



Empathy, Mindfulness and Caring

THREE WEEKS OF EASY ACTIVITIES FOR ELEMENTARY TEACHERS TO PRATICE MENTAL HEALTH SKILLS WITHIN THEIR CLASSROOMS.

Week 1: Kindness in action

Week 2: Empathy

Week 3: Mindfulness

INTRODUCTION

When a person is **caring**, they are displaying kindness and the need to address the emotions of others.

Empathy is the ability to notice and understand another person's emotions and to act on that understanding in a caring way. Empathetic students have an easier time navigating conflict and developing positive relationships which serve as protective factors against many of life's challenges. Empathetic students are less likely to engage in bullying, or aggressive behaviours, and are more likely to model positive social behaviours. Empathy is a skill that can be taught.

Stress is our body's fight or flight response trying to protect us against real or perceived harms. Stress makes it very difficult to be empathetic or even caring to others as our bodies are trying to protect us and cannot prioritize the needs of others during periods of stress. Luckily, many stressors in the classroom can be overcome once our emotional response is under control. **Mindfulness** practices help students to regulate their stress responses, re-orient to the task at hand, and succeed in both the classroom and their relationships.

Short, simple, and consistent mindfulness practices help students foster caring attitudes and empathy skills which will benefit classroom behaviours, their emotional regulation, and relationship skills.

KEY POINTS

- **Week 1:**
Caring is kindness in action! Caring attitudes allow students to engage in the world outside of themselves and build positive relationships. Foster caring by helping students recognize moments of kindness and find opportunities for students to display kindness towards themselves and others. Make it a challenge – how many caring moments can your students achieve today?
- **Week 2:**
Empathy allows a student to understand the world through someone else's perspective and to act on that understanding in a caring way. Empathetic students have better relationship building skills, and stronger conflict resolution. You can create an empathetic classroom by: modelling empathy, teaching what empathy is and why it matters, practicing empathy by creating opportunities to reflect on other's perspectives, and making school culture a priority.
- **Week 3:**
Mindfulness allows students to recognize their stress response kicking in. It provides them with the skills to moderate their stress response and regulate their emotions. Simple and consistent practice teaches students to practice mindfulness habitually. Here are some simple exercises you can do in your classroom to help students learn this important skill: Deep breathing exercises- try balloon breathing or square breathing, stretching exercises get students to explain how their bodies feel, and guided imagery exercises- describe a peaceful scene.

Weekly Announcements (Mental Health Monday)

Week One Announcement:

This week's mental health topic is caring. How have you been caring today? Did you remember to take time to care for yourself? When we care for ourselves we are better able to care for others. Did you notice someone being caring today? Let them know!

Week Two Announcement:

This week's mental health topic is empathy. When we are empathetic we are understanding how someone else is feeling and showing kindness to them. Can you think of an example of empathy?

Week Three Announcement:

This week's mental health topic is mindfulness. What is mindfulness? It is a skill you can use when you feel anxious, upset, or worried to help calm your mind and help you feel better. How can you be mindful? When you are feeling upset take 5 deep breaths and name four things around you. There is always time for a mindful moment!



ACTIVITIES

- How Would You Feel? A scenario-based worksheet to help students put themselves in someone else's shoes. Teaches empathy. [Grades 2-5]
- Two-minute mindfulness, helps students become more aware of their interactions with others. 2 – 10 minute activity to debrief and focus students. Teaches mindfulness. Appropriate for all elementary school grades.
- Talking Circles, a weekly practice that helps students to respectfully listen and connect with others. Teaches caring. Appropriate for all elementary school grades.
- Sharing Kindness, a weekly practice of developing kindness and positive relationships through fostering cooperation with others. Teaches empathy, and caring. Appropriate for all elementary school grades.
- For caring lesson plans, activities, quotes, and videos check out Character Counts.
- Teaching Empathy: as a caring adult make a point of expressing and explaining your own emotions as they arise. This helps students express and explain their emotions. Try asking them "what are you feeling and why?"

Also, try These Great Activities from Middlesex-London Health Unit:

How can you practice empathy with others?

- One of the ways we can develop our empathy skills is by learning about and from others. If we can learn how to embrace our differences and find things in common with others, we can really get to know, come to appreciate, and care about one another.
- In a respectful way, ask questions and be curious about people and communities who look, act, or speak differently than you.
- Look for things you have in common with other people or fictional characters (from TV, movies, books, etc.).

Practice Scenarios

- Primary (K-3): A group of students were playing tag at recess and told Morgan that they couldn't play, Morgan spent recess alone. How do you think Morgan felt? What would you have done if you were there?
- Junior (4-6): Cameron and Blake are best friends who love basketball, they decided to try out for the school team, Cameron was cut from the team after the second try out while Blake made the team. How do you think Cameron felt towards Blake? Do you think Blake felt good about making the team when Cameron did not? How would you talk about your feelings if you were Cameron or Blake?
- Intermediate (7-8): Jamie isn't participating in class like they usually do, during recess they share that their family is moving to a different city and that they will have to go to a new school. How do you think this person may feel? What are some positive words you could share with a person that is having a hard day or dealing with a difficult situation to show them empathy?

Book and/or Video Recommendations

Did you know that reading fiction helps students learn empathy? Through fiction they can experience the character's thoughts and feelings. This helps students see the character's point of view and empathize with them.

The following books are appropriate for primary and junior level elementary students. Do you want to get your intermediate elementary students involved? Why not have them read these books to younger grades as part of a reading buddy program?

- Brene Brown on Empathy, [a short video](#) that describes the difference between empathy and sympathy.
- The Last Stop on Market Street by Matt de la Pena, an award-winning book that teaches students to empathize with all the differences around them.
- Listening to My Body by Gabi Garcia a book that teaches students to pay attention to the sensation of their bodies as a mindfulness practice.
- You, Me and Empathy by Jayneen Sanders teaches children what empathy is.
- I am Human by Susan Verde shows students that we all make mistakes and we can all make good decisions, such as kindness, which make the world a better place.



References

- Canadian Mental Health Association, Mental Health Week "What is Empathy?"
- Mental Health Foundation. "What is Stress?"
- The Harvard Gazette, Harvard University. "With Mindfulness, Life is in the Moment"
- Character Counts. "Character Education Lessons: Caring"
- Harvard Graduate School of Education. "How to Build Empathy and Strengthen your School Community."



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