month.



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