



# MY MIND IS A CAST OF CHARACTERS: EXPLORING THE NATURE OF OUR THOUGHTS

*“Change your thoughts and you change your world.”*

-Norman Vincent Peale

## OVERVIEW

Students do a brief role play that demonstrates how the “voices in our head” impact our ability to concentrate.

## LEVELS

- Middle School
- High School

## PLANNING FOR IT

## WHEN YOU MIGHT USE THIS PRACTICE

- When students are experiencing stress and anxiety and might benefit from realizing that they are not alone
- When students are struggling to be attentive and focused, and you need an entry point for discussing this more openly

## TIME REQUIRED

- 20 minutes

## MATERIALS

- 4 name tags, each one labeled with a different role: parent, teacher, friend, self
- 4 index cards, each one labeled with a different message that corresponds to each of the four roles (see “Suggested Roles and Messages” at the bottom of the “How to Do It” section for message ideas)
- one [math worksheet](#) & pencil

## LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Students will:

- Understand the relationship between thoughts and feelings
- Investigate the effects of mind chatter on attention and performance

### ADDITIONAL SUPPORTS

- [Making Practices Culturally Responsive](#)
- [Adapting Practices for Students with Special Needs](#)
- [Making a Practice Trauma-Informed](#)
- [Making Classrooms and Schools Trauma-Informed and Healing-Centered](#)

### SEL COMPETENCIES

- Self-Awareness

### HOW TO DO IT

#### REFLECTION BEFORE THE PRACTICE

- Think of a recent challenging experience, such as criticism from a colleague or parent, or a difficult encounter with a student, or feeling overwhelmed with the amount of paperwork. What were the “voices in your head” saying to you during this time?
- For example, a teacher who just received an angry email from a parent might hear:
  - The voice of her partner: “Are you staying late again?”
  - The voice of the principal: “You handle it.”
  - The voice of a colleague: “This parent doesn’t know what he’s talking about.”
  - Her own voice: “I’m such a bad teacher.”
- Notice the impact these “voices” have on how you feel and maybe what actions you choose.
- Take a moment to step back and breathe. Recognize that these voices are just that: voices. It’s our choice whether we believe or question what these voices say to us.
- Consider engaging in a brief [mindfulness practice](#) that helps us to look at our thoughts with curiosity rather than fear or judgment.

### INSTRUCTIONS

This activity is drawn directly from Patricia Broderick’s [Learning to BREATHE](#) Curriculum and her lesson on Theme R: Reflections (Chapter 6). It is best used in conjunction with her larger curriculum because it is embedded in a context that helps students understand the nature of their minds.

#### SETTING UP THE PRACTICE

- Ask for one student volunteer (number 1) to sit in the front or middle of the class.
- Ask for several other student volunteers to be that student’s “thoughts.”
- After student volunteer 1 is seated in the center, have the other students stand in a circle around the seated student.

- Tell students:
  - *Let's try an exercise that shows how the mind's chatter can affect us.*
  - *This student, \_\_\_\_\_ (name), is a stand-in for all of us. I am going to ask her/him to do something in a minute.*
  - *The other students (use their names) stand in for her/his "thoughts." I'm going to each of them a name tag and a "thought" to read.*
- Give each of the other volunteers a name tag with the name of a role: parent, teacher, friend, self, and an index card with an appropriate message written on it. (See suggested message for various roles below.)
- Put the name tag on each student. Using name tags on a cord that can be placed around the student's neck makes this easy. Allow each actor to read the message quietly before the activity begins.

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### ROLE-PLAYING CHARACTERS

- Tell students: *Now I am going to give \_\_\_\_\_ (name of the seated student) a math worksheet to do. While she/he is filling out the worksheet, all the thoughts need to walk around her/him in a circle and keep repeating the sentence on your index card. You don't need to yell or walk too close to the student in the middle. Just remember that you are the thoughts in her/his head.*
- The first thought reads the message aloud and begins circling the seated volunteer as that person works on the math sheet.
- One by one each "thought" enters the circle.
- Students in the "roles" walk in a circle around the working student and repeat their scripted message over and over. If teachers use more than four volunteers and space permits, make the circles concentric. This may be done for three to four minutes while the student volunteer works on the problems. At the end, all roles might speak their "thoughts" at the same time.

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### DISCUSSING THE PRACTICE

- After the demonstration, discuss the following questions with the actors and with the whole class:
  - *How did this experience affect your concentration?*
  - *Were the messages (thoughts) helpful or unhelpful? Pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral?*
  - *How did listening to this affect your mood?*
  - *How difficult was it to stay focused?*
  - *What other kinds of messages or thoughts did you find in your mind at times?*
- Call attention to several elements demonstrated in the activity:
  - The repetitive nature and automaticity of self-talk
  - The positive and negative tone of self-statements
  - The impact of mind chatter on attention and concentration
  - The universality of the "wandering mind" experience.

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### SUGGESTED ROLES AND MESSAGES

Teachers may develop additional roles if they wish.

- Parent 1: “Did you do your homework?”
- Parent 2: “Hurry up and finish, or you’ll be late.”
- Teacher 1: “This test is worth 40 percent of your grade.”
- Teacher 2: “This material will be on your final exam.”
- Friend 1: “Why are you always studying so much?”
- Friend 2: “Did you hear what she said about you today?”
- Self 1: “I’m no good at math. I’m afraid I’m not doing well.”
- Self 2: “I hate math. It’s so boring.”

For a variation, include some positive thoughts like “This is easy because I’m good at math.”

## SOURCE

This practice is reproduced directly from [Learning to BREATHE](#), pages 49-50, with permission of the author.

Broderick, P. C. (2013). *Learning to BREATHE*. Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications.

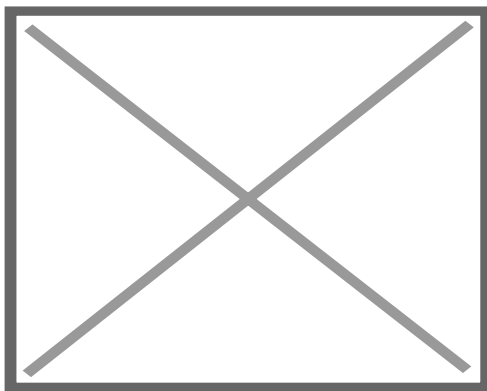
## REFLECTION AFTER THE PRACTICE

- How did students respond to watching another student’s thoughts in action? If anyone in the group expresses vicarious anxiety or stress after watching the demonstration, you might consider brainstorming some strategies for managing anxiety or difficult emotions including [mindfulness practices](#), [self-compassion practices](#), and/or [cognitive reappraisal](#) (shifting your thoughts/interpretations).

## THE RESEARCH BEHIND IT

### EVIDENCE THAT IT WORKS

In general, scientists recognize that our [thoughts, emotions, and behaviors](#) impact one another, often illustrated through a triangle.



For example, our thoughts or beliefs about a situation can impact how we feel, which in turn may dictate how we respond.

## WHY DOES IT MATTER?

As students learn to become more aware of their thoughts and feelings, they can also learn to step back and observe them with curiosity and a greater level of detachment. Understanding and acceptance of feelings and thoughts can lessen students' emotional and physical feelings of anxiety, and can also help to [reduce depression](#) after stressful experiences.

## TERMS OF USE

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