

## Abstract

This unit is designed to introduce students to the self-soothing techniques that meditation and mindfulness have to offer. Furthermore, this unit takes a mindfulness tool, Internal Family Systems, and turns it into an analysis tool for movies and short stories. Utilizing the lessons offered here builds both academic and social emotional skills so that students develop a well-balanced approach to health and well-being.

Meta-Tags: Social Emotional Learning, English Literature, Healthy Mindsets, Meditation, Mindfulness

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Mindfulness & Self-Soothing Techniques  
for Social Emotional Growth

Philadelphia Juvenile Justice Services Center School

### ***Background***

Touted as a tool for reducing stress, anxiety and depression as well as being a host to many more health benefits, mindfulness has gained popularity. From programs being offered at healthcare facilities to yoga studios offering techniques for children, people recognize that getting quiet and focusing on the breath leads to a variety of benefits.

My own experiences taught me that the different avenues one can take towards mindfulness offered opportunities for self-growth and transformation. For instance, in a yoga class in the basement of Garland of Letters on South Street, several decades ago, I learned a posture/meditation that was intended to disrupt anxiety and depression. While sitting in the lotus position, the practitioner would lower their chin to their chest but focus their gaze on their forehead then they would focus their gaze on their chest while raising the head and leaning it all the way back. Bringing the head back to center gaze facing forward, the practitioner would turn their head left but set their gaze to the right, then return to center and take their head and gaze in the opposite directions. The goal of this practice was to disrupt one way of thinking and shift the focus onto another.

Another example of mindfulness to which I was exposed was in a writing workshop, author Elizabeth Gilbert (*Eat, Pray, Love*) introduced participants to a five senses meditation to ground one's self. The steps included: notice five things you see, notice four things you hear, notice three things you can touch, notice two things you can smell, and notice one thing you can taste (Gilbert, 2006). The goal of this practice was to transition from a day's driving concerns into a mental space of openness for what the workshop had to offer.

Throughout the years, I have studied with a variety of yoga teachers, tried meditation in several forms, and have sought the meaning of life through books, podcasts, lectures and college courses. I also journal on a daily basis. I know these practices work for my overall wellbeing and I want to bring these life approaches to the students I teach.

Trying to discern how to take make some of these practices accessible for students has proven to be a challenge until a group of educators enrolled in the Asian Meditation Traditions seminar as part of the Teachers Institute of Philadelphia.

Week after week, we met to discuss how what we learned from our material could benefit the students with whom we are charged to educate. We spoke of the academic and emotional concerns that we face with our young people and how mindfulness can help to ease some of the problems they face.

From immersing ourselves in a meditation technique in which we were instructed to count while we were breathing to learning about Zen meditation through a visit from a practitioner in the Philadelphia region, this TIP seminar enabled us to dabble in the multiple paths of meditation and mindfulness. Similarly, the seminar helped us understand that there are multiple outcomes, whether that be spiritual enlightenment or psychological transformation, sought from taking on meditation practices.

The forthcoming discussion is an exploration on how the mindful practices can interrupt the students' current mindset and prepare them to receive the material that is offered as part of their social-emotional learning program: Seven Mindsets.

### ***Who are those students?***

Tucked away in Southwest Philadelphia, the Philadelphia Juvenile Justice Services Center resides. Housed in the facility are juveniles who have been arrested and are awaiting movements to home or home with house arrest restrictions, state treatment facilities, or to prison for adult charges. Of the almost two hundred youth who are in the facility, twenty-five percent are there for violent crimes. Many of those crimes were committed with guns.

Much conversation surrounds how to address the gun problem in the city of Philadelphia. The newly elected Mayor, Cherelle Parker, is devoting many resources to combat this issue including funding educational programs and nonprofit ventures.

When one steps inside the units and meets the residents, one meets groups of students that one finds hard to believe the crimes for which they are housed. Like typical teenagers, they joke, they laugh, they listen to music, they enjoy drawing, writing and creating. They have dreams of becoming entrepreneurs, rap artists and NBA players.

The goals of all of the staff are to light that spark within the young students to change the unskillful trajectories they are on,. While I do not have exact numbers, my experience over the last five years shows me that the recidivism rate is high. Whether I'm encountering these students on their returns to the center or seeing their images on the local news for crimes committed (as perpetrators or victims) in the area, I see that once they are in the criminal justice system, they face significant challenges trying to stay out.

### ***One Initiative - Seven Mindsets***

The principal of the school at Philadelphia Juvenile Justice Services Center works tirelessly to bring opportunities to the young people in this situation. The School District of Philadelphia has mandated a social emotional learning component be brought to schools. The principal selected *Seven Mindsets* as the initiative the Philadelphia Juvenile Justice Services Center School will use.

Researching a variety of self-growth models, the creators brought together the best practices within the industry to establish this curriculum. With themes identified as "Everything is Possible, Passion First, We Are Connected, 100% Accountable, Attitude of Gratitude, Live to Give, and The Time is Now," each unit offers quotes, videos and activities that highlight the positive directions into which they want young people to move.

As promoted on their website, Seven Mindsets is geared towards students and educators. The goal of *Seven Mindsets* is to "drive student well-being and achievement" as well as "educator happiness and retention." Additionally, the website states:

7 Mindsets improves relationships, reduces behavioral issues, increases grit and leads to improved academic performance. Educators and students report improved mental health and higher levels of confidence and hope, leading to positive lasting change.

Surveying their curriculum, one finds that it does not dive deeply enough into a key component of what healing could look like. Ultimately, before students are ready to accept the messages *Seven Mindsets* has to offer, they need to address some of the trauma that has built their emotional walls and causes them to act from anger. Using some of the self-soothing techniques offered through this curriculum, those students will be ready to accept what *Seven Mindsets* has to offer.

### **Going Deeper**

Surveying the students at JJC, one quickly finds that buried beneath the anger they are expressing in the community is a complex set of emotions lodged in grief, anger and trauma. While the classroom is not the place to conduct therapy and teachers must devote the majority of their time to academics, we cannot overlook the weight of the emotions these students bring with them every day.

So, how do we create space to do some social emotional work while addressing the academic needs of students? First, we need to think of interrupting one train of thought to create space for what *Seven Mindsets* has to offer. We can do that through mindfulness. Through a variety of mindfulness techniques, the young people will be offered opportunities to become present for the work that is being attempted to be done. While many of these techniques can be found within the Buddhist tradition, one needs to be careful that no infringement is made upon the different religious practices that show up in the center. Removing the language of spirituality, there are a

variety of techniques that can be offered, ranging from techniques that allow students to mindfully sit and breathe to sensory awareness to walking meditations. Once this idea of presence has been established, students will have the opportunity to distill the values that are most important to them. From the awareness of the values that have been established, students will generate an affirmation or set of words that they can use to bring themselves into a space of grounding. Work that could be offered simultaneously is providing the space for students to deal with uncomfortable emotions that arise within them. This work will involve, foremost, identifying the feelings and then writing letters from those feelings to themselves so that they understand what those specific feelings are trying to tell them. Depending on the relationship with certain groups and the trust that has been established with them, this work could involve working from their perspectives or finding films and/or short stories to work with emotions.

### *Setting the groundwork*

Mindfulness and meditation are words that are often used interchangeably. Foremost and for the purpose of what is being brought into the classroom, we must distill a definition of what meditation is. For this definition, we should consider the discussions that arose in the 2024 TIP seminar, Asian Meditation Traditions, and the article that from that course that helped distill the definition, "Asian Traditions of Meditation," edited by Halvor Eifring (2016). He wrote: "Meditation is an attention-based technique for inner transformation" (pg. 2). While Eifring offers the different traditions from which meditation arises, he also offers an in-depth discussion of the technical aspects and the transformational nature of meditation.

About technique, Eifring states:

A technique is a kind of practice that is deliberately undertaken...A technique is systematic in the sense that its procedures are clearly specified...It is continuous, meaning that the intentional activity undertaken is either durative (as when sustained attention is directed toward an image) an image or repetitive (as when a word or a sound combination is repeated over time)... A technique is set aside from other activities in time, often also with regard to posture and location ...And it is undertaken to achieve certain effects. (Eifring, 2016, pg. 8)

Furthermore, about technique, he writes:

Individual agency is an important part of the practice orientation involved in defining meditation as a technique. Meditation is done by the practitioner, not to him or her. (pg. 12)

For the purposes of this discussion, we will think about certain breathing exercises and movements that will be done at the service of bringing participants into a mental space that has the potential to lead to the transformation that is being sought. Ultimately, we seek to shift mindsets.

In terms of transformation, we'll borrow Eifring's comments:

Inner transformation consists in long-term fundamental changes affecting many aspects of the person, such as perceptual, emotional, intellectual, spiritual, or behavioral patterns, eventually bringing about the anchoring of the person in more fundamental aspects of existence. (Eifring, 2016)

Due to the nature of the detention center, certain techniques may not afford students to immerse themselves in the quiet needed for meditation. Therefore, a scaffolded approach as well as patience should be taken to providing students with a toolkit for using mindfulness techniques to manage emotions.

As far as the scaffolded approach is concerned, several meditation/mindfulness techniques will be offered so that students have the opportunity to experiment:

1. Five senses technique - Taking deep breaths to center the self, identify five things one can see...
2. Box Breathing - This technique involves both kinesthetic and breath work.
3. Imagery - Using visualization to guide mindful practice.
4. Progressive Muscle Relaxation – A technique that brings mindfulness to different parts of the body.

While this toolkit will serve to momentarily suspend the issues that are arising in young people, there are some opportunities of self-soothing that could be added to help young people with some of the underlying issues that face them.

One school of psychological thought that could provide some helpful insight is IFS or Internal Family Systems. Through his observations, Dick Schwartz, the author of *No Bad Parts (2021)*, contends that a healthy being hosts the eight Cs of self-leadership that include: calmness, curiosity, clarity, compassion, confidence, creativity, courage, and connectedness. He spends the majority of his book discussing how people need to honor the different parts of themselves that show up as reactions to events.

For Schwartz, no feeling or part (including those negative reactions like rage, disassociation, depression) should be viewed as bad but as learned behaviors that arose from when people were young and unable to communicate those feelings.

### ***Mantra Development and Usage***

While being aware of the different breathing and awareness techniques that can be used throughout the scaffolded introduction to mindfulness, enabling students to create their own mantra, a set of words to which they can return when they need grounding, is an important tool especially in an environment like a detention center where students may not feel comfortable closing their eyes. By creating their own mantra, students are given their own power of the words they will use.

In his 2000 book, "Healing Mantras: Using Sound Affirmations for Personal Power, Creativity and Healing", Thomas Ashley - Farrand offers a lengthy discussion on the opportunities for physical, mental and spiritual growth through the use of mantras.

He states:

When we pronounce mantras, we initiate a powerful vibration that corresponds to both a specific spiritual energy level and a state of consciousness in seed form. Gradually, the vibration of the mantra begins to override all of the lesser vibrations. These eventually become absorbed by the mantra. After a length of time that varies from person to person, the great wave of mantra stills all other vibrations within individual organs and systems. Ultimately, the individual will be in perfect harmony with the energy and spiritual state represented by and contained in the mantra. (pg. 52)

Furthermore, he contends:

The practice of Sanskrit mantra increases the vitality and energy utilizing ability of the chakras in our subtle body and the organs of our physical body. As we grow proficient in mantra meditation, new experiences may begin to present themselves to us...Even speaking a mantra very softly influences the chakras that correspond to the nerve centers of the physical body. Just thinking a mantra-pronouncing it subvocally in your mind-can further the process of clearing away spiritual impurities, energizing the chakras, and burning off karma. (Ashley-Farrand, 2000, pg. 52)

In his book, *The Big Leap* (2009), Gay Hendricks writes about how people sabotage themselves on their roads to life successes. His theory centers around the idea that people will experience their ultimate success in life when they learn to get out of their own way. He posits that once people recognize that they are in their own way, through stirring up unnecessary conflicts or getting into trouble, a guiding principle or mantra is a good way to ground a person and refocus their attention.

About the importance of using mantra, Hendricks writes:

A mantra is a sound or idea that you use as a focal point in meditation. In some meditation systems, the mantra is a word or sound from an ancient language such as Sanskrit or Hebrew. In other systems it might be an idea, such as “Focus your awareness on your breathing.” (Hendricks, 2009, p. 145).

In his book, Hendricks offers a mantra that he developed called the Ultimate Success Mantra. The language of the mantra he discusses is: I expand in abundance, love and success and I inspire others to do the same. (Hendricks, 2009)

In her book, *Emotional Agility* Susan David discusses how to best navigate the positive and negative emotions one experiences. This idea of being agile with emotions has to do with being able to understand how one must accept both positive and negative feelings despite how many people were taught that negative feelings should just be buried. She notices that people often get hooked on their feelings and become paralyzed when it comes to action or they live with lots of regrets. One solution she offers is for people to know their values and live by them. As long as those values guide a person, they can move forward knowing they made the best decision for themselves. (David, 2018)

David characterizes this mindset as "Walking your why" and states:

“Walking your why” is the art of living by your own personal set of values—the beliefs and behaviors that you hold dear and that give you meaning and satisfaction. Identifying and acting on the values that are truly your own—not those imposed on you by others; not what you think you should care about, but what you genuinely do care about. (David, 2018, pp. 114-115).

Crucial to being able to walk one's why is to establish security in the decisions people are making. Those decisions that are based in values offer the security one needs to live in their why.

About being able to discover values, David writes:



Values serve as a kind of psychological keel to keep you steady...Here are some other characteristics of values: They are freely chosen and have not been imposed on you. They are not goals; that is, they are ongoing rather than fixed. They guide you rather than constrain you. They are active, not static. They allow you to get closer to the way you want to live your life. They bring you freedom from social comparisons. They foster self-acceptance, which is crucial to mental health. (p. 121).

What is critical for this discussion and to the point of mantra development here is placing the values into the mantra similar to how Gay Hendricks developed the ultimate success mantra.

### *From Values to Parts*

When trying to think of life as being made up of parts being explained in simpler terms, one can think of Pixar's movie "Inside Out" where the main character, Riley, has to contend with the battle her emotions engage in as she navigates her family's move from Minnesota to San Francisco. (Docter & Del Carmen, 2015) It does an excellent job of illustrating how all parts of a person need to be attended to in order to have a mentally healthy life.

Referring again to Dick Schwartz and his book *No Bad Parts* where he discusses the healing of trauma through recognizing that everyone has multiple parts within them and that none of those parts, despite how they appear in the world, are bad, we see how this approach is recognized as a mindful one, he writes:

In Buddhist terms, IFS helps people become bodhisattvas of their psyches in the sense of helping each inner sentient being (part) become enlightened through compassion and love. (Schwartz, 2021, p. 16).

As children, people come into the world innocently. It is the wounds that get acquired along the way that cause people to develop parts that must protect that innocence. Ultimately, Schwartz (2021) contends that in order to live a fulfilling life, people should be able to maintain the eight C's of self-leadership. Those eight C's are: Calmness, Curiosity, Clarity, Compassion, Confidence, Creativity, Courage and Connectedness (pg. 112). The emotional parts get in the way of self-leadership when they must protect the innocent inner child.

In the audiobook, *Reconciliation: Healing the Inner Child*, a compilation of Dharma talks by Thich Nhat Hanh, we find Buddhist practices that seek to promote mental health and wellbeing. More specifically, it focuses on the theme of mindful awareness of our emotions, like anger, sadness and fear, and healing our hurtful relationships from when we were children. Ultimately, the talks and exercises seek to turn the pain into joy and tranquility by learning to breathe with, explore, meditate, and speak about our strong emotions. (Hanh, 2010)

One particular exercise that arises is the writing of letters from the emotional places that need to be heard. Borrowing from this practice, students who are caught in a negative cycle of thinking will be taught to write letters to themselves from these emotions. Example: Dear Anger, What am I supposed to learn from you today? Dear Jealousy, What are you here to teach me? Using these prompts as starting points will enable students to understand that the emotions have something to offer.

While this toolkit will serve to momentarily suspend the issues that are arising in young people, there are some opportunities of self soothing that could be added to help young people with some of the underlying issues that face them.

This can swing us back to the discussion of children sitting in a detention center as they deal with anger, grief and other emotions that swirl up to come to terms with where they are and where they want to go. They're not taught how to deal with those emotions so they stew in them.

### ***Teaching Strategies***

**Vocabulary Development:** Provide students multiple opportunities to interact with words that relate to values. In groups, they will define and present words to the class. Additionally, they will use these words in essays.

**Cooperative Groups:** Working with peers, students will develop presentations of words for better understanding.

**Short Story and Movie Analyses:** Using concepts/theories drawn from Dick Schwartz's IFS systems, we will look at characters in short stories and movies to hypothesize on the different parts that might be at play within our characters.

**Activities:**

**Lesson #1**

Introduction to Mindfulness & Meditation

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Aw71zanwMnY&t=11s>

[https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1x1sjRTdauEL-LLdn8oSVZpJq\\_Xv24JWVuvnEIM-ZUK0/edit#slide=id.g124c66b833e\\_2\\_32](https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1x1sjRTdauEL-LLdn8oSVZpJq_Xv24JWVuvnEIM-ZUK0/edit#slide=id.g124c66b833e_2_32)

**Lessons #2 - 4 - Values/Affirmation/Mantra Activity/Essay**

Provide each group with a set of four cards. Each card has a different value. Sample: Life - An appreciation and respect for all living things. The students must find a way to teach the other students what these values mean. The students are required to develop a presentation that demonstrates the meaning of their group of cards.

Value #1:  <b>Honesty</b>	Value #2:  <b>Success</b>
Value #3:  <b>Integrity</b>	Value #4:  <b>Trustworthy</b>
Value #5:  <b>Dignity</b>	Value #6:  <b>Respect</b>

Value #7:  <b>Tolerance</b>	Value #8:  <b>Compassion</b>
Value #9:  <b>Flexibility</b>	Value #10:  <b>Beauty</b>
Value #11:  <b>Comfort</b>	Value #12:  <b>Compassion</b>
Value #13:  <b>Dependability</b>	Value #14:  <b>Generosity</b>
Value #15:  <b>Humor</b>	Value #16:  <b>Independence</b>
Value #17:  <b>Inner Peace</b>	Value 18:  <b>Strength</b>
Value #19:  <b>Knowledge</b>	Value #20:  <b>Health</b>

Value #21:  <b>Popularity</b>	Value #22:  <b>Self-Acceptance</b>
Value #23:  <b>Simplicity</b>	Value #24:  <b>Spirituality</b>
Value #25:  <b>Romance</b>	Value #26:  <b>Forgiveness</b>

Checklist for Group Projects: Each task is worth 20 points and everyone in the group will receive the same grade.

1. All students participated in the delivery of the presentation: \_\_\_\_\_
2. The presentation included all 8 values-based vocabulary words: \_\_\_\_\_
3. The presentation included videos/some visual component of each values-based vocabulary word: \_\_\_\_\_
4. The presentation included an activity (graphic organizer, etc) that allowed students to take notes/capture the meaning of the words: \_\_\_\_\_
5. The presentation included some assessment/product: \_\_\_\_\_

At the end of the presentation, students are provided with a sheet that helps them determine 3 - 5 important values that they want to dictate the ways in which they live their lives.

Students must write a short essay that includes the values they chose, the definition of the values and the reasons for choosing those values.

Using the language provided from the book, *The Big Leap*, by Gay Hendricks, students will develop their own mantra/affirmation to which they can turn when feelings of anxiety or uncertainty arise. Instead of using the language of "abundance, love and success" as Hendricks offers, students should include the language of their own important values.

Essay Checklist:

1. Introduction: \_\_\_\_\_
2. Identify & define 3 values: \_\_\_\_\_
3. Explain how values apply to your affirmation: \_\_\_\_\_
4. Five paragraphs: \_\_\_\_\_
5. Grammar & mechanics: \_\_\_\_\_

**Lesson #5 - 6**

Introduction to understanding Internal Family Systems as an analysis tool for movies and stories

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ji7bk3JfEmk>

Questions about Internal Family Systems for Kids video

1. The speaker states that when we are born, our hearts have certain characteristics. What are those characteristics?

2. The speaker states that as we grow up some events might alter the ways in which we perceive the world. In which ways could our perceptions change?

3. The speaker discusses different ways in which parts can show up in our lives. How would you summarize how the speaker does this?

4. The speaker contends that when our hearts are on the road to healing, the parts could serve a different purpose. Which purpose might that be?

### **Movie Analysis**

Pixar's *Inside Out* - Riley is a happy 11-year-old Midwestern girl who loves hockey and her life. That life gets turned upside down when she and her parents move to San Francisco. Riley's emotions, including Joy, Sadness, Anger, Fear and Disgust, guide her through this difficult time. (Docter & Del Carmen, 2015)

*Charm City Kings* - Based in Baltimore and starring Meek Mills, this movie is a gritty portrayal of the dirt bike scene in an urban city. Mouse and his friends are trying to join the neighborhood group, Midnight Clique, but face multiple obstacles and learn harsh lessons along the way. While this is rated R due to the themes and language, it provides good content for analysis of the characters that have multiple parts. (Soto, 2022)

### **Story Analysis**

*Jason Reynolds's "Eraser Tattoo"* - In this short story, two teenagers face a change that challenges their relationship and their dreams for the future.

### **Lesson 7**

#### Letters to Self from Emotions

Using targeted sentence starters and paragraph frames, students will be invited to write letters to themselves from their emotions.

Example:

Dear Anger,

What would you have me know today?

Dear (Student Name),

I want you to know \_\_\_\_\_.

### References

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## Appendix:

### *Common Core Standards*

**Standard - 13.2.8.E** Explain, in the career acquisition process, the importance of the essential workplace skills/knowledge.

**Standard - 13.3.8.C** Explain and demonstrate conflict resolution skills.

**Standard - CC.1.2.9-10.K** Determine or clarify the meaning of unknown and multiple-meaning words and phrases based on grade-level reading and content, choosing flexibly from a range of strategies and tools.

**Standard - CC.1.3.8.C** Analyze how particular lines of dialogue or incidents in a story or drama propel the action, reveal aspects of a character, or provoke a decision.

**Standard - CC.1.3.8.H** Analyze how a modern work of fiction draws on themes, patterns of events, or character types from traditional works, including describing how the material is rendered new.