



Morningside Center for Teaching Social Responsibility

13 Essential SEL Tips

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SEL Tip: Storytelling for Community-Building

Invite students to think about the power of storytelling, and make time for storytelling in your classroom.

Introduction

In this activity, students share their reflections about the power of storytelling to build community, tell some stories themselves, and perhaps make a plan for regular storytelling sessions.

Begin the session by inviting students to think about the role that storytelling plays for them, both individually and in building community.

Ask students to consider (by themselves, in pairs, or with the whole group):

- What are the reasons we tell and share stories?
- Why do we like hearing stories?
- What are some elements of a good or interesting story?
- What are some ways that stories influence us?
- What happens when we hear stories that hold meaning for us or that resonate with us?

After students have reflected on these questions, share that storytelling influences just about every aspect of our lives, including where we shop and what we buy, the places we go, who our influences are, and who we spend our free time with, for example.

Our favorite shows and movies include the element of great storytelling. The images we like tell us stories and often allow us to see ourselves, or maybe the version of ourselves that we want to be. Storytelling helps us keep our traditions and cultures alive.

Share with students that storytelling can be used both proactively to build community among people, and to heal and repair the community after a harm or conflict has happened.



Storytelling can build community and connection among students - and adults.

Discussion

Invite students to share their responses to the following two questions:

- 1. How can telling or hearing stories about ourselves or others help us build community and strengthen our connections with each other?**

Record students' responses. You might elicit such responses as the following.

Storytelling can:

- help us understand each other (and sometimes ourselves)
- shed light on our similarities and help us understand and/or appreciate our differences
- let us know that we're not the only one
- help us to learn and grow

- provide inspiration
- connect us to each other
- help us celebrate
- enable us to share and discuss
- help us to plan and strategize

2. How can storytelling help us heal and repair the community after harm or a conflict has occurred?

Record students' responses. You might elicit such responses as the following.

Storytelling can:

- help us understand the impacts of our actions
- help us understand each other's needs (even if/when our needs conflict with others' needs)
- support us in working collaboratively to repair harm/rebuild community
- help us to see things from someone else's perspective

Activity: Storytelling Go-Round

Invite students to a seated circle, and ask them to respond in a go-round to some of the prompts below.

- What are examples of storytelling that matter to you, and why? (i.e. in the news, informational podcasts, music, books, documentaries, visual art...)
- What story have you heard recently that you connected with, or that impacted you?
- What is a story about yourself, your community, or your culture that you are proud to share with others?
- Whose story comes to mind when you think about bravery? Strength or courage? Perseverance, or any other quality you admire? What about this person's story stays with you?
- Who is the best storyteller you know, and what makes them great at storytelling?
- What is a/the story of your name?
- Tell a story of a time when you felt like your presence mattered in a community.

Closing

After the go-round, invite students to share:

- What was it like for you to share stories and hear others' stories – and thoughts about stories?
- What stood out for you?

Ask students if they would like to do more storytelling with each other.

If they are interested, work with students to come up with a plan for another storytelling session in your class. Ask them to work together to decide on some prompts they would like to use for this future gathering.

SEL Tip: Try a Restorative Conversation

A restorative conversation can turn a student's problematic behavior into a teachable moment.

As educators, we know that asking questions and guiding students through their own learning process is ultimately more beneficial than pointing out mistakes and lowering students' grades accordingly.

The same is true for how we handle students' behavior. When a student acts out or causes harm in some way, pointing out the behavior and imposing consequences unilaterally often isn't the best way to help the student learn. It won't teach a student to take ownership of their actions or understand why the behavior is problematic or harmful, let alone how to change the behavior going forward.

Restorative approaches offer an alternative strategy for addressing problematic behavior. The aim is to better understand our students, help them become more self-aware, become effective problem-solvers who take responsibility for their actions and work to repair any harm they may have caused. All this, in a supportive environment in which alternative behaviors and possible next steps are explored together.

Here are some suggestions for having a "restorative conversation" with a student who has engaged in problematic behavior or caused harm.

1. Draw on the caring relationship you have with the student.

Restorative interventions work best when you have a relationship to draw on that is based on mutual respect and trust. Building such relationships with students takes time, but it pays off when the going gets tough.

2. Be calm, and help the student be calm.

Before the conversation, you might take a few deep breaths, use positive self-talk, or notice the tension in your body and let go of it, muscle by muscle. Being calm yourself and using a calming tone of voice can help the student calm down in response. Check in with the student about having a conversation. Showing interest and concern can help ease the student into a conversation that might be challenging. Acknowledging a student's feelings can help calm them down; we can "[name it to tame it.](#)"

3. Wait for a moment when you are ready.

You might choose to postpone the conversation to later in the day or week, at a time when you're more mentally prepared and perhaps less rushed. Let the student know that you'd like to have a conversation and plan to come back to what happened, then make sure that you do. This is a teachable moment and a way to strengthen the relationship you have with the student. Before you begin, carefully consider the aim of the conversation.

4. State your aim in having the conversation.

Explain that you want to understand where the student is coming from; understand their point of view on what happened. You want to work with them and support them in problem solving, addressing the conflict, repairing harm if needed, and figuring out possible next steps together.

5. Help the student consider their behavior.

Talk students through what happened and why it might have happened. Ask them to reflect on their actions and the impact of their actions: What were they thinking and/or feeling at the time? What about the other people in the space? What might have been their thoughts and feelings?

6. Ask questions to help the student address the problem.

Once you have a better understanding of what happened and why it might have happened, ask questions about how the student might address the problem or the behavior going forward. What needs to happen to make things right or whole again? What steps can they take? What might get in the way? What supports might they need going forward? Students are more likely to feel in charge of their actions and be invested in next steps if they are able to explore solutions themselves.

7. Support the student in taking the steps they've decided on.

Whether through checking in with the student about how they're doing, reminding them of the behaviors they committed to, or putting other strategies and scaffolds in place, make sure you come through on the supports you agreed on with the student.

SEL Tip: Sharing Appreciations

Build classroom community by making a practice of sharing appreciations.



Developing a practice of sharing appreciations can help build community and shift your classroom climate. It's wonderful to hear someone say something as simple as "I appreciate you," and it can be even more impactful with a little time and practice to share something more specific.

The format can be kept simple, for example:

One thing I appreciate about you is _____.

OR

I appreciate that you _____.

Have students pair up and write an appreciation for each other. Or, have each person pick a name at random* and write an appreciation for that person. Make sure that everyone receives an appreciation (yourself included!).

Give students time to think about what they want to say. Considering these questions might help them along in crafting an appreciation:

- What is something that your classmate does to help the class or other students?
- Why do you enjoy spending time with this person?
- What is a good quality that they have?

These questions might lead to appreciations like:

- One thing I appreciate about you is that you are kind.
- I appreciate that you always have great ideas.
- One thing I appreciate about you is that we have fun together during recess.
- I appreciate that you ask good questions.

**If you're teaching remotely, you can use a website [like this one](#) to draw names from a hat.*

SEL Tip: Be Naturally Assertive

In communicating with students, focus on the behavior you want to see and encourage, not the off-task or disruptive behavior you want to stop.

To be happy and effective in the world, we need ways to express what we want and need, set limits respectfully, and stand up for ourselves and others. Assertiveness allows us to do all this. There are different ways to be assertive (that is, to be strong without being mean). One especially important skill for teachers to master is what we call the “natural assertive message.”

The natural assertive message is a simple, straightforward statement of how you’d like the other person to be or what you want them to do. A teacher may use a natural assertive message to give directions in class: “Take out your notebooks” or “Pick one of the problems on page 35 to work on with our partner.” “Raise your hand to let me know if you have questions” or “When you’re done with the assignment, turn to one of the problems on the board for extra credit.”

A natural assertive message may also be used to redirect a student who is off task or disruptive: “I’d like you to quietly turn to problems 1-5” or “Please return to your seat and get to work.” “I need everyone’s attention so I can talk you through the next steps of this assignment” or “Let’s turn our volume down to a whisper, so that people can hear themselves think.”

Note how the focus in all of these examples is on the behavior we want to see and encourage, not the off-task or disruptive behavior. There is a difference between “Stop talking with your neighbor right this minute” and “Please wrap up your conversation and get back to work.”

Sound them out. Do you sense the difference?

You’re probably able, much of the time, to find positive ways to redirect student behavior. But what about the times when you’ve found yourself focused on the behavior you don’t want to see? Record some of your negative messages in a chart like the one below. Next, think of ways to transform each of these negative messages into positive ones, and record them as well.

Negative focus / comment	Positive focus / comment
"Stop talking to your neighbor."	
"Don't run in the hallway."	
"Quit playing around."	

Focusing on what we don't want often brings with it a level of stress and frustration, which we communicate to our students, affecting instruction. If instead we focus on the behaviors we want to see in our classrooms, we can lower our stress and frustration, so that we're more able to provide instruction in an assertive manner.

The most effective strategy is to teach into the behaviors we want to see from the start of the school year, problem-solve them as needed, and emphasize them over time with students who are on or off task, by either acknowledging or reiterating in a firm, calm and respectful manner, behaviors that are acceptable in the classroom setting.

If this is our approach, our students will come to know the classroom expectations and how to meet them. As a result, we'll be more likely to keep our stress levels and blood pressure down – which means we are more likely to be heard by students who most need our reminders and redirection.

After all, no one likes to be told something in frustration.

SEL Tip: Practice Gratitude as a Form of Self-Care

Gratitude can reduce stress and reshape the brain. Here are two steps for practicing it.

Being an educator is stressful – in fact, it’s one of the most stressful professions in the country. No wonder so many educators are looking for ways to combat our stress, or at least take it down a notch. Research shows that one way to do this is to cultivate gratitude as a nurturing self-care practice. Practicing gratitude on a regular basis has been associated with enhanced optimism, better sleep, fewer physical ailments, and lower levels of anxiety and depression.

Gratitude practice can also reshape the brain. While we used to believe that our brains were fixed in adolescence, in recent years neuroscientists have discovered that we can continue to grow and reshape our brains well into old age.

Say you’re a complainer. You’re always looking for what’s wrong with a person or situation. Not only does this negative outlook impact how you feel, your accompanying thoughts manifest as a neural pathway in the brain. And as you travel down this negative path more and more often, new connections between neurons are created to facilitate this particular thought process. Eventually the pathway may even be insulated, using a process called myelination, which further increases the speed with which these neurons fire together.

But if instead you turn your thoughts to what’s good about a particular moment, a different set of neurons start to fire together. With practice, the connection between them is strengthened and a new neural pathway comes into being. This more traveled path becomes the default as the “what’s bad about the person or situation” path is pruned back, in a process called “synaptic pruning.” Over time, the physical structure of the brain is re-wired.

Here are two practices to prime and re-wire the brain for increasingly more positive thoughts:

1. Focus on gratitude

Try these two steps first thing in the morning – or at any point in the day:

- Think of something you are grateful for. It could be anything, large or small. Consider, for instance, feeling grateful for waking up in a warm bed, having hot water for your morning shower, or having a good cup of coffee to start your day. You might be grateful for having a job, for your family, for supportive colleagues or the students in your class. Whatever it is, direct your mind to go there.
- Consider how it makes you feel. Take a few moments to sit with that feeling before moving on to the rest of your day.

2. Redirect negative thinking

If you find your mind going in a negative or complaining direction, try redirecting your thoughts. Try to recognize what's good about the person or situation you are inclined to complain about. Taking this step can radically change the way you feel in the moment. And if you get into the habit of redirecting our thoughts in this way, you contribute to a different – positive and strengths-based – neural pathway in your brain.

For example:

- You think: *I hate getting up early.*
Search your mind for any positive in the situation, such as: *I love the quiet, first thing in the morning.*
- You think: *The train is late. Again.*
Redirect your thought to: *I'm really enjoying this podcast I've been listening to.*
- You think: *Why does my student have such a bad attitude?*
Try a strengths-based approach: *She made it to school despite the fact that she's obviously having a bad day. Good for her. I so appreciate her commitment to this class.*

Gratitude practice is not just a form of nurturing self-care. Taking charge of our thoughts in this way can shift our feelings in a positive direction and improve our attitude. That improved attitude can lead to a shift in our behavior (perhaps we are more calm or thoughtful) – and *that* can result in improved outcomes in our classrooms. Just imagine those improved outcomes ... and feel your stress levels drop!



SEL Tip

Practice gratitude as a form of self-care

Practicing gratitude on a regular basis has been associated with enhanced optimism, better sleep, fewer physical ailments, and lower levels of anxiety and depression. Here are two practices to prime and re-wire the brain for increasingly more positive thoughts:

Focus on gratitude

1

Try these two steps first thing in the morning – or at any point in the day:

- Think of something (large or small) that you are grateful for: having hot water for your shower or a good cup of coffee. You might be grateful for having a job, for your family, for supportive colleagues or the students in your class. Whatever it is, direct your mind to go there.
- Consider how it makes you feel. Take a few moments to sit with that feeling before moving on to the rest of your day.

Redirect negative thinking

2

If you find your mind going in a negative direction, try redirecting your thoughts to recognize what's good about the person or situation.

- You think: The train is late. Again.
Redirect your thought to: *I'm really enjoying this podcast I've been listening to.*
- You think: Why does my student have such a bad attitude?
Try a strengths-based approach: *She made it to school despite the fact that she's obviously having a bad day. I appreciate her commitment to this class.*



SEL Tip: Strike a Powerful Pose

Using a “power pose” can help young people and adults increase their confidence before anxiety-producing activities. Here's a step by step process to help students develop the practice.

Taking an assertive and expansive stance for even a minute or two can help people feel more capable of taking on a challenge. (Although initial research on the effectiveness of the "power pose" was flawed, current evidence shows that it can be [effective](#).)

Here is a step by step process to help your students develop and practice their own "power pose."



Photo: Power pose by [juhansonin](#)

1. Introduce the power pose.

Share with students that in times of stress, it's especially important to find stress-reduction strategies that will work for you.

Today we'll have a chance to learn and try out one simple strategy that works for many people – especially to reduce anxiety at certain moments (like before a test or a presentation). It's called a “power pose.”

Explain that although using a power pose takes only two minutes, it can be [effective](#) in helping people feel more powerful and capable.

2. Think of your power pose.

Invite students to think of their favorite superhero or heroine. Is it Wonder Woman? Superman? Zena the Princess Warrior?

Think about how they stand. Their bodies are usually held in an open position where they take up more space than we mere humans. Their heads are held high, their legs and feet are apart, and their body position is expanded. Maybe their hands are on their hips or their arms are up in the air in a show of victory or they are even flying.

When a superhero or heroine takes a pose like this, they feel calm, powerful, confident, and not inhibited. They make themselves bigger, not smaller. They do not cross their legs, or arms, or make themselves take up less space. If they are sitting, they do not cross their legs or their ankles or fold their bodies in any way.

Their arms would not be in their laps, for example, but would rest on the arms of the chair so that they are as big as the chair. Many animals puff themselves up in this way, as well. Think of a peacock spreading its feathers.

Once you've found a power pose, you can use it as you see fit. When something anxiety-producing comes up, take a quick timeout to adopt your pose. The feelings of calm, confidence, power, and enthusiasm will follow. Then, dig into the task you've been anxious about.

3. Try it out.

Tell students that now they'll have a few minutes to find their own power pose.

If your class is remote, tell students to turn off their video or find some space in their homes where they can be alone for two minutes (such as the bathroom). They will need a space where they will feel completely free to open up and spread out.

You will set the timer for two minutes. During those two minutes, students should adopt a superhero pose that makes them feel confident, and hold that pose.

If your class is in person, demonstrate a power pose yourself, and have the students try out some poses.

4. Regroup.

Ask students:

- Did you find a pose that works for you? Invite a few volunteers to share their power pose.
- What did it feel like when you were in your power pose?
- When do you think you might benefit from doing this pose?
- Are there certain times when we as a class want to take a 2-minute power pose pause? (For instance, before a test?)

5. Using the Power Pose.

This exercise is recommended for any stressful situation you know you will be facing. It is best to do it as close to the beginning of the stressful event as possible. Some examples of times that it might be useful are below. But feel free to use it whenever you find it helpful.

- Right before taking an exam
- Right before making an oral presentation
- Right before a job interview
- Right before an audition
- Right before a competition

SEL Tip: Pass the Quiet

Read about — and try! — this 'snippet of magic' for younger elementary students.



I'd like to start this SEL Tip with a shout-out to Mr. Holifield, a master teacher who introduced me to this "snippet of magic" many years ago in his pre-K classroom at Atlanta's Dunbar Elementary School.

In the years since, I've found that the activity, which I call Pass the Quiet, has an almost mystical power to thrill Pre-K to 2nd grade students – and get them to center, calm themselves, and focus in a positive and exciting way.

Here's how Mr. Holifield did it:

Sitting on the rug, surrounded by the wiggly, excitable bodies of his pre-K students, he would cup his hands, and, looking as if he was hardly able to contain himself, he'd whisper to his students "I have the quiet." He'd glance into his cupped hands, then look back up at his students, repeating the fact that he had the quiet. His excitement was contagious, yet quiet and contained.

Students, intrigued by what Mr. Holifield was doing, would mostly stop talking and lean in to find out what was happening. He'd ask his students in a very quiet, low, but excited voice if they'd like to get the quiet as well. He used expressive body language and facial expressions to accentuate his words. Captivated by his excitement, his students would inevitably want to hear the quiet for themselves.

I have found this to be true in lower elementary schools across the country, whenever I get ready to pass them the quiet in this way. Students pick up on the quiet excitement and will almost certainly want to be a part of it.

So I put my cupped hands up to my ear and listen intently. You might consider it yourself – nod enthusiastically, confirming that the quiet is in there. Invite students to put their hands out, like a cup. Then pour (yes POUR!) the quiet into the hands of the student sitting next to you. Encourage them to put their hands up to their ear to listen:

Can you hear it? ...

Good ...

Pass it on ...

Point and demonstrate. Use your body language and facial expressions to encourage and maintain the enthusiasm while the quiet moves around the space, from student to student.

At the end, when the quiet is passed back to me, I usually tuck it into my pocket, quite carefully.

After reflecting on the experience with students, I've also given pieces of the quiet to the teacher to put in a safe place in their desk so that it can be taken out and shared as needed.

Students like the idea of being able to come back to the quiet in particularly noisy moments. Some students will even ask for a piece to take home with them. They recognize, as we do, that we need moments of calm and quiet throughout the day to be able show up as our best selves and to do our best work.

This was the case in Molly Heekin's second grade classroom in Woodstock, NY, a few weeks back. For her students, as for so many others, being back in school after the stresses of Covid and other hardships has provoked both excitement and anxiety – feelings that can be hard to contain, especially in the early grades.

SEL Tip: Using Self Talk to Calm Down

Three simple steps to help us calm our brains — and our classrooms.



4Rs lesson in an elementary school classroom

As educators we need to set the tone in our classrooms—we need to serve as the thermostat, not the thermometer. We know that if we ride the waves of emotion our students bring into our classroom, we’re likely to make the highs higher and the lows lower, creating an emotional rollercoaster ride for all.

But being the thermostat isn’t easy, especially when we get triggered ourselves, whether by a group of rowdy students who refuse to settle down, by one particularly disrespectful student who knows exactly what buttons to push, or by a colleague we think is being unreasonable.

It’s in situations like these that it is especially important to have a practice that can help us to maintain our calm. We want to be able to counteract the body’s natural response to [fight, flee or freeze](#), when the reptilian part of our brain believes our survival is at stake. There are a number of strategies we can use to reclaim control, regulate our emotions, and make fitting decisions in the moment.

A good first step is [deep breathing](#). Taking some deep abdominal breaths can help our brain to calm down and relax. As the supply of oxygen to the brain is increased, the [parasympathetic nervous system](#) returns the body to a state of calm, by bringing our blood pressure and heart rate back down.

A second, complementary strategy is [self-talk](#), which enables us to soothe and calm the anxious parts of the brain. This requires us, first, to recognize that we have a voice inside our heads that can either calm us down, or add fuel to a situation, further escalating our emotions. Once we're aware of this internal voice, we can direct it in some or all of the following ways:

1. Generic self-talk. The fight, flight, or freeze stress response is triggered when the reptilian part of our brain (the limbic system) believes our survival is at stake. Affirming that we are safe and that we are capable of handling the situation can help counteract the stress response and reengage cortex. We might tell ourselves:

- "I am good."
- "I am safe."
- "I've got this."

2. Acknowledging our feelings. We know that acknowledging feelings helps soothe the agitated parts of the brain. Neuropsychologist Dan Siegel calls this "[naming to tame it](#)." Acknowledging our feelings can reengage the cortex in a particularly stressful moment and open up choices of how to respond after a situation in which we "flipped our lid." Self-talk examples are:

- "Wow, I feel really anxious."
- "I feel annoyed" or "I feel frustrated."
- "I'm feeling [x-emotion] because [y-event] happened."

3. Reframing the narrative in our head. Instead of engaging in thoughts that add fuel to an already stressful situation, we want to pivot away from negative thoughts and instead reframe things in the positive. For instance, we might add fuel to a situation by thinking:

- "He's such a jerk!"
- "They always do that!"
- "I can't believe they did it again!"

Instead, we might move to calming thoughts such as:

- “Maybe they didn’t mean it.”
- “This probably isn’t about me, they seem to be having a bad day.”
- “They don’t appear to have the skills yet, to _____.”

By maintaining *our* calm in stressful, triggering situations, we educators can set a positive tone in the classroom, send a comforting message to our students, and maintain full access to the problem-solving part of our brain so that we can make appropriate choices in the moment.



SEL Tip

Using Self-Talk to Calm Down

Use generic self-talk to affirm that you are safe & capable.

1

The fight, flight, or freeze stress response is triggered when the reptilian part of our brain (the limbic system) believes our survival is at stake.

“I am good.”
“I am safe.”
“I can handle this.”

Acknowledge your feelings to soothe agitated parts of the brain.

2

Reengage the cortex in a particularly stressful moment & open up choices of how to respond.

“Wow, I feel frustrated.”
“I feel annoyed.” Or “I feel nervous.”
“I’m feeling [x-emotion] because [y-event] happened.”

Reframe the narrative in your head

3

Instead of engaging in thoughts that add fuel to an already stressful situation, we want to pivot & reframe things in the positive.

“They’re such a jerk!” ⇨ “Maybe they didn’t mean it.”
“They always do that!” ⇨ “Maybe this isn’t about me.”
“I can’t believe they did it again!” ⇨ “Maybe they don’t yet have the skills to ____.”

SEL Tip: Two Quick Techniques for Calming Down

These practices can help both young people and adults stay grounded when anxiety arises.

It can be helpful for us, and for our students, to learn simple practices we can use to calm ourselves when we are feeling tense or anxious.

The activities described below, 5-Sense Memory and 2:1 Breathing, both activate the body's parasympathetic nervous system, which decreases heart rate, blood pressure, and muscular tension, preparing the body for rest, sleep, or digestion.

Consider doing these two activities together, in either order.



5-Sense Memory

This is a good technique for grounding yourself during moments of anxiety.

Keep your eyes open and go through this process whenever needed, in whatever space you're in.

Sit comfortably with your feet on the floor, your hands on your legs, your spine comfortably straight. Close your eyes if you can. Otherwise, focus on a spot in front of you. Take a deep breath and let it out slowly. Repeat.

Imagine one of your favorite places from any part of your life. As you remember it, start to walk toward it in your mind.

As you walk into it, find...

- 5 things that you can see
- 4 things you can touch
- 3 things you can hear
- 2 things you can smell
- 1 thing you can taste

Acknowledge and take in all of the positive feelings this place holds for you.

Know that it is forever with you and you can come back here anytime you want to.

As you back away from this memory, take the gifts of this memory with you to help and sustain you today.

2:1 Breathing

2:1 breathing is simply exhaling for twice as long as one inhales. For example if you inhale on a count of 3, you would exhale for a count of 6. If you inhale for 4, exhale for 8, etc.

- Sit in a comfortable position with your feet flat on the floor, spine comfortably straight. Hands can be in your lap or resting gently on your belly. You can close your eyes or not. If your eyes are open, try to focus on a point in front of you.

- To begin, take a couple of deep gentle abdominal breaths. Don't worry about what the count is at this point. The objective is to just calm the breath.
- Now, take a deep gentle abdominal breath in for 3 seconds. Hold it for a count of 1. Then release it for a count of 6. Hold for a count of 1 and then repeat for at least 3 breaths. Do the counting in your mind and let the numbers flow softly and easily.
- To help extend the exhale, make sure to use your abdominal muscles to gently push out all of the air. Your shoulders should not be helping you breathe. They move as a consequence of being on top of your abdomen, not to help you draw in a breath.
- As you exhale, let the tension in your body leave with your breath. Let it drain down from your head, your shoulders, your hands, your legs, your feet.
- As you inhale, bring in calm, peaceful energy.

Variations

If this activity follows the 5-Sense Memory, breathe in the positive feelings from that memory.

As you inhale, you can breathe in your intent for the rest of the day, and let it fill you. Each breath in of your intent will fill you further. Fill your arms, your legs, your hands, feet, neck, and face.

When doing the activity with a group of people, model the technique, then tell participants that you'll be doing the activity for a certain range of breaths (perhaps 3-4) - and ask them to find their own rhythm.

SEL Tip: Working with Students' Excess Energy (Spring Fever)

During the last few weeks of school, we and our students often struggle to stay focused. And yet there is still work to be done. Try these steps to keep students engaged (and yourself sane) as summer approaches.

Summer is just around the corner. Testing season is wrapping up and we're in the home stretch. With just a few weeks left, many of us are exhausted, low on energy and patience. And yet there is still work to be done.

At the same time, student restlessness is increasing. It's a perfect storm as young people infected with spring fever may once more start testing behavioral limits, the way they did the first weeks of school.



Here are some strategies for channeling students' energy - and rallying our own:

Challenge students to do independent work on topics that draw on their personal interests. With spring energy levels boosted, due to longer days and more exposure to sunlight, students tend to be more curious and motivated. Consider having students choose the topic they want to research, sparking their natural instincts to explore and stretch themselves.

Introduce special classroom projects that are hands-on, collaborative, out of the box and fun. Break out the art supplies and encourage creativity. But make sure to hold on to classroom routines and structures, which students need. Too much change and upheaval can feed their spring fever and make them a bit too goofy.

Revisit [classroom norms](#) throughout the year to encourage the practice of reflection. This will prove useful when students struggle with end-of-year changes and transitions.

When you notice student behavior is off, make time to explore what's going on. Ask them:

- What norms have we been doing well with/gotten better at?
- What norms have been hard to follow? Why?
- What is getting in the way?
- Did anything change? What? What is the impact?
- How can we work together to maintain a positive classroom community?

Be mindful around norms when schedules change because of speakers, field trips, town halls, celebrations and other special end-of-year projects or events. For students who struggle with change, reminders are useful, but exploration, interactive modeling, and role-playing ahead of time can help develop actual behaviors and the understanding of why norms are important.

Give students time and tools to reflect on their school year. Consider doing this through a writing exercise, a [restorative circle](#) or [two](#), a collage, (spoken word) poetry, skits, a multimedia or other kind of art project that students can share with each other.

Questions to consider for these projects include:

- What stood out for you about the year?
- What did you learn?
- What did you struggle with?
- How did you overcome your challenges?
- What made you proud?
- What, given a chance, might you have done differently?
- How did you change/grow?
- What are you taking into next year with you?
- What questions do you have about next year? Concerns?
- What advice do you have for students entering your grade next year?

Consider scaffolding the activity by a) sharing your own reflections on the year, as you model the activity, or b) inviting students in pair shares or microlabs to share their reflections on the year, before turning to their own reflection project in whatever format makes sense.

And when all else fails, take a deep breath and remember: The end of the year is in sight!

SEL Tip: Reducing Stress at Testing Time

These strategies, from bringing plants into the classroom to mindful breathing, can help us and our students cope with the pressures of testing season.

As May and June roll around, we educators are in the homestretch. Summer is just around the corner. And yet it's also testing season, which doesn't allow us to unwind, just yet.

The pressure is on, and stress is everywhere. Not just the moderate amounts of stress that can push our students to be more focused, pay attention, and perform better, but also the overwhelming and debilitating stress provoked by high stakes testing in particular. And we know stress is contagious. What's more, many educators have their own worries about test results and are already running on empty at this time of year. It's an unhealthy mix.

The following strategies may help both you and your students unwind and boost your batteries to make it through the end of the year intact.

Create a calming environment

- Let in light and air. Open the shades and flood your classroom with light. Consider cracking open those windows to let in some fresh air as well.
- Get some greenery. Consider bringing fresh flowers or a plant into your classroom. [According to studies](#), greenery can reduce fatigue, stress, anxiety, and promote well-being, performance and improve memory retention. In addition, caring for a plant can be a perfect project for a student who seems disconnected or detached. It can teach responsibility and gives students an added incentive to come to class.

Take care of yourself

- Go out and take a stroll: Being outdoors, especially in green areas, can help reduce stress and increase overall well-being. And physical activity has been shown to produce endorphins, natural painkillers that can also improve sleep, reduce stress, and improve our focus, thinking, and memory.

- Eat well: Faculty rooms at this time of year can be full of donuts, cookies, pizza and other unhealthy “comfort” foods left over from school events. These foods can make us feel lethargic. Snacking on fruits and vegetables can reenergize us instead.
- **Don’t forget to breathe!** Take a beat, take a few deep breaths, especially as you walk into a stressful space or situation. Deep breathing can counteract the body’s stress response. Regular breath breaks are a helpful response to the many stressors at school.

Practice mindfulness

Consider practicing mindful awareness with your students throughout the year, so that you have a buffer when testing and other stressful times come around. Mindfulness is the ability to be fully present in the moment. Research shows that a regular mindful practice can trigger hormones that relieve stress and anxiety, while improving our mood, self-awareness, mental concentration, and emotional self-regulation. A few minutes of mindful breathing meditation (or practices such as yoga and tai chi), several times a week, can make a noticeable difference, especially during stressful times.

Try positive affirmations

As we slow down, breathe deeply, relax, and become more aware of our thoughts and feelings, we can also learn to take charge of our thoughts in ways that can help us improve our performance. Research tell us that our thoughts are as real to the brain as what’s happening in our outer lives. This is one reason why positive affirmations can be so effective. Affirmations work best when you:

- use the present tense and the first person (as in, “I am calm now”)
- frame them in the positive (instead of “I’m not going to fail this time,” try “I’ve got this”)
- speak them as if they are fact and truth (no mights, shoulds, or coulds)
- repeat them confidently to yourself multiple times a day, especially before going to sleep or right before a test

You can reinforce positive affirmations with physical touch. Tap the back of your hand, gently caress your arm or apply pressure to your temples as you state your affirmation. Consider positive affirmations that have four syllables (e.g. “I can do this,” “I am ready,” “I am calm now,” etc.) so that you can squeeze your thumb and fingers together one syllable at a time, from your index finger, through your pinky, several times over.

Foster positive interactions

Finally, we can help reduce stress by engaging in positive interactions and encouraging them between students. Experts recommend a ratio of five positive interactions to counteract each negative interaction, because **negative emotions** tend to involve more thinking than positive emotions, and invite rumination. Making an intentional effort to connect with colleagues and students in positive ways can help us better handle this stressful time in the school year.

And if this list of strategies for reducing stress is stressing you out, pick just one idea that you feel drawn to and commit to practicing it in the weeks ahead. See how it makes you feel.



SEL Tip

Reducing Stress at Testing Time

The following strategies may help both you and your students unwind and boost your batteries to make it through the end of the year intact.

Create a calming environment

- ✦ Let in light and fresh air.
- ✦ Consider bringing fresh flowers or a plant into your classroom. According to studies, greenery can reduce fatigue, stress, anxiety, and promote well-being, performance and improve memory retention.

Take care of yourself

- ✦ Go out and take a stroll: Physical activity has been shown to produce endorphins, natural painkillers that can also improve sleep, reduce stress, and improve our focus, thinking, and memory.
- ✦ Eat well: Snacking on fruits and vegetables can reenergize us.
- ✦ Don't forget to breathe! Regular breath breaks are a helpful response to the many stressors at school.

Practice mindfulness

Mindfulness is the ability to be fully present in the moment. Research shows that a regular mindful practice can trigger hormones that relieve stress and anxiety, while improving our mood, self-awareness, mental concentration, and emotional self-regulation.

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Foster positive interactions

Making an intentional effort to connect with colleagues and students in positive ways can help us better handle this stressful time in the school year.



<https://www.morningsidecenter.org/teachable-moment/lessons/sel-tip-reducing-stress-testing-time>

SEL Tip: Managing Worries about Transition

For many students, the close of the school year comes with anxiety about the transitions ahead. Try these strategies to help you and your students address those anxieties in a positive way.

No matter how welcoming and positive a classroom community you've established over the course of the year, students may struggle with the thought of the school year coming to an end. They may feel discomfort or stress about the unknowns of the year to come—from new teachers and classmates to new content or schedules, a new school, new friends, or even a post-school environment, if students are graduating from high school. Change is hard, especially for students who struggle socially and emotionally.

For some of our students, the thought of summer itself can be distressing in that summer may lack the structure, routines, and safety provided by school. Daily access to friends, food, and supportive, caring adults may not be available to some of our students over the summer months.

For all these reasons, students may act out and struggle to be present and learn during these last weeks of school. Being aware of student worries can help us be intentional about how we wrap up the school year, acknowledging that our students may have a lot on their minds.

Be proactive:

- Revisit classroom norms on a regular basis throughout the school year. When you notice students struggle with your classroom norms, make time to explore what's going on. What norms are hard to follow? Why? What's getting in the way? Did anything change? How can we work together to maintain a positive classroom community?
- Try mindful awareness practice. Mindfulness works best when it's been practiced throughout the year, so that it can function as an anchor and buffer when tough times arise. Research shows that a regular mindful practice can trigger hormones that relieve stress and anxiety, while improving our mood, self-awareness, mental concentration, and emotional self-regulation. A few minutes

several times a week can make a world of difference, especially when stressful times arise.

Pave the Way for Transitions:

- Practice gratitude. Invite students to make cards or write thank you notes to some of the people who've made a difference in their school year. This practice is beneficial for those receiving the gratitude as well as for those giving it. Regular gratitude practice is known to rewire the brain, impacting our outlook and mood in positive ways.
- Look ahead. Engage your students in discussions around what next year may bring: the possibilities and hopes of a new grade, school or life as well as the concerns or fears that may bring. Consider sharing of yourself to set the stage.
- Acknowledge students' feelings, no matter what they are. Feelings are real, we can't undo them, but we can acknowledge them, and in naming them, we can tame them.
- Address obstacles. As students think ahead to the summer/next year, invite them to consider the obstacles they may face. Then problem solve together how they might face their struggles and, where possible, overcome their obstacles.
- Consider supports. Have students think about where they draw their strength from—external support systems as well as internal wells. Have them reflect on and possibly share out the times they overcame challenges or hardship. What supports did they draw on? What other supports do they have in their lives? How might they build a stronger system of support? Who might they reach out to? How?
- Help others. Ask students to write letters of support to the students moving into their grade. Encourage them to think back to the start of the school year. What would be useful tips and information for younger students moving into the grade?

Reconnect with community:

- Connect with students. Check in with your students, not just over academics but find out how they're doing overall. Connections are the foundation of any learning community. For students who are struggling, a quick check in and acknowledgement of where they're at can help. If you have time, follow up and invite them to talk later about what might be bothering them. You don't have to be a therapist to provide the healing power of good listening and connection.
- Connect with colleagues. When we feel tired or overwhelmed ourselves, it's easy to close our doors and retreat into our own classrooms, when the opposite might provide the recharge we need. Connecting to the community at large, or just with a colleague you trust, can help us get through the day or week. Maybe plan to have lunch together one day this week, or bring in an extra cup of coffee that you can share before school starts.

We, like our students, can benefit from strategies ranging from relaxation techniques and gratitude practice, to connecting with and helping others. By supporting each other, we can make a smoother transition into summer and the new year.

SEL Tip for the Holidays: Handle Feelings by 'Naming to Tame Them'

The holidays can be a stressful time. Here are some simple steps to help us and our students handle heightened emotions - now or any time.



December can be a month of heightened emotions and stress. This is as true for us as educators as it is for the young people in our care. Sometimes these feelings are joyous, cheerful, and upbeat—feelings the media promotes with images of happy families coming together for the holidays, sharing festive meals, gifts, and good times. There is excitement mixed in for some of our students, and that can sometimes bubble over.

But we all know that the holidays can also bring up feelings of anxiety, grief, and loneliness. Many families are worried about finances, about keeping a roof over their head and food on the table, let alone partaking in the holiday shopping frenzy. These feelings can create stress that young people pick up on and absorb. Young people may even feel a sense of responsibility and worry about the family finances themselves.

Spending additional time with erratic or dysfunctional families over the holidays can also be stress-inducing. And for those whose family members are absent, or no longer with us, loneliness and depression may set in. It doesn't help that these upsetting emotions are coming at a time when people are expected to be festive and jolly.

For all these reasons and more, we and our students may be more easily triggered during this period. When that happens, the “fight, flight or freeze” stress response kicks in and we risk “flipping our lids.”

Here are some simple steps you and your students can take to cope with these heightened emotions:

- **Step 1:** Make sure you yourself are calm before you help your students. Use techniques that have worked for you in the past, like deep breathing, self-talk, or acknowledging how you are feeling in the moment, e.g. “I feel annoyed” or “I feel worried” or “I feel upset.” You can say it inside your head, or quietly under your breath. And if you want it to be a teachable moment, you can say it out loud, modeling for your students how self-talk helps you calm down. Note how saying “I feel annoyed” is different from saying “I am annoyed.” By recognizing this as a feeling, not as a quality that is part of our identity, we acknowledge that the feeling is temporary and that we can move beyond it.
- **Step 2:** Connect with the young person who is being triggered. Meet them at their level, literally, without crowding their space. This might mean crouching down to be face to face with them. Try to connect by calmly and quietly using their name, and perhaps putting your hand on their shoulder or arm. This can help the student’s system stabilize because they no longer feel alone.
- **Step 3:** Next, recognize the feeling that the student seems to have, and name it, e.g. “You look like you’re feeling frustrated” or “It sounds like you are feeling angry” (or “sad” or “nervous”). Whatever the feeling may be, “name it to tame it.”

As neuropsychologist Dan Siegel explains, naming our feelings – or having a supportive person name them for us – sends soothing neurotransmitters to the lower, more primal part of the brain that is designed to trigger our stress response. Calming down this more agitated part of the brain allows us instead to have access to the more recently developed upper parts of the brain that are involved in processing and synthesizing complex information. It is this part of the brain that supports our amazing capacity to learn, focus, make good decisions, moderate our social behavior, and even feel empathy. It can also help us think pro-actively about the holidays; what we might do and who we might reach out to when the going gets tough.