

GRATITUDE &
MINDFULNESS
ACTIVITIES FOR THE
CLASSROOM
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AIMS

- **PRACTICAL SOLUTIONS:** Gratitude techniques provide students with skills to increase calmness and solutions to practice in response to challenging situations.
- **ATTITUDE AND RESPONSE:** Gratitude helps to allow a positive response and a deeper awareness of student's emotions in positive and negative situations.
- **GRATITUDE:** Gratitude helps students to focus on the positive (and be aware of the negative) and helps students to focus on positive approaches, resulting in positive actions and behaviours.
- **SELF-AWARENESS:** Students' self-awareness deepens when enhanced by the mindfulness practices as it allows students to be in control of how they respond to thoughts and feelings.
- **DECISION-MAKING:** Mindfulness increases cognitive flexibility and creativity, which gives students a wider range of responses to challenging situations, improving mental health and well-being.
- **SOCIAL AWARENESS:** Mindfulness increases students' empathy by helping them to regulate their emotions rather than get emotionally overwhelmed when faced with difficult situations.
- **SELF-MANAGEMENT:** Mindfulness increases students' emotional regulation skills, which enhances their ability to resolve conflict more creatively or to say how they're feeling in an emotionally balanced way.
- **MINDFULNESS:** Mindfulness can help students become aware of the present moment (being non-judgmental), helping them to recognise and cope with signs of stress, anxiety and depression.

INTRODUCTION

THE BRAIN AND THE BODY

If you became small enough to walk around inside the brain, you would see a breath-taking electrical pattern around you. There are specialised cells of the brain, known as neurons, which use electricity and chemicals to carry information across vast networks and systems. The brain can be considered a switchboard where it serves as a communications system regulating emotions, mood, memory, thought and personality.

There are four main areas in the brain:

- The cerebrum which controls memory, personality and conscious thought
- The cerebellum which controls balance and co-ordination of movement
- The medulla which controls heart rate and breathing rate
- The hypothalamus which is the regulating centre for temperature and water balance

This extends to other systems from the spinal cord to the skin, muscles and other organs in the body. CBT (Cognitive Based Therapy) works on the basis that the way we think and interpret life's events affects how we feel and, ultimately, how we behave. The theory is that problems arise from the meanings we give to events and unhelpful thoughts can make it difficult for us to function confidently in different situations.

One such system is the autonomic nervous system (ANS), it governs the actions of the muscles, the glands and covers vital functions such as heartbeat, salivation, digestion and breathing. The autonomic nervous system is divided into two parts (they help balance each other), the sympathetic and parasympathetic nervous system.

SYMPATHETIC NERVOUS SYSTEM:

This has an excitatory effect on the body and like all animals, human beings have evolved ways to help us protect ourselves from danger. When we feel under threat our bodies react by releasing certain hormones, such as adrenaline and cortisol. These hormones (known as the fight, flight, or freeze response):

- Make us feel more alert, so we can act faster
- Dilate pupils
- Reduce the activity of muscles of the intestinal wall
- Widen the airways to the lungs
- Make our hearts beat faster, quickly sending blood to where it's needed most

PARASYMPATHETIC NERVOUS SYSTEM:

This has an opposing effect to the sympathetic nervous system as it has a calming effect on the body and its systems. It depends on the neurotransmitters acetylcholine to transmit signals from one cell to the other which (known as the ease response):

- Make us feel calmer, so we can slow our thoughts, actions and response
- Constrict pupils
- Increase activity of muscles of the intestinal wall
- Narrows and constricts the airways to the lungs
- Make our hearts beat slower, reducing the amount of blood sent to other parts of the body (muscles).

More information on the two systems has been provided in '[Session 5 - Positive affirmations and Alternative thinking](#)' of the lesson plans.

GRATITUDE

Gratitude is a feeling of appreciation and being thankful for the good things that happen in your life. Research suggests that centralising experiences through writing and transcribing your thoughts (in a gratitude journal) is spiritually therapeutic, reduces stress, increases happiness and improves self-esteem. Recording our thoughts gives us an intimate insight into ourselves and allows us to translate appreciation from our thoughts into reality.

As we introduce this technique to our students, we can start to familiarise this practice and cultivate positive mental well-being. This program involves each student having a gratitude journal so they can write and keep track of their thoughts and progress. Over time the practice will allow them to reflect and have a positive mind-set when dealing with intense moments in their life.

The journal is designed to help students, savour what they appreciate as it will prompt them to write what makes them happy. It's an activity book created specially to cultivate mindfulness and appreciation in the student's life. In the journal, they will find a mixture of inspirational quotes with writing prompts and mood emojis to help enhance their positive mental wellbeing.

Below are some general statements that can help the students in their journal entries:

- Something beautiful I saw...
- The best part about today...
- Something I can be proud of...
- A fun experience I had...
- A valuable lesson I have learned...
- An unexpected good thing that happened...
- An act of kindness I witnessed or received...

The journal can be used weekly at lesson time and, over time, it will allow the students to record and reflect on their progression and their own personal mental wellbeing.

GRATITUDE LESSON PLANS

The lesson plans are designed to be tweaked if needed and are intended to last 45-60 minutes under the discretion of the teacher.

Session 1 | THANKFULNESS

GOALS OF THE SESSION:

- To establish an understanding of the term gratitude.
- To establish a rapport with the students.

OBJECTIVES:

- Define gratitude/ thankfulness.
- Have students identify a personal experience with feeling grateful.

MATERIALS:

- White board.
- Gratitude journals or paper and pencils/ pens for students.

ACTIVITY 1: (5-10 MINUTES) – SET IT UP

Before beginning the session, the teacher will set the premise for the well-being class. During these sessions the class will have discussions, act out different role plays, and write down personal stories in the gratitude journals.

Teacher: "Hello boys and girls, I am very excited that we are launching our wellbeing classes for the next few weeks to help you with anything you may want to improve or need encouragement in. During this time, we will have group discussions, act out different role plays, work in groups, and write down personal stories. These wellbeing lessons are very important, as they will allow us to improve our mental ability and how we handle difficult situations.

Wellbeing is described as our mental and physical state that gives us life satisfaction and a sense of meaning. There are times where we experience periods of positive and negative states where our mental wellbeing can change from moment to moment, day to day, month to month, or year to year. Mental health is defined as a state of wellbeing in which every individual realises his or her own potential to:

- Cope with the normal stresses of life
- Work productively and fruitfully
- Improve how we feel about ourselves and the people around us
- Make and keep friends and relationships
- Learn from others and to develop psychologically and emotionally
- Contribute to her or his community.

ACTIVITY 2: (15 – 20 MINUTES) – TALK ABOUT IT

The teacher will write down the word “thankful” in large, bold letters, on the front board for all students to view.

Teacher: “Today we are going to talk about what it means to be thankful. Can anyone tell me what the word thankful means?”

The teacher will allow the students to have a discussion and come up with answers to the meaning of the word ‘Thankfulness’. The teacher will write the answers on the teaching board and explain to the students the theory behind being thankful and mental health.

Teacher: “Gratitude is the quality of being thankful; readiness to show appreciation for and to return kindness. A happy mental state and environment is not free of negativity and irritation. A happy mental state is where negativity and irritation are not fed and strengthened; rather they are graciously acknowledged and humbly accepted. Research suggests that the feeling of gratitude involves two stages:

1. First comes the acknowledgment of goodness in one's life.
2. Second, gratitude is recognising that some of the sources of this goodness lie outside the self

Gratitude acts as a gateway to having a steady mental state and presence. When we are truly present in the moment, we see the beauty all around us and the more joy we cultivate, the more we can practice our purposeful awareness and acceptance of the present moment. This can help:

- Strengthen our emotional resilience
- Help to stop rumination (thinking over a situation again and again).
- Reduce anxiety and depression
- Become more self-aware
- Increase self esteem
- Feel calmer and less stressed
- Improve sleeping patterns
- Cope with difficult or unhelpful thoughts and body pain"

The teacher will then allow the students to have a class discussion and share their ideas of gratitude and thankfulness. The teacher will note the examples given by the students on the teaching board and for each volunteered answer, the teacher will make the connection that something positive happened to the student and that is why the student felt grateful.

ACTIVITY 3: (10-15 MINUTES) – JOT IT DOWN

Have students write down 1-3 things they are grateful for in a journal.

The teacher will next hand out journals to the students. Students will be instructed that these will be their gratitude journals.

Teacher: "I am handing out your own personal gratitude journal and these journals will be used in the wellbeing classes to help cultivate good mental health and wellbeing. Take a moment to reflect on the gratitude discussion and jot down 1-3 things that you are most thankful for."

Teacher prompts to help the students get started:

- Something beautiful I saw – A previous holiday perhaps
- The best part about today - Think about things in your past, even your recent past, that you are grateful for

- Something I can be proud of – Think of achievements and targets you have met
- A valuable lesson I have learned – Think about positive conversations you have had
- An act of kindness I witness or received - Remember the teachers who have encouraged and taught you or who have inspired you to learn...
- Think about your relationships - Choose one person or multiple people in your life, and describe why you are grateful for them and how they make you feel
- Think about the opportunities that are available to you. How might it feel if any of those things were taken away?

Teacher can end by stating:

“Disciplining the mind through practice will enable you too incrementally get better at developing your stress relief skills. Initially, the practices may seem difficult to develop, but with continuous repetition, the process of habituation and familiarisation will allow you to get better.”

ACTIVITY 4: (5-10 MINUTES) – SUM IT UP

The teacher can sum up the lesson by giving the students tips on how to start the process of journaling:

- Go for depth over breadth – focus on one detailed thing rather than a superficial list of many things.
- Get personal - focusing on *people* to whom you are grateful has more of an impact than focusing on things for which you are grateful.
- Try subtraction, not just addition - reflect on what your life would be like without certain blessings, rather than just tallying up all those good things.

This can be followed by a question and answer session under the discretion of the teacher.

END OF ACTIVITIES (MAX SESSION TIME IS 50-60 MINUTES).

OUTRO

THIS IS THE END OF THE PACKAGE.

ALL REFERENCES TO DEFINITIONS, ANATOMY,
EXERCISES, AND MEDICAL TERMS ARE AVAILABLE ON
REQUEST AS INFORMATION IS CHECKED AND
UPDATED ACCORDINGLY.

Disclaimer: Mindfulness can also be the cause of anxiety attacks and stress. As you try to meditate, your mind may start to concentrate on uncomfortable past experiences that can make you feel more anxious. Please refer to the school's health and safety procedures or first aid guide.

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