



SOBER BREATHING SPACE FOR TEENS

"Feelings come and go like clouds in a windy sky. Conscious breathing is my anchor."

—Thich Nhat Hanh

OVERVIEW

This practice prompts students to practice broadening and narrowing their field of awareness so that they can be more mindful throughout the day.

PLANNING FOR IT

WHEN YOU MIGHT USE THIS PRACTICE

- Daily, for at least a week or more
- At the start of a school day, to close a class, in a classroom meeting, or a student's one-on-one meeting with a school mental health professional
- When you or your students are experiencing tension, anger, or anxiety

TIME REQUIRED

- <5 minutes

LEVEL

- Middle School
- High School
- College

MATERIALS

- None

LEARNING OBJECTIVE

Students will:

- Practice observing their body sensations, thoughts, & feelings, and focusing their attention on their breath

SEL COMPETENCIES

- Self-Awareness
- Self-Management

HOW TO DO IT

REFLECTION BEFORE THE PRACTICE

- Try this [Mindful Breathing practice](#) before leading students in this practice.
- Check in with yourself before doing the practice and again afterwards. Do you notice a change in how you feel?

INSTRUCTIONS

SOBER Breathing Space



S: Stop
O: Observe
B: Breathe
E: Expand
R: Respond

GETTING STARTED

- Note: As you prepare to lead this practice, you don't need to read verbatim from a script, but rather to learn the practice yourself. Use the script as an example of the steps as well as the spirit of the practice. But in leading a practice, you can guide students using your own words, from your own moment-to-moment experience.

Before you begin this practice, share the following information with your students:

- The SOBER Breathing Space practice was originally developed to help people recovering from drug and/or alcohol addiction, but anyone can use it to check in with themselves during the day. You can practice while standing, sitting, or lying down—indoors or outdoors with your eyes open or closed.
- When you take a few minutes to practice the SOBER breathing space (e.g., in your car or waiting for the bus, between classes, etc.), you learn to help yourself shift out of “autopilot” (or mindlessness) and into mindful awareness of the present situation.
- SOBER stands for STOP, OBSERVE, BREATHE, EXPAND, and RESPOND.
- While you are checking in with yourself using the five SOBER steps, your field of awareness moves much like the shape of an hourglass--from wide or broad awareness at the beginning, to narrow in the middle, and back to wide at the end of the practice.
- Notice how your awareness shifts throughout this brief practice.

<https://soundcloud.com/user-877205336-555180076/sober-breathing-space>

THE PRACTICE

Welcome to the SOBER breathing space.

Sober stands for Stop, Observe, Breath, Expand, and Respond.

Stop whatever it is you are doing and whatever it is you are about to do.

Allow yourself to just simply be right here in the present moment.

Observe what is happening in your body, noticing any sensations that are present in your body right now.

[Brief pause]

Check in with your emotions, noticing whatever feelings are there for you right now without judging anything--just allowing them to be as they are.

[Brief pause]

Notice where your thoughts are right now—whether they are in the past, or in the future, or in the present.

[Brief pause]

With the next breath in, gathering your awareness.

With the next breath out, bringing your awareness now just to the breath.

As best as you can, keeping your full attention on the sensations of breathing.

Breathing in—I know that I am breathing in.

Breathing out—I know that I am breathing out.

In. Out.

[Brief pause]

Whenever you notice your mind wandering, as best as you can, simply bring your awareness back to the next breath.

Breathing in, breathing out.

In. Out.

[Brief pause]

Gathering your awareness again with your next in-breath.

Breathing out, expanding your awareness to the sensation of your whole body being breathed.

Checking in again with the body—what do you notice? What sensations are present right now? Are they the same or are they different than earlier?

Checking in with your emotions—what feelings are present right now?

Checking in again with your thoughts—where is your mind right now?

And with awareness, as best as you can, responding to the situation, carrying on with your day...shifting out of autopilot mode and into mindful awareness.

CLOSURE

- Invite students to describe their experiences.
- Ask them what they noticed about their ability to narrow their focus to their breath vs. check-in with themselves (e.g., their body sensations, thoughts, and feelings)?
- Assure them that the mind is easily distracted—a key to mindfulness is to continue redirecting your attention to an “anchor” (e.g., the breath) as your mind wanders.
- Ask students why and when they might want to try this activity again in the future? When would it be most helpful to them?

EXTENSIONS

- Consider using this practice in conjunction with other mindfulness activities, including a mindful movement practice or a loving-kindness practice.

REFLECTION AFTER THE PRACTICE

- How did students respond to this practice? Did they appear calmer and more focused?
- Do students feel that they are able to make a better decision, responding to the situation with intention rather than reacting out of habit or strong emotion?

THE RESEARCH BEHIND THE PRACTICE

EVIDENCE THAT IT WORKS

A [2014 meta-analysis](#) that focuses on 24 mindfulness studies of K-12 students demonstrated changes in students' attention and resilience to stress, including positive emotions, self-esteem, and self-concept. Further, a [2019](#) targeted review of mindfulness interventions with young adolescents indicated benefits to teens' well-being.

WHY DOES IT MATTER?

“Mindful breathing” is a simple process—one that involves observing the breath and redirecting attention to the breath when the mind wanders--and is a tool that students can easily use when faced with a stressful situation.

This particular practice is helpful because it gives students an anchor for their attention: their breath as a place to focus when they might feel carried away by emotions. Students who practice mindful breathing regularly may feel less anxiety, more focus, and a greater sense of calm in the classroom.

SOURCE

[Dzung X. Vo, MD](#) (adapted with permission from Bowen, Chawla, and Marlatt, 2011: [Mindfulness-Based Relapse Prevention for Addictive Behaviors: A Clinician's Guide](#)).