This Fleeting Moment

A Stoic Teacher's Handbook

Strategies from Stoicism, Mindfulness and Philosophy

to Promote Calm, Resilience, and Intellectual Exploration in the Classroom

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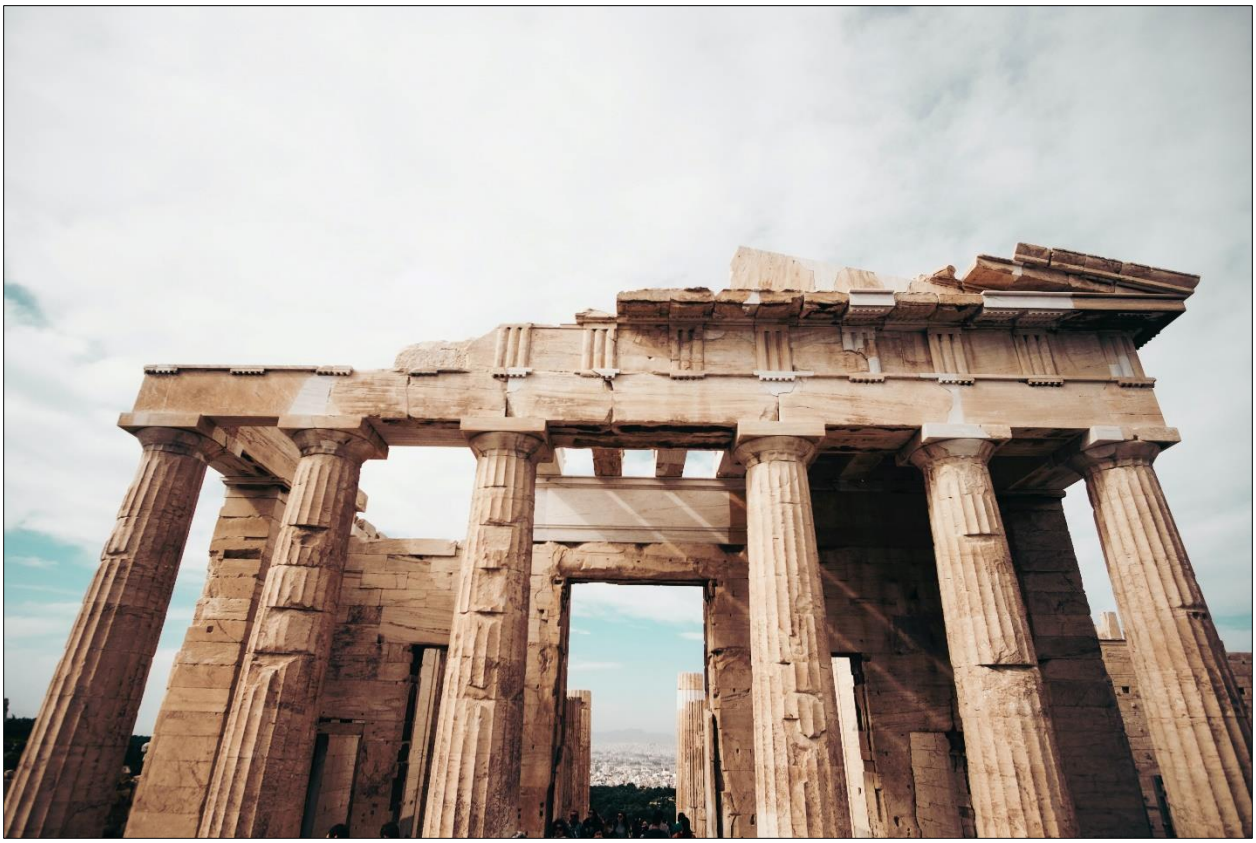


Introduction: Wisdom from Ancient Sources

When I began my teaching career over 30 years ago, I had few tools to cope with the enormous challenges ahead of me: difficult student behaviors, limited budgets, crowded classrooms, a lack of curriculum, to name just a few. I sometimes thought, *Can I really do this?*

Slowly over time, I gathered helpful tools and ideas and integrated those into my classroom and into my personal life. Early on the Stoics spoke to me through the writings of Marcus Aurelius and his *Meditations*. I learned mindfulness from a gentle Zen teacher. I pored over books from the great wisdom traditions, as well as from modern psychologists. I traveled the country to learn stress-reduction techniques for teachers. I consulted with experts in mental health and had endless conversations with my wife and colleagues. It was a long and transformative journey.

In this handbook, I'll share many of the practices I learned over the years. I'll also share some new ones I've created. They range from short mindfulness techniques to full blown lessons from philosophy and Stoic psychology, as well as tips on self-care for teachers. I conclude with a list of resources that you may find helpful in continuing your own journey.

I hope you'll find this handbook both enjoyable and useful. Teaching is hard—you need all the tools you can get!

Wisdom from ancient sources

The ancient traditions of Stoicism and mindfulness have both offered specific ways to help foster self-awareness and self-discipline, as well as paths to reduce stress and strengthen good behavior.

There are many wonderful mindfulness curriculums available for the classroom, but fewer based on Stoic principles. Hopefully this is changing. Stoicism—and its offspring *cognitive-behavioral therapy* (CBT)—has powerful tools to make our lives better.

Mindfulness, as it is presented in education and healthcare, is largely focused on stress-reduction and the management of attention and emotion. Stoicism (and I include CBT under this broad heading) also focuses on emotional control, but with more emphasis on the thoughts and beliefs we have about the world, and the way these *mediate* our experience. (Buddhism also offers cognitive strategies, but they are taught less in secular contexts.)

Both traditions stress the importance of being *present in the moment*. Common sense and observation tell us that we are often distracted and not fully focused on what we are doing. Think of the times you've been driving and suddenly realized you weren't fully aware for the last 15 minutes, or longer! In fact, a famous study conducted by Matthew A. Killingsworth showed that peoples' minds are off task nearly 50% of the time. And whereas mindfulness approaches emphasize a variety of postures and "techniques" for establishing focus, the Stoics spoke about a more general *intention* to be aware at all times.

While each tradition is powerful in its own right, more and more people—including teachers—are incorporating ideas from each into their classroom practice. We live in an exciting time when so many of these teachings are available at the press of a button!

What is Stoicism?

The Stoics were philosophers from ancient Greece and Rome who emphasized the cultivation of reason and good character (virtue or *arete* in Greek). The Stoic school began about 300 BC, with the Greek merchant Zeno and his famous shipwreck. (The original Stoics were called *Zenonians*). They looked to the philosopher Socrates, with his intensive search for knowledge and virtue, as their role model.

The Stoic philosophers best known today are Epictetus (a slave turned teacher), Marcus Aurelius (a Roman emperor), and Seneca (a writer, tutor, and statesman). Stoic philosophers are not considered "gods", but men and women who share insights with others on how to live a good life—a life of virtue, service, and peace. Stoic teachings and writings are not considered infallible. Practitioners are encouraged to test out the teachings in their own lives, and modify or adapt them as needed.

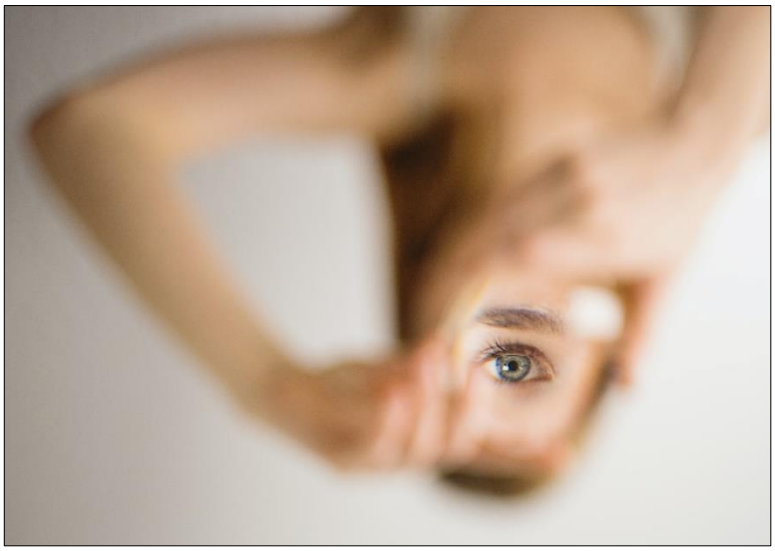
Stoicism for moderns?

We know Stoicism was popular in ancient times, but what about for the modern world, especially *teachers*? While some Stoic teachings seem time-bound and irrelevant now, others are still very helpful. In fact, they've been adapted and modified by the world of psychotherapy.

In the 1950s, Albert Ellis was a psychologist who was dissatisfied with the current approach to treating his patients. He was a life-long student of ancient philosophies and incorporated some of their core principles into the new approach that he advocated for the rest of his life, called REBT (rational-emotive behavior therapy). Many others followed his lead and developed the more general approach called CBT (cognitive-behavioral therapy).

Both of these new schools emphasized the power of our thoughts and beliefs to mediate our experience. In other words, we *filter* our experience, coloring it with our *judgements* (to use a more Stoic word). By becoming aware of those judgements, we can change them to improve our lives. They also taught a more *present-oriented* approach, unlike the previous focus of psychoanalysis, which encouraged patients to spend many hours digging into childhood sources of trauma.

What is mindfulness?



Simply put, mindfulness means awareness. If we are conscious of something, we can be said to be "mindful" of it. If I'm grocery shopping at the store and paying attention to what's happening around me, I'm being "mindful." If, however, I'm chatting on my phone and unaware of what's happening, I'm *not* being mindful. I could bump into someone, or smack my cart into something (which I have done). And I may also be forgetting my primary job: to get my groceries and return home safely.

In the modern, more technical usage of the word, popularized by the scientist Jon Kabat-Zinn, mindfulness is a "non-judgmental" awareness of the present moment. Another meaning of mindfulness (from the ancient Pali world, *Sati*), is *remembering*. We are mindful if we remember what we're supposed to be doing in each moment, and where our focus is supposed to be. And if we remember our values, our goals and aspirations, we can also be said to be "mindful."

And although most spiritual traditions have some kind of contemplative practices, the mindfulness that many practice today derives from the *Vipassana* (Buddhist) tradition of Asia. More on mindfulness in a bit.

The Stoics used the word *prosoche*, which is usually translated today as "attention." Chris Fisher of *Traditional Stoicism* defines it as "attention to oneself." The philosopher Epictetus had a lot to say about attention, although he doesn't have formal techniques or postures to recommend, like the Buddhists did. It was a more general admonition to pay attention to our life, especially our impulses, thoughts, and actions. "Pay careful attention, then, to your impressions [inner and outer sensations, thoughts]; watch over them unceasingly" (Discourses, 4.3.7). When teachers tell students to *watch themselves*, or *pay attention*, it is this kind of self-remembering that they mean.

Facets of modern mindfulness

The term *mindfulness* as it is used today has many facets. Here are some:

- Awareness, curiosity.
- Observing something closely *before* judgment or assessment arises.
- Being anchored in the present moment, versus lost in thoughts of past or future.
- Awareness of our "inside" experience, as well as the outside world.
- Partnered with an attitude of kindness and compassion.
- A universal, innate capacity all humans have, regardless of one's religious or philosophical orientation.
- *Remembering*. For example, remembering what we are doing, or where we are right now, what tasks have to be done, or what our values are. Or remembering what is appropriate for each moment.
- *Direct experience* rather than a theory or belief system.

Religious or secular?

If you're teaching in *public* education, you need to remember the separation of religion and state, and that teaching expressly religious ideas is forbidden. Of course, both the Stoic and mindfulness/ Buddhist traditions have "metaphysical" elements (ideas which are beyond observation or scientific proof) like *Karma* or the *Logos*, not to mention *God* (or *gods*). It is the job of educators to stay away from those terms in the classroom, or translate them into more scientific or common sense terms. (Unless you're teaching them in a disinterested fashion, as in a history or philosophy unit).

For example, in my classroom I shared mindfulness practices for over a decade. I never used the word *meditation*. I spoke of *attention*, *focus*, or just *being aware* of what is happening. The word meditation is loaded with religious baggage, and best avoided by anyone in a public school setting. Using the language of psychology, or *emotional intelligence* (EI) is a great way to go instead. I'd also avoid gestures or activities that go with meditation, like hand mudras or chanting, or even a bell that has a strong cultural appearance. I did use a simple bell (*Woodstock Zenergy* bell) to end mindfulness sessions, but it was not a "singing bowl" as they are used in many Buddhist settings. Some mindfulness programs have faced challenges for their curriculums, (although rare), so give this careful thought. Of course, if you're working in a private school, this may not be an issue.

No one has to be a card-carrying "Stoic" or "Buddhist" to share these practices or ideas. And no matter what your personal outlook is, *Easy does* it when sharing with students. All ideas should be subject to rational scrutiny or evidence—even if it's just the evidence of personal experience. The ultimate question when working with students is, "Does it work for you?"

What Stoicism can bring to mindfulness

Both traditions emphasize paying attention to our thoughts and actions, as well as living in the present. But mindfulness—in the secular world of today—focuses largely on reducing stress and improving focus. Most activities are sensory-based, such as mindfulness of breathing, mindfulness of the body, or awareness of other sense information like hearing or vision.

But mindfulness in the East was part of an overall training called the "Eightfold path." The other parts of the path had to do with intention, action, and our view of the world (called "right thought"). These elements are usually left out of mindfulness the way it is practiced in the classroom, although there are other character education programs that do highlight more cognitive elements.

Stoicism (and CBT) can bring more focus to the *views* or *lenses* with which we view the world. CBT teaches about "cognitive distortions," or those ways in which our thinking styles can create difficulty for us and get in the way of our achieving our goals. Stoicism offers a number of other cognitive practices, some of which we will touch on in the Stoic lessons.

Of course, no sketch here can be complete. There are mindfulness teachers who use cognitive (mental) techniques, and there are modern Stoics who meditate. But in general, the two paths can complement each other, and make a *character* education program much stronger and more complete.

Morris Sekiyo Sullivan is a Buddhist who specializes in teaching meditation and REBT (a type of CBT) techniques to prison inmates. He writes, "If you look closely, you find that mindfulness and rationality go hand-in-hand. In fact, they're not only complementary—each is almost useless without the other" (from an article in *Psychology Today*).

Awareness and our mind

Essentially awareness is just awareness. We don't need to add any modifiers to it (e.g., *Buddhist* mindfulness). It isn't owned by any system of thought, even though those systems can wrap a helpful framework around the practices.

Awareness is a capacity of the mind, which is under the direction of our will (what brain scientists call *executive function).* I can *choose* to look at my dog or at the latest notification from my phone. And this *function* (guiding our attention) is correlated with a *place* called the *prefrontal cortex* (the part of the brain right behind our forehead).

Stoics talk about taking care of this "ruling faculty" (in Greek *hegemonikon)*, the part of our mind that *guides* our actions. *Good choices, good life*, so to speak. When teachers and parents say *make good choices*, they are referring to this function of our minds. A goal of both Stoic and mindfulness practice (and teaching) is to strengthen this *executive* part of our mind. (More about this in section 3.)

Stoic philosophy

Stoic philosophy is rich and complex, but the following list contains some of its core ideas, many of which could be translated into classroom activities and be a good framework for mindful practice:

- Things are impermanent, including ourselves, our thoughts and feelings.
- We are all connected, through biological systems and social relationships.
- We are small parts of the cosmos, and yet still important.
- All humans have the potential to become more rational or reasonable.
- Since we are all connected, we should cultivate kindness towards others—and to ourselves.
- We need to strengthen our faculty of choice, our *hegemonikon* (or our executive function).
- We need to distinguish between things we can control and things we can't, or at least focus on areas where we have some control.
- We all have difficulties, so cultivate compassion for self and others.

Many of these ideas are similar to ones found in the Buddhist tradition. And none of them have to be considered "religious." They can all be presented in everyday language or the language of science. And this list is certainly not exhaustive.

Mindfulness Strategies

Why mindfulness?

Teaching is tough.

A 2021 study from the Rand Corporation found that one out of four teachers were thinking of quitting by the end of the school year. Students also feel stress, with busy family schedules, academic demands, and the pressures of social media. More educators are turning to mindfulness for help.

Mindfulness provides strategies for working with attention, thoughts, and emotions, all factors that can enhance or interfere with success in school.

Attention. According to Lidia Zylowska, MD, "Mindfulness involves both focusing and monitoring our attention" (Zylowska, 2012). In a world that offers a dizzying array of distractions, both real and virtual, this aspect of mindfulness is fundamental.

Emotions. Mindfulness is also being seen as a key component of *Emotional Intelligence* (EI). The field of Emotional Intelligence (sometimes abbreviated as EQ, or emotional quotient) has grown over the last two decades, and educators and researchers are studying how EI impacts student success. EI is traditionally broken into five components: *self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skills*. Howard Gardener, in his theory of multiple intelligences, speaks about *intrapersonal* intelligence (knowing oneself), and *interpersonal* intelligence (between people), skills essential for thriving in today's complex world.

How specifically does mindfulness support EI?

Mindfulness helps us become aware of thoughts and feelings as they are happening, in the present. It also shows us where our attention is and gives us options as to the placement of our attention.

It provides perspective. We can step out of "reactivity" mode, and just watch events—both internal and external—thereby loosening their power.

Mindfulness fosters an attitude of patience, kindness, and self-acceptance.

Evidence from the American Psychological Association has shown that mindfulness can help with:

- Reduction in stress, anxiety, and depression
- Greater focus
- Reducing rumination (worry)
- Improvement in working memory
- Increased cognitive flexibility
- Less emotional reactivity
- Improved relationships

IQ alone is not enough; EQ also matters. In fact, psychologists generally agree that among the ingredients for success, IQ counts for roughly 10% (at best 25%); the rest depends on everything else—including EQ.

Steve Bressert

Daily mindfulness or "brain break"

My school incorporated a daily mindfulness break around mid-day. Teachers were given several options depending on their experience and comfort levels, from very simple to more elaborate. Students were given options like reading quietly, sketching, following the mindfulness activity, or just relaxing quietly. We often called this our "brain break" time, and it lasted about 5 minutes.

Some schools that incorporate a brain break into their day follow a formal practice or curriculum. There are many good ones available, like **Calm Classroom**, or **Mindful Schools**. Or you can make up your own.

Start slowly

Start small. Easy does it. This type of inward reflection may be new to children and feel awkward at first. You may want to keep your break short and simple, until you are more comfortable with your own practice. If you have a student (or students) with mental health issues or a history of trauma, go slowly. You can check with a counselor too.

Participation

Students who don't wish to participate are asked to be silent and allow others to do so. If a student continues to disrupt, consequences may ensue like any other classroom situation. Start with a discussion with the student first, if possible. Try to focus on the benefit of the practices for them, as well as the group. But the default expectation is silence. Occasionally I allowed a student to relax in the hall outside the room if they could not calm themselves in the context of the whole group.

Eight informal practices

Mindfulness doesn't have to be a formal practice, done in a certain posture. It can be done anytime, for as little as a few seconds. The key is to check in with the present moment and interrupt the "chatter," both external and internal. Some of my colleagues incorporated brief moments of mindfulness into their regular classes, in addition to their formal brain break.

Short practices, if done with focus and intention, can be quite powerful. Often, however, students won't do them perfectly, and that's OK. That's when I would remember I can only control *myself*, and I would focus on my own attitude and practice—thereby also modeling attention and self-control. (I was also refusing to be drawn into lots of petty behavior). These short breaks were usually refreshing and important for me too. Here are eight to try:

1. **Three slow deep breaths.** The root of the word *conspiracy* is to *breathe together*. Take three breaths with your group. Really focus during that time. Pause for a beat or two before moving on.
2. **Enjoy some silence**. Just pause. You could have students rest their heads on their tables without talking or just be still for a minute or more. Notice how the tone of the room changes.
3. **See a color.** Pick a color and have students silently look around the room to see all instances of that color (about a minute). Then, one at a time, have them share where they see that color. For example, if you are looking for red, they might see a book on the shelf, a fire extinguisher, a post-it note on the wall, etc. The mind will often see what it is primed to see. I was always amazed how enthusiastic my kids were for this "I spy" type activity.
4. **Humor!** Tell a joke or riddle to lighten the mood. Humor gives kids a different way to look at things, and can be a quick way to "change the channel" of the classroom tone. I had a corny joke book on my desk which I dipped into at times.
5. **Soles of the feet.** Have students take a breath and move their attention to the bottoms of their feet. Can they *feel* the sensations there? How about their toes? They might notice textures from their socks or shoes. Then switch to their feet as a whole or even their lower legs. When attention wanders, emphasize that it's perfectly OK (that's what minds do), and just come back to their focal point.
6. **Move.** Movement can be a great way to change the mood, especially when energy is waning after lunch. Some simple stretches or even walking meditation can energize students. Some of my colleagues led simple yoga stretches during brain break time. You can just call it *mindful movement* or *stretch time* too.
7. **Use a chime or bell**. You (or a student) can ring a bell or tone bar. Have students pause, focus on the tone, and when it stops, they raise their hands. Alternatively, they can open their eyes, if closed. My students loved this short activity.
8. **Relax the muscles**. Tension can build up over time. Have students take a break for a moment and focus on relaxing their muscles, scanning slowly from their head to their feet, or vice versa. You can also have them "scrunch up" their muscles before relaxing. Spend a few moments focusing on the feeling of relaxation. There are also many short relaxation videos on the internet.

Formal mindfulness in the classroom

Here are a few ways to incorporate a formal mindfulness practice in your classroom.

- **Guided practice using scripts.** You or a student can read a script slowly, pausing frequently to let students really relax into the practice. If a student leads it can greatly enhance their confidence and "buy in." Some of my most challenging students actually did a great job leading these activities. I've included four scripts to get you started in section 5.
- **Guided audios**. I created many short (3-4 minute) audios which I stored in a shared folder on our desktops for all the teachers in my school. They were easy to access, and I heard frequently from teachers on how much they enjoyed and used them (they also remarked how much they were a benefit to *them*).
- **Use your own resources** to foster calm, self-awareness, and reflection. Teachers in my school used *Youtube* for music or stretches. You may have your own practices to draw on.
- **Discussion.** Intellectual processing can also be very valuable during brain break time. We often focused on kindness (or the opposite, bullying), success in life, and gratitude.

Reminders:

- If you don't like the word mindfulness, use another word, like awareness, observation, or *brain break*.
- Mindfulness is a universal capacity: we all breathe, deal with distractions, manage our impulses, and deal with the ups and downs of life. We all work to be present in what we are doing.
- As much as possible, teach from your experience. Try the practices yourself first, whenever possible.
- Be kind to yourself, and your students—less judging, more accepting. They're usually doing the best they can.
- Be patient and allow for some giggles and discomfort. Most students will settle into the practice or will be silent.
- Don't make mindfulness a *behavior management* tool. It's really an invitation to explore our inner selves, and the present moment. Ultimately, it's a tool for kids to manage *themselves*.
- *Inspire, don't require* is a good motto for brain breaks, and other initiatives too.
- Don't expect magic or immediate results. We're planting seeds for the long haul.
- Don't be afraid to mix it up with a variety of approaches.
- Remember to use secular and scientific/educational language, where appropriate.
- Try asking students to lead the practices whenever possible.

Stoic-Inspired Activities

We know from research (and wisdom handed down for centuries) that our perspective impacts the way we feel and act. Stoicism is largely about learning to be realistic and flexible with our thinking. One of the great joys of my teaching was "playing" with ideas: tossing up a thought to students and seeing where it would go. In the process, students could see that there were many ways to view something, and to tolerate others' perspectives. For this section we focus on Stoic-inspired activities.

Activity 1. What do I really control?

Introduction. One of the foundational concepts of Stoicism is called the *Dichotomy of Control*. In the first chapter of his *Handbook* (or *Enchiridion* in Greek), Epictetus says, "Some things are within our power, while others are not." A simple statement that packs a punch. Essentially, he's reminding his students to remember what they can really affect—and what they cannot. And by remembering this, they could save themselves a lot of frustration and anxiety.

Vocabulary. Begin by placing these terms on the wall, and asking students if they know anything about them. This warms them up to the theme and begins discussion.

- **Epictetus:** Greek Stoic philosopher, 50-135 AD. A *philosopher* is a "lover of wisdom", someone who wonders about what is really good, what is true, and what is beautiful.
- **Stoic Philosophy:** Ancient school of philosophy that emphasized living a good life and developing wisdom, courage, justice, and self-control.
- **The Dichotomy of Control:** Inquiring into what we can actually influence, or not, in any given situation.
- **And this quote** from Epictetus, *"Some things are within our power, while others are not."*

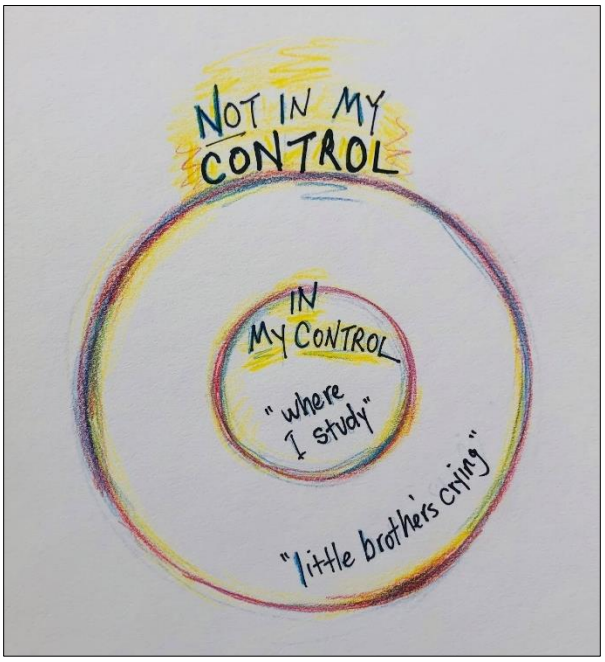
Activity. Next, divide students into small groups. Pass out some larger sheets of paper (regular paper is OK too).

Have the students draw a large circle on their paper, and a smaller circle in the center. (See image on next page.) You can pass out markers if you have them. Then, have them label the larger circle, *Things not in my control*, and label the smaller one, *Things in my control*. You can draw an example on a board or show an image from the internet.

Allow them to spend 10 minutes discussing the outer circle, and then 10 minutes on the smaller circle. As they converse, they begin recording their thoughts on the diagram.

For example, "My little brother's crying" could be written in the outer circle. For the small circle, students will then write things they can control. For the same situation, they might write, "I can study over at my friend's house when I hear him crying." Encourage them to add small visuals wherever they can. (Maybe a picture of a crying face—keep it simple!) They should have fun with this!

When the 20 minutes is done, groups can share their "circles of control" and explain some of the highlights of their maps. Did they have any insights as they did this activity? Was it worthwhile? Writing things down like this is a type of journaling and can clarify issues they are struggling with. Remind them where to put their energy: toward what they can actually have an impact on.



You might emphasize that this can also apply to internal events, like blushing or anxiety. Best to accept these things too, rather than try to control them. You can hang and display the maps if you have the space to do so. They're fun to look at and continue to be great reminders of the discussion.

This lesson can also be done individually. Students might be more willing to talk about their more personal issues in this format.

Extension. Contemporary Stoics talk about the *Trichotomy* of Control. The TOC recognizes that there are gray areas where we may be able to have *some influence* on an outcome, without having total control. Using the previous example, if my little brother is screaming during my study time, I can ask him to quiet down, or distract him with a game. It may work only for a short time, but I've had some influence on his behavior.

For this exercise, put a three-column table on the board. Label the columns *total control, partial control*, and *no control.* Pose a scenario to the class (like the one above), or have them suggest several from their own lives. Then fill in the tables during the discussion, highlighting facets of the problem that are *completely* up to us, not up to us *at all*, or *partially* up to us. (I often had students do the writing on a whiteboard).

Example scenario: *I really need to pass my math test!*

Total control	Partial control	No control
Where I study	Noise in my house when I study	The actual test questions
How much time I study	If my study partner cancels our meeting	Mood of the teacher
Turning off distractions	How I feel that day (tired, etc.)	Distractions in the classroom
What I eat		

Follow up. From time to time, revisit the Dichotomy and Trichotomy of Control, and ask students what is currently challenging them. What in the situation do they have control over? Is some of their stress about things they are trying too hard to control? What might they need to accept or let go of? Can they move their attention back to things they can actually control or influence?

Activity 2. How am I connected to the world?

Introduction. In his journal, which is now called *Meditations*, Marcus Aurelius wrote down his reflections over a ten-year period, while commanding the Roman legions in the north of Italy. Even in the midst of challenges and danger, he was reminding himself that we are all connected, as if we were one living being. In book 4, verse 40 he writes,

> *The world as a living being—one nature, one soul. Keep that in mind. And how everything feeds into that single experience, moves with a single motion. And how everything helps produce everything else. Spun and woven together.*

While this could be considered a religious perspective, it doesn't have to be. Science gives us numerous examples of how we are connected to the earth, the atmosphere, the trees that grow nearby, and more. For example, we are all connected to the *troposphere* (part of the atmosphere closest to the surface). If we are cut off from the oxygen in this part of the atmosphere, we can suffer serious brain damage within minutes. All of us are connected in this way—it's just a fact.

Activity. While this activity could be carried out in many ways, try this one. Have students pull out their journals (or a sheet of paper), and give them the prompt, *How am I connected to the world?* Allow them 10 minutes to freewrite. Then when the time is up, let them share their thoughts in groups of two or three. You could also have a few share with the group.

Extension 1—Use categories. To encourage their thinking, supply them with **categories** for their thinking, such as *social, biological, familial, volunteering*, or *helping*. Such categories may reveal additional ways we are connected to others. For example, ask if anyone has volunteered in their community recently, and how that work helped others in some way. When my kids were younger, their mom took them to a kitchen that served meals to the homeless. They learned in a concrete way that their actions helped other human beings survive another day.

Extension 2—Mindful snack. This extension activity ties into both mindfulness and Stoic philosophy. Bring a simple snack to share, such as raisins, potato chips, or a small chocolate. (Due to health issues, some students may choose to bring their own snack. Or they could visualize their favorite food.)

Pass out the food to each student.

Instruct them to be silent for a few moments.

Before eating the food, have them close their eyes and visualize all the factors and people that helped that food get to their desk: *the truck drivers, gardeners, factory workers, store employees, the teacher, etc.* This list could be almost endless.

Next, instruct them to go ahead and eat their food, really focusing on the taste and texture of the food, and how it changes and dissolves in their mouth. They can also recall some of the people who helped bring it to them.

Have a short debrief afterwards, asking them, *How was that for you? What was it like to think of all the connections that there were in the simple act of eating?* Try to allow any opinion, as long as it is respectful and reflects their actual, subjective experience.

Follow up. Have a snack together, once a week or month, reviewing the ideas of connection. Or see if there is a way to implement a service project in your classroom. A friend of mine who taught industrial technology had his students create beautiful wooden pens, which they then sold, donating the profits to charity.

Activity 3. Seeing and describing objectively through art

Introduction. In teaching critical thinking, great emphasis is placed on separating *fact* from *opinion*. *Facts* are what can be proven through testing or experience. *Opinion*s are the thoughts we have *about* events or the world and are often harder to prove (and often wrong!).

The Stoics stressed that we should be more objective as we move through the world, being very careful about what we *add* to situations with our evaluations or judgements. As Epictetus said,

'His ship has gone down.'—What has happened? His ship has gone down.

Discourses, 3.8,5

It's not that we should never make judgments or decisions about things. It's about our ability to recognize that judgements are not *inherent* in reality, and that we should *delay* them until we have adequate evidence for their validity.

When people *jump to conclusions*, they believe an idea or projection before it is proven true. *Jumping to conclusions* is a problem, both for individuals and sometimes for whole groups. Think about rumors that prove to be false, or when people are imprisoned or fined for crimes that they did not commit. And we also have numerous examples of the media jumping to false conclusions.

Learning to recognize our judgements (opinions) as being *separate* from facts is an important skill for any young person to develop. In perhaps his most famous passage, Epictetus says,

It isn't the things themselves that disturb people, but the judgments that they form about them.

Enchiridion, 5

Looking at art can be a great way to explore our judgments and learn to describe things objectively.

Activity. **Select an artwork** to show the class. (I use a painting most of the time, but a sculpture or other medium is fine too). It can be a poster, print, an original artwork, or an image from the internet. It can help to select one that is a bit ambiguous or likely to create a reaction in students. I often found images called "bad art" to stimulate discussion!

1. **Look**. The first step is to just look at the work. Give students a small time frame, perhaps two minutes, to just peruse the artwork silently. No comments or judgments yet. You might give more time for older students. Encourage them to focus on details and also the artwork as a whole. If they notice their minds have wandered, have them "bring their minds back" to the image in front of them. (In a way, this is a mindfulness exercise).
2. **Describe objectively**. Now ask for a volunteer to begin describing the artwork objectively, in a few sentences. Emphasize that for this step we are not using judgements or opinions, but sticking closely to what only can be seen in the work. You can ask others to add to this initial description. If students stray from strict objectivity for this stage, just bring them back to the bare sensory input for now. (Without making a big deal—this is practice!)
3. **Add judgments**, stories, inferences, likes, or dislikes, and more. In this step, we move from bare description to adding our *opinions*. You can ask students:
    a. *What do you think of this picture? Is it any good? What would you pay for it?*
    b. *What feelings are on display here, or what is the feeling tone of the picture?*
    c. *What do you think the artist's message is?*
    d. *What do you think is going on here? What's happening in the person's mind? (if it has a figure)*
    e. *What does it remind you of?*
    f. *What would it be like if you put yourself in this time and place?*

    Step 3 moves into ambiguous territory, with more opinion and creative ideas. Let the students' imaginations have more freedom here. As they share you might want to ask, *What makes you think that? Where in the painting do you see that?* Or*, What in the painting supports your thought?* Even if students are off a bit, encourage their minds to roam and explore without too much correction. Praise them for showing interest and sharing their ideas.

Extensions.

1. You can also add a traditional analysis of the painting, sharing details about the artist's life or facts about the painting itself: its design, composition or other historical data.
2. Another discussion lens to add is the *metaphorical*. Ask students how this picture—or which part—is a *metaphor for them*. You're bound to get some very creative answers! This could also be a writing assignment.
3. You (or a student) *describe* that artwork while the students sketch it. (Try to show the image only to the one describing it.) After about five minutes, reveal the picture to the class, allowing the students to compare their drawing with the actual image. Ask, *Why might your image differ from the original?*

Note: There are good internet resources about *aesthetics* (the philosophy of art) and how to talk about art. (There isn't one "right" way.) If you decide to make this part of your classroom, check them out.

Activity 4. Finding silver linings

Introduction. "Finding the silver lining" is an old cliché but a great truth. Everyone will face hardships and challenges, even the most privileged. It isn't in our power to completely avoid these, but we can decide what they mean to us. Finding the benefit in a negative event takes practice for most people (positive psychology calls this *benefit finding*). Since our brains are wired to anticipate problems to solve, this process requires a level of creative thinking that we may not be used to. According to psychologist Maria Sirois, "Seeing the silver lining in any situation is crucial for happiness" (Four Ways to Become More Resilient, kriaplu.org).

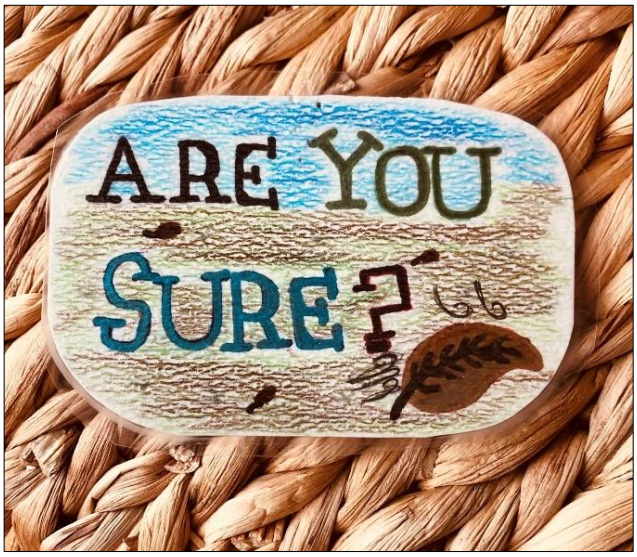
Activity. This is a personal writing assignment, which can also be used for class discussion.

1. **Start by listing five things that make you feel like your life is enjoyable, enriching, or worthwhile at this moment.** Items can be as general as "being healthy" or as specific as "I got a new puppy yesterday." The purpose of the first step is to help you shift into a positive state of mind about your life in general.
2. **A challenging situation.** Next, think about the most recent time when something didn't go your way, or when you felt frustrated, irritated, or upset. In a few sentences, briefly describe the situation in writing.
3. **Find the silver lining.** Then, list three things that can help you see the bright side of this situation. What are the benefits or positive outcomes, some of which you might not have seen coming? (For example, if you missed the bus this morning, maybe you got to spend some time in the car, catching up with your mom).

Extension. Hold a class discussion afterward. See if a few writers will volunteer to share their ideas, especially about the benefits that emerged from their challenging situation. Write the key ideas on the board for the class to see. Affirm that we do decide what events mean to us. Even when a situation doesn't seem to have any obvious benefits, you can contemplate the fact that you survived and are probably stronger for it. Here is how Marcus Aurelius reframed difficult situations:

> *So remember this principle when something threatens to cause you pain: the thing itself was no misfortune at all; to endure it and prevail is great good fortune.*
> *Meditations, 4.49*

Activity 5. Are you sure?



Introduction. One of the central missions of any educator is to teach students to be critical thinkers. Especially in the age of the internet, students need to be able to differentiate between legitimate information and rumor, lies, or sites with hidden intentions. While critical thinking deserves an entire book in itself, here is a short activity to help students remember to pause before acting on information or stories that may not be true. (I shared a version of this at a teacher meeting as well).

Activity.

The great philosophical traditions teach us to be *skeptical*.

1. Write the term *skeptical* on the board and then ask, *What does that word mean? Why is it important to be skeptical? (Broadly speaking, to be skeptical means to not agree to assertions without adequate proof.) When should your "skeptical radar" be on high alert (e.g., cell phone calls from solicitors, rumors floated out by friends, some internet sites)?*
2. **The harm***.* Continue your discussion: *What does it mean to "Jump to conclusions?" Why is that a problem?* You might have touched on this in a previous lesson. *Have you ever been hurt by someone spreading rumors about you? How did it make you feel?*
3. **The aim of a skeptic***.* The job of a skeptic is to wait, or withhold judgment until they have evidence that a story or assertion is true. And while this may not be as exciting as jumping on a bandwagon, it is safer in the long run and might save a relationship from damage.
4. **Being skeptical of *your* thoughts.** But we shouldn't restrict skepticism to outer events. We can also learn to be skeptical of our own thoughts and impulses. When we're tempted to jump to a conclusion (*I'm really boring, I can't do this, I'll make a fool of myself*), we can also treat that as just a thought in the moment, without agreeing to it. Or we can actively dispute it. "That's not true" or, "I can do this," for example.
5. **"Assent."** The Stoics call this skeptical process "withholding assent." We pause when we hear stories, even if they come from ourselves. This does not mean we doubt everything we see and think. We wouldn't be able to function very well that way. We often have to trust others and most of our experiences. It does mean we learn to be *selectively skeptical*, especially regarding troublesome stories or thoughts that cause us difficulty. This process takes time to master, and the next steps can help.
6. ***Are you sure?*** The Zen teacher Thich Nhat Hanh uses the phrase *Are you sure?* to teach skepticism to his students. The full phrase is, *Are you sure of your perceptions?* In other words, are you sure of the thoughts your brain is serving up about your world? Or, are you sure of that story that is floating around? By working with this phrase, students can learn to question their stories and conclusions—and to verify them—before taking any actions that could cause harm.

7. **Make a card.** This is the fun part. Take a small blank card or piece of paper and gather some markers and pens. Write the words *Are you sure?* in large print on the card. Decorate the borders, the letters, any way you can. Add glitter! Make it fun to look at and hang it somewhere you can see it easily. My staff enjoyed making these cards and I would see them hanging in their rooms.
8. **Maxims.** The Stoics called these "maxims" and encouraged students to keep them "ready to hand" to contemplate during difficult moments. I had a card with *Are you sure?* on my wall for several years, and I'm confident it helped me question my own thoughts many times. (The one above was made for me by a student).

Extension.

1. I've even woven this idea—of the uncertainty of our knowledge—into a lesson on Plato's *Allegory of the Cave*. In this story, prisoners are chained up and perceive only the shadows of objects as they dance against the wall in front of them. One of the prisoners breaks free, and escapes into the full light of day, where he perceives things as they really are. Our perceptions can be like those hazy shadows: incomplete, distorted, or downright false. Revisit the idea of *Are you sure?* in the next few weeks, and see if students have any stories to share, or if it means something different to them now.
2. Explore the cognitive bias called the *bandwagon effect*. How does it relate to the idea of *Are you sure?*

Final thoughts.
Skepticism is an invaluable tool for young people to learn, but it should be balanced with conversations about joy, curiosity, and our need for trust. We don't want skepticism to devolve into cynicism or *nihilism*. Author Robert Greene writes, "You want to retain the elasticity of spirit you had as a child, interested in everything, while retaining the hard-nosed need to verify and scrutinize for yourself all ideas and beliefs. The two can coexist."

Activity 6. Concentrate like a Roman

Introduction. In his *Meditations*, Marcus Aurelius writes,

> *Concentrate every minute, like a Roman, on doing what's in front of you, with precise and genuine seriousness, tenderly, willingly, with justice. And on freeing yourself from all other distractions. (2.5)*

During Marcus's reign, the Roman empire stretched over 2,000 miles from east to west. As the emperor of this vast domain, he had a plethora of duties, including leading his troops in battle, resolving conflicts in the courts, raising a large family, and attending to his other political duties. He was likely continuing his studies in philosophy, as well as keeping up letters to friends and tutors. He probably felt overwhelmed at times.

We can speculate that when he wrote these lines in his journal, he was reminding himself to focus—to restrain his mind during important meetings, or to listen carefully when people were speaking. Maybe he was upbraided for not paying attention to an important senator, or he missed some details in a planned military maneuver. His inattention could be very costly.

We may not ever reign over a world empire, but our minds can be equally overwhelmed by schoolwork, family responsibilities, jobs, social media, after-school activities, and more.

Activity.

Warmup: To *concentrate* means to *collect* or *gather together*. When we concentrate we are gathering our attention on a single point or area, and trying to keep it there. It's easy to concentrate when we are enjoying something, like a movie or conversation with a friend. It's harder to concentrate when we're doing something that is not as fun, like planning a project or cleaning the garage. But sometimes those things need to be done too, and we have to be more intentional with our focus. *What are times when it's easy to pay attention? When is it harder?*

Concentration exercise: According to neuroscience professor William Klemm in *12 Ways to Improve Concentration*, **"**Acquiring good concentration ability isn't much different from developing a good golf swing. You have to practice." Try this simple concentration exercise.

1. **Pick a focal point,** like the sensations at the bottom of your feet, or a pencil on your desk. Maybe the sounds in the room will work for you. Keep it simple. Let yourself relax and settle in. Then bring your attention to this anchor.
2. **If your mind wanders, bring it back.** *This may be the most important step of all*. Minds wander—it's what they do. You can notice that your mind has moved away and just bring it back, gently. You might even say, *Come back*, or *Be mindful*. This is your "ruling faculty" in action, guiding your attention back to its focal point.
3. **Repeat.** Keep repeating this process, over and over. You're strengthening your concentration "muscle," even though your mind may be used to following whatever idea pops into awareness.
4. **Widen the attention**. Now, try widening your attention. If you're focused on something in front of you, take in more of the details around your object. Include the sensations in your body too. In this way you're being *present* in a general sense. We do this all the time. We can still think of it as concentration, in that we're not lost in thought, or daydreaming. We're fully present now.
5. **Let go.** Now let go of any anchor, and let your mind wander freely for a few moments. We can't be in concentration mode all the time. Our mind also needs freedom to explore ideas, make plans, or revisit pleasant memories. Let your mind go where it wants, like a puppy following his nose. (For more mindfulness scripts, see part 4).

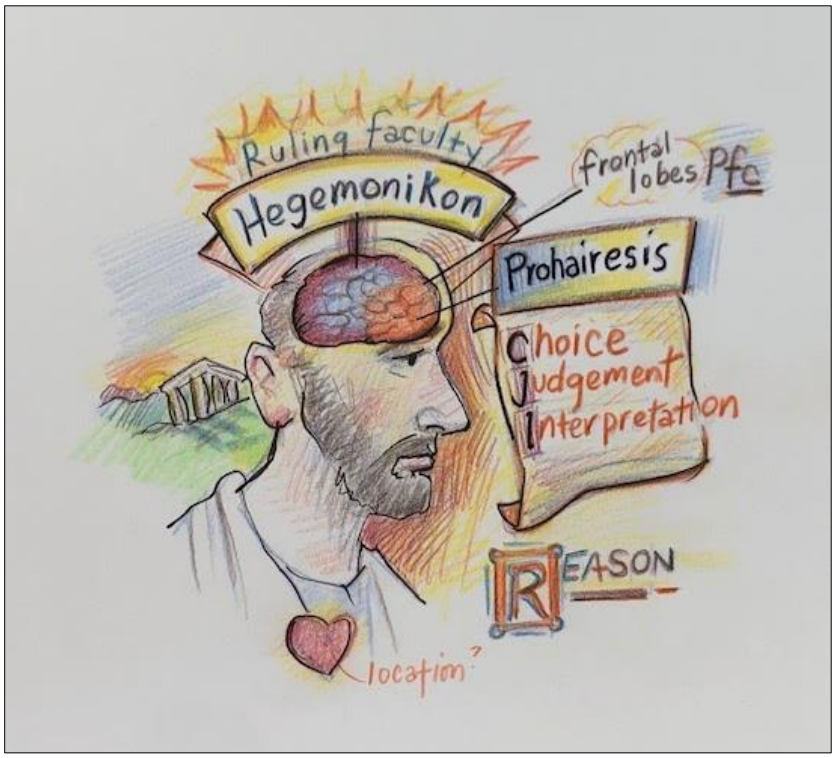
Extension. Ask students, *What was this exercise like? What did you notice? How did you feel after the exercise? What did you learn about your mind? (Hint: Are some parts of the mind not totally in our control? What part is under your control?) When might this be useful to you?*

Controlling your attention — becoming more able to place it where you want it and keep it there, and more able to pull it away from what's bothersome or pointless (such as looping again and again through anxious preoccupations, mental grumbling, or self-criticism) — is the foundation of changing your brain and, thus, your life, for the better.

Rick Hanson, Ph.D.

Activity 7. Brain and mind

Introduction. Our minds are an incredible piece of technology, and yet we don't get an "operator's manual" when we're born! It can be fun and valuable to have some basic knowledge of the mind, as well as the brain.



Vocabulary. Here are some terms for this lesson:

- **Hegemonikon**: Greek for "ruling faculty" or reason.
- **Prohairesis**: Another Greek term for our faculty of choice or reason, favored by Epictetus.
- **Will:** Our ability to make a decision and act on it.
- **Reason**: Our human ability to think things through using logic and evidence rather than emotion.
- **PFC (prefrontal cortex):** Area of the brain behind our forehead—the "executive center" of the brain (like the *hegemonikon*).

Activity.

Warmup: Start by asking the question, "*Is the mind the same thing as the brain?"* My students (middle schoolers) had a lot of fun with this question, and it was one of our most popular topics. I just allowed them to follow their ideas, occasionally asking for evidence, examples, or further explanation. I wrote keywords and ideas on the board as we talked. Another great conversation starter is simply, *What is the mind?* You may not reach any conclusions during this discussion, and that should be OK. Use this as a warm-up for the following.

Discuss. *Why do philosophers and psychologists want to understand the mind?* Have them discuss in small groups for a few minutes, then move to a whole class discussion. Record some answers on the board or screen. Notice what responses might fuel future projects or discussions.

Ancient psychologists. For centuries, before modern tools like brain scanners and computers, philosophers have tried to understand how the mind works. They just had the tools of close observation and introspection (looking within). Despite that, they had marvelous insights about the mind and came up with ways to help people cope with their difficult emotions and circumstances.

The ancient Greeks had a term, *hegemonikon*, which meant *ruling faculty* or *the part that guides*. It refers to the part of our mind which directs our attention and guides our actions. It's as if we have a little general in our mind, directing its activities.

They also noticed that we have *voluntary* (having control over), and *involuntary* (having little or no control) portions of our mind. The hegemonikon is the ancient term for what psychologists today might call our *prefrontal cortex*, or **executive center**, the part of the brain where we make our rational decisions.

Stoic psychology. While the Stoics of Greece and Rome had no access to the tools of modern science, they came up with some astonishing models of the mind. And while we associate our mental activities with the brain, they actually believed these functions resided in the heart!

Here is a useful breakdown of the mind according to the Stoics. Use this mnemonic device to help you recall the four basic mental functions:

> **"A well-ordered mind is RAIR":**
>
> 1. It **receives** impressions.
> 2. It **assents** to those impressions (or not).
> 3. It forms **intentions** to act or not.
> 4. And it does this **rationally**.
>
> (Source: Internet encyclopedia of philosophy)

Let's break this down with a simple example. You're alone at home studying for a big science test tomorrow…

1. You hear a ping on your phone and turn your attention to it. (Receiving an impression). You realize it is a text message.
2. It's from a friend who says school has been canceled tomorrow, even though it's spring and the weather is perfect. You decide he's teasing you, and you ignore it. (You withhold your assent or agreement).
3. You suddenly have an impulse to stop studying and tease him back, but then decide not to (You form an intention to refrain from responding).
4. You figure it's more important to keep focused and prepare for your test tomorrow so you're well prepared. (Making a rational decision, based on your long-term goals).

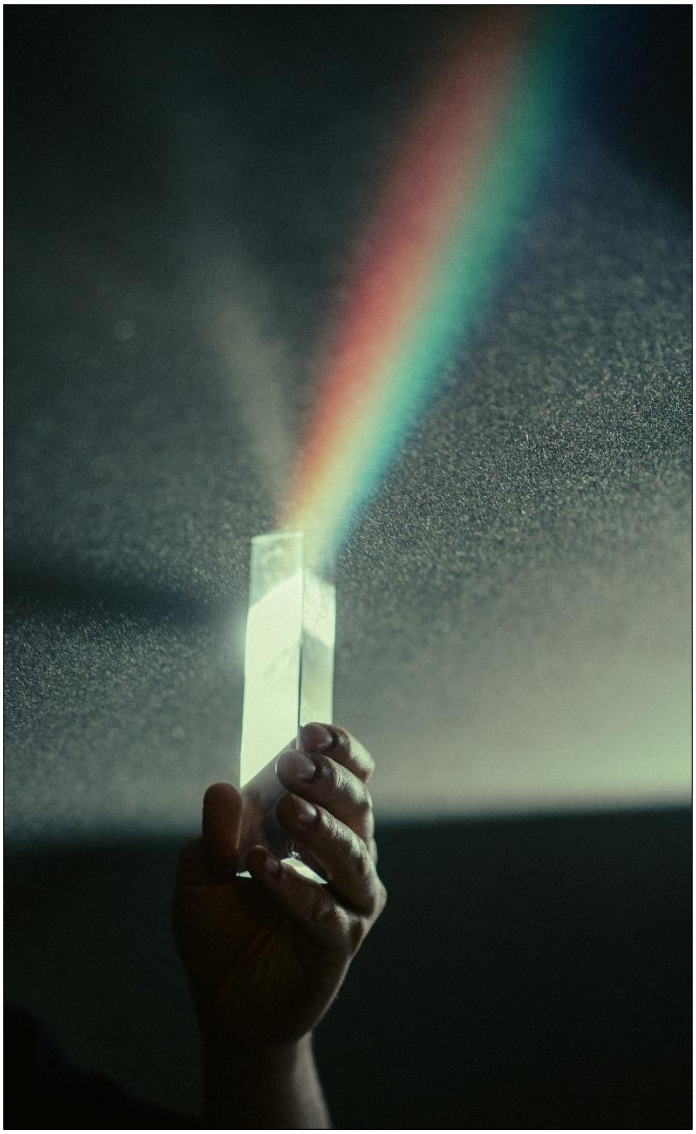
While this is a fairly benign example, it could be more serious if gossip or rumor is involved, or if the suggestion could have more serious consequences. Have students come up with their own examples from their own lives, or from the news or movies.

Takeaway. The important lesson from the Stoics is that we are constantly receiving *impressions* (Greek, *phantasia*) from the outside world, which we then have to make sense of and respond to. The word *impression* can have different shades of meaning in Stoicism, but I think of an impression as anything that "appears" to our awareness, the initial impact of any sensory input (*information* is another useful synonym for impressions).

Impressions also come from our *inner* world, in the form of thoughts, impulses and feelings—which can prod us into acting. In fact, at the root of the word *emotion* is the idea that they *move* us to do something (like run if we are frightened, or attack if we are angry).

And if we do decide to act on an urge or idea, we want to rationally consider the consequences of our behavior, to *think it through*. And that's where stopping or pausing can help.

Mindfulness (Greek, *prosoche*) is a way of paying attention to this input and making sure we are clear on what's happening before we act on it. It helps us to pause, to create a space between an impression and our action. By taking a deep breath and delaying for a moment, we can avoid saying or doing something we regret later. Mindfulness "protects" our ruling faculty, our reason.



Follow-up. Revisit the idea of the *hegemonikon* in a few days or weeks. Ask students about decisions they have had to make, whether large or small. How did they turn out? Did they regret something they decided to do? Did they employ their rational thinking, or mindfulness? What helped them make their decision?

Extensions. Some extension ideas:

1. Make a drawing of the brain using the MacLean "triune" model.
2. In a way this whole lesson is about using our brains to make *good choices*. Discuss things that can help us make better decisions (like *pausing, gathering evidence, taking your time, resisting peer pressure*, etc.)
3. Explore Plato's theory of the soul and its different parts. Make a drawing or artwork, then discuss.
4. DBT (dialectical behavior therapy) is a modern branch of psychotherapy that has a simple yet effective model of the mind, similar to Stoicism. Look up *wise mind*, and reflect on its three components: *reason mind, emotion mind*, and *wise mind*. Discuss.

"We have all a better guide in ourselves, if we would attend to it, than any other person can be."

Jane Austen

Activity 8 - The orange in your head

Introduction. This activity could be an extension of the previous one, *Brain and Mind.* It's essentially a philosophical "thought experiment," where one imagines a certain scenario to think through its wider implications. This lesson focuses on the nature of our private, "subjective" reality, versus our agreed- upon, "objective" reality.

Vocabulary.

- **Existence v. Subsistence:** In general, anything that *is* can be said to *exist,* like a ball or a table. To *subsist* refers to things that exist but don't have *physical* reality, like thoughts and images. The red apple on the table in front of me *exists*. The apple I see in my imagination (maybe it's purple and the size of the moon), *subsists*.
- **Subjective v. Objective:** An experience is "objective" if it is shared with others or is outside of us. It is "subjective" if it is private to one person.

Activity.

1. Ask the class to look at the tabletop where they are sitting (or any spot in the room they can all see). Have someone describe the color as carefully as they can, e.g., *This table is a red-rust color.* Ask the class if this is an accurate description. (Assuming most will say OK). If someone disagrees, ask why, and ask for their description.
2. Next, introduce the idea of "objective" reality. Something is *objective* if it is outside of us, or if it is an experience we all share (like seeing the table or feeling the sun on a summer day). The color of the table is an "objective" experience. (Again, you can briefly discuss why someone might see it differently, e.g., if they are colorblind).
3. Now ask for one volunteer to continue the thought experiment. (Let's call her Sarah). The volunteer can remain seated and needs no materials. Begin with the following questions:

   > Sarah, can you close your eyes and imagine an orange, just like one you might have for lunch? (Pause for a few seconds)
   >
   > Can you "see it" clearly, in your mind's eye? (Again pausing)
   >
   > Can you see details, like the small bumps, or a highlight? What surrounds the orange?
   >
   > Now, can you imagine it cut in half, then into smaller slices?
   >
   > Now can you imagine eating one of the slices? Can you sense the taste or texture of the orange? (Pause for several seconds)

4. Now ask the class, *Can any of you see the orange Sarah is imagining? … Can you smell or taste it?* (Pause for negative responses)

   Now let's continue with our experiment. If we could peel back Sarah's skin and skull just a bit, (Ew!!!!), *what would we see <u>while</u> she is visualizing the orange?* (Wait for responses, like, "gray stuff", "maybe veins", "chemicals", etc.)

   Would we see the orange at all? (Pause) *Then where is it? Does it exist in space? Does it exist—or subsist? Is there a part of our experience that is completely private to us?*

Conclusion. *So we can say that Sarah's image of the orange is a private, subjective experience. It exists in time (it arises and passes), but not in space.*

Can we say a thought is both simple and a great mystery at the same time?.....Whew! Great job! (You may have more discussion and questions here.)

Extension questions for further discussion.

- How do people communicate their private thoughts? How about their feelings? What would it be like to know everyone's private thoughts at all times? What about pain? Can we feel someone else's pain? How? Should we share all our inner thoughts and feelings?
- What is a thought? Where does thought exist? Do images need brains and bodies to exist? How do we know? How *could* we know? Are thoughts and brains two very different things? (Stress that it's OK not to know the answers—even the greatest philosophers struggle with this one!) (We often left our discussion with many unanswered questions.)

Extension.

1. (For older students) Have students research the *mind-body problem* of philosophy or create a video explaining the fundamental issues of it.
2. Why do we have a hard time agreeing about some things and not others? How do the terms "subjective" and "objective" relate to debates about politics or religion? What factors other than simple sense perception go into those issues?
3. Research the case of Phineas Gage, a 19th century railroad worker. He sustained a severe head injury during an explosion, which radically altered his personality. Discuss what parts of the brain seem to be related to our personality.

"The world is nothing but change. Our life is only perception."

Marcus Aurelius, Meditations, Book 4

Self-Care Tools for Teachers

A teacher's mood is an integral part of a classroom culture. While research is being done to ascertain how those moods specifically affect learning, we know that teachers who are stressed out are more likely to consider leaving the profession, causing more disruptions in learning. And how enthusiastic can kids be when their teacher is in a sour mood?

The terms *grit* and *resilience* are part of the current discussion of stress management. A related term, *stress hardiness,* was coined over 40 years ago by the researcher Suzanne C. Kobasa. The idea here is that conditions in any job are rarely perfect. What is important is that employees find ways to survive—even thrive—where they are, turning "obstacles" into the "way," to use Stoic language.

In a famous study of corporate workers in 1981, the psychologist Salvatore R. Maddi and his colleagues isolated three elements that were crucial to managing during a difficult downsizing. They were *commitment*, *control* and *challenge* (The "three C's"). These "reframes" can be applied to teacher stress too.

Commitment refers to the act of being **involved** in activities that one finds meaningful (rather than isolating or avoiding); *Control* is focusing on aspects of your experience that you can actually have an **impact** on; and *Challenge* is viewing each situation for its **learning** potential (*what can I learn or gain from this?*), instead of just the threat potential.

Here are ways I incorporated the three C's into my teaching:

Commitment. While some curricula were mandated by my district, I often found ways to enrich my lessons and include elements that were exciting and meaningful to me and my students. For example, I always had an interest in philosophy, so I created my own philosophy club. It lasted for years. It was the only type of program in the area and several of my students created award-winning projects. What curriculum can you create? Is there an after-school club that can reflect your values and interests (and that kids will enjoy)? Is there a staff-level initiative that you can start?

Control. This one is straight out of the Stoic playbook! What aspects of your job can you control, or at least have influence on? Which parts are beyond your control? You may want to put pen to paper and actually write about this occasionally. (I did). By keeping your attention on those things you can control—and not on what is beyond your control—you will feel more empowered and positive. And you won't fall into the trap of complaining (at least not too often!)

Challenge. Modern Stoics are famous for the saying, "The obstacle is the way." The stresses of life and teaching will keep coming, but we can choose to see them in different ways. For example, we can see our difficulties as opportunities for learning, and for developing our "virtues"—strengthening those positive character traits that Stoics talk about.

Cultivating patience was one of my go-to practices. I borrowed the phrase *may I be patient* from my Mindful Schools training and made cards (and even a poster), which I plastered on my wall to see easily. I worked on reminding myself, *may I be patient* during many stressful moments. Physically, it meant slowing down, even stopping at times, and breathing deeply. Every moment is an opportunity to practice a positive response, even if we feel crummy or stressed.

The 4th C: Coaching. I'll add my fourth C to the mix, *coaching*. A good school system provides lots of opportunities for mentoring and communication between veterans and newer teachers. I attended many great workshops in my career and used several of those ideas for years! I also took advantage of personal counseling to help me process the inevitable difficult times that a teacher faces.

Other strategies

One class, one child. Teaching can be overwhelming at times, especially if you have a class with several challenging students at once.

Now and again I would feel very upset by the chaos going on around me. Art class (my subject area) by nature could be chaotic. And if I had students who were continually disruptive, my attention would be constantly pulled in their direction. If I wasn't mindful, they could start to control my focus and actions.

In those instances, I would pick one student who was not getting my attention, who was being forgotten in the chaos. I would pull up my chair, and engage them, asking questions about their artwork or their life. Being present for this *one human being*, for this *one moment*. It helped to remember that this student also had hopes, dreams, and challenges that might be forgotten in the chaos if I allowed myself to be too distracted.

In this way too, I retained control of my attention, rather than being continually drawn away by the behavior of others. And I realized that I was contributing to the distress I was feeling.

There is always something positive happening if you look for it. And there are also many students who never clamor for attention but might need it just as much.

Instead of thinking about the tough week or tough day you're having, just focus on the class you're in right now. *One student, one class, one day* at a time. Let go of the past and future for the moment.

In his *Meditations*, Marcus Aurelius wrote:

> *Don't let your imagination be crushed by life as a whole. Don't try to picture everything bad that could possibly happen. Stick with the situation at hand, and ask, "Why is this so unbearable? Why can't I endure it?" You'll be embarrassed to answer.*
>
> *Meditations, 8.36*

Reduce the grumbling. There's so much happening in schools today. Even if your classes are going well, there are bound to be debates about administrative policies, student handbooks, parent emails, technology, politics, and much more.

While it's human to vent our frustrations, too much can lead to a subtle sense of despair and actually add to our stress. And grumbling can become an unconscious habit. For example, the staff lunchroom can become an arena for complaining, with some parties contributing more than their fair share. To interrupt this habit in myself, I tried to take the first few bites of my food mindfully, silently, often taking a deep breath or two. Then I tried to be intentional about what, if any, frustrations I was going to share.

Don't worry about venting now and again. We're all human and need to connect with others about the challenges we may be facing. Just don't let it become your default "channel."

Marcus Aurelius probably heard a lot of complaining and bickering as he carried out his duties as a judge and administrator, maybe even indulging in a bit of it himself. To overcome this tendency, he wrote:

Don't be overheard complaining about life at court. Not even to yourself.

Meditations, 8.9

Tolerate frustration. Teaching is full of frustration: the student who refuses to follow directions, phone calls from the office in the middle of a presentation, the technology that fails as you're just starting to present. Psychologist Albert Ellis coined the phrase *Low frustration tolerance*, or LFT. To be enraged by these interruptions only adds to the problem. But by *expecting* our plans to be derailed at times, we can reduce our disappointment when it happens. And as Epictetus taught, we know we're making progress when we no longer blame ourselves or others for problems. We just do what we can to deal with them.

This too shall pass. My father was a veteran of World War II, and a natural Stoic, even if he never mentioned *Seneca* or *Cato the Younger*. But one maxim he passed on to me was, *this too shall pass.* This universal bit of wisdom is expressed in many spiritual traditions, but especially in the writings of the Stoics and Buddhists. When the Zen master Suzuki Roshi (one of the first Zen teachers to come to America) was asked to summarize the teachings of Buddhism, he said two words, *everything changes.*

While the philosophy of impermanence can occupy a lifetime of study, the simple maxim *this too shall pass* can be an instant reminder that this moment, as difficult as it is, will soon change and be gone. In fact, you might not even recall it in five years. In book 5 of the *Meditations*, Marcus reminds himself,

Time. How brief and fleeting your allotment of it.

Meditations, 5.24

I had one of my students create a small art card with the phrase *this too shall pass*, which I had tacked to my wall for many years. Remember, whatever you are going through will soon be a distant memory, shorn of most emotion. Why not treat it that way now?

Accept your life. The American teacher and journalist Margaret Fuller once said, "I accept the universe!" I recalled that phrase many times when things weren't going the way I wanted them to.

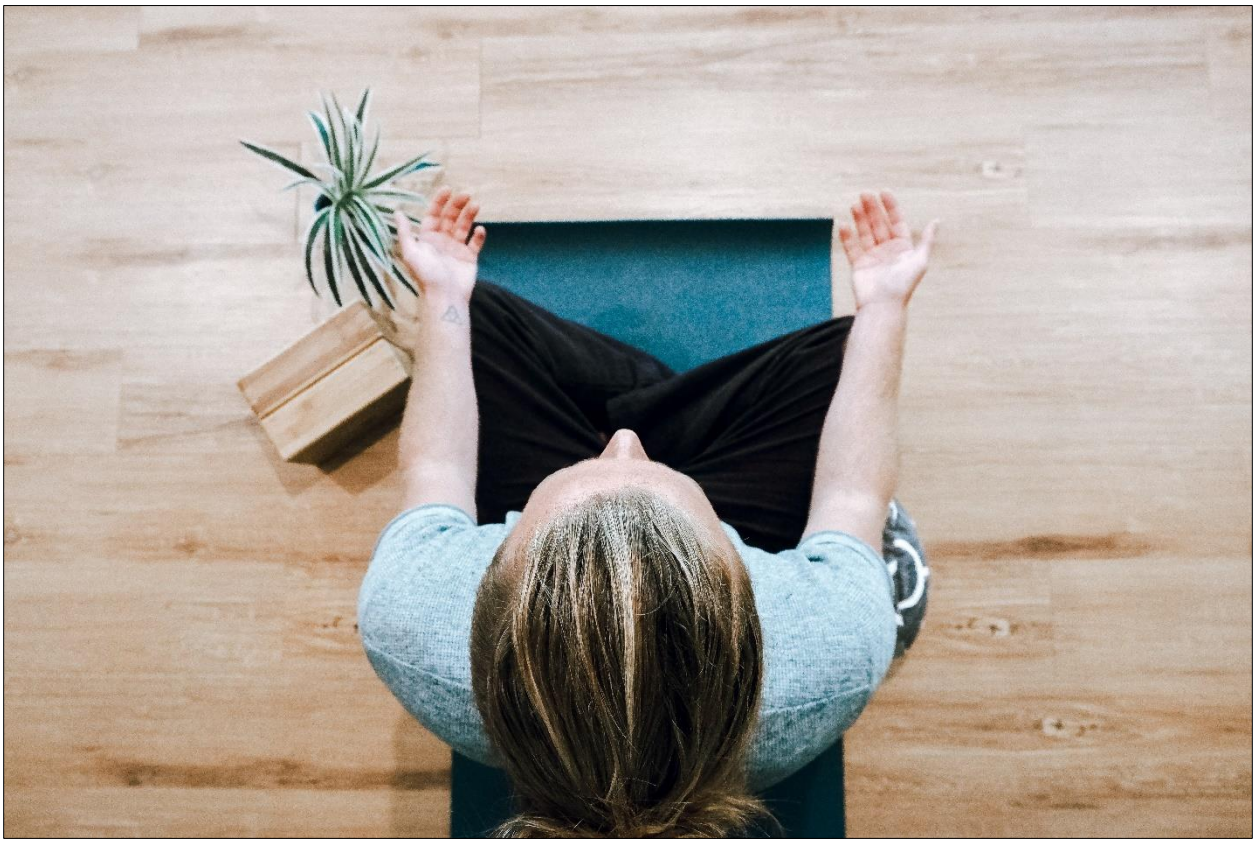
I spent many years resisting the hard realities of my job: challenging classes, modest pay, a long commute, not being able to paint as often as I wanted.

And this resistance applied to my inner world as well. I had to learn to accept—and to live with—the reality of a body that reacted strongly sometimes. I had to accept my difficult emotions and learn to cope with them in rational and compassionate ways. Stoic author Donald Roberson calls this *emotional acceptance*.

I also learned to accept the realities of family challenges, illness and death, just like everyone has to do. Learning how to physically relax, to let go of bodily tension, was very helpful too. “I accept the universe” was a great reminder not to resist what was happening in the moment.

Morning stillness. After I learned meditation, I built some “sitting” time into my morning routine before leaving for school. It might vary, from three minutes on busy days to 10 minutes or even longer on others. Two components were particularly helpful. First, by adopting a *solid posture* and being *still*, I was saying to my worries, “you won’t get to me,” or “you won’t make me bend.” And second, by having a firm focus for my mind, I was able to “unhook,” or let go of worries about the day upcoming, or from yesterday’s problems. It was like cleaning your car windshield after driving through mud. I could see—and think—clearly again. Later, during my coffee, I often had some inspiring pages to contemplate, and maybe some writing to do too.

For you, morning stillness might be prayer, reading spiritual literature, or just being quiet for one minute. But whatever approach you use, unhooking from your mind’s habitual activities can be invaluable.



Embrace your "imperfectness." This one took me a long time to learn (still learning it!). Like a lot of young people in the job market, I had to work hard to prove myself and build the credentials that would land me a good job. But this striving can be overdone, and high standards, especially if turned inward, can wreak havoc. I'm not saying teachers shouldn't have high standards; some may even need to raise theirs a bit. But we need to balance this with an attitude of *we are human*.

I adopted the simple phrase, *We're all bozos on the bus* (attributed to the entertainer Wavy Gravy) with surprisingly good results. It reminded me to stop taking myself or my mission too seriously, and that even the most professional and talented among us is just human and going to screw up at times. Marcus Aurelius had his own way of reminding himself not to take himself, or his station, too seriously:

> *Alexander the Great and his mule driver both died and the same thing happened to both. They were absorbed alike into the life force of the world, or dissolved alike into atoms.*
>
> *Meditations, 6.24*

Finding beauty and joy in the moment. Although a teacher's job is difficult, there are moments of great joy and beauty to be had too. I will always treasure the memories of the simple moments with young people, exploring ideas, looking at great art, talking about silly stuff, eating an Oreo cookie together. Be alert and available for those beautiful, fleeting moments. In the *Meditations*, Marcus reminds us that if we are awake, we can find beauty in those things that others might miss.

> *And anyone with a feeling for nature—a deeper sensitivity—will find it all gives pleasure. Even what seems inadvertent. He'll find the jaws of live animals as beautiful as painted ones or sculptures. He'll look calmly at the distinct beauty of old age in men, women, and at the loveliness of children. And other things like that will call out to him constantly—things unnoticed by others. Things seen only by those at home with Nature and its works.*
>
> *Meditations, 3.2*

Rest and the rest. Most of the ideas we've gone over relate to our *inner* responses to the world. And this is often the focus of both mindfulness and Stoicism. And yet there are other factors which can clearly affect our wellbeing, like sleep, a balanced diet, friendship, watching our caffeine (a tough one for me), and more. An in-depth discussion of these is beyond this handbook.

But one final tip. When I learned formal relaxation and meditation practices, I found I could recover very quickly and "get back in the game." Five minutes of progressive muscle relaxation, a couple minutes of mindfulness, or a few deep breaths had an amazing ability to give my brain a rest so I could tackle the next challenge on my plate. Relaxation is a vital skill in any teacher's toolkit.

Mindfulness Scripts for the Classroom

This section contains a sampling of mindfulness scripts for you to try in your classroom. Read the scripts slowly, with care. You may want to have your own formal practice for a while before implementing these in class. I also had students lead these at times.

Script 1. Basic mindfulness of the breath

Note: *The breath is a common anchor for mindfulness meditation. It is always with us, easy to locate (usually), and in movement.*

Find a comfortable position while sitting upright…Let your arms and hands rest in your lap or on the table.

Close your eyes or look down so you won't be distracted…Notice your face—feel it…relax your jaw, and the muscles around your eyes…

Now notice your breathing coming in and going out…you don't need to change it in any way…

Notice how the breath breathes all by itself, with no effort on your part.

Notice your belly rising and falling along with the breath…Relax the muscles in this area, as you breathe.

Notice what else you feel as you breathe…Do you notice the air in your nostrils?…or feel your chest rising?...just observe, like a scientist looking through a microscope…If your mind wanders away, just gently return your attention to the breath. (Pause here for about 30 seconds)

Again, our minds will wander…if you notice your attention has traveled away, notice what you are thinking about…then return your mind to your breath.

Breathing in…breathing out. (Pause here for several seconds)

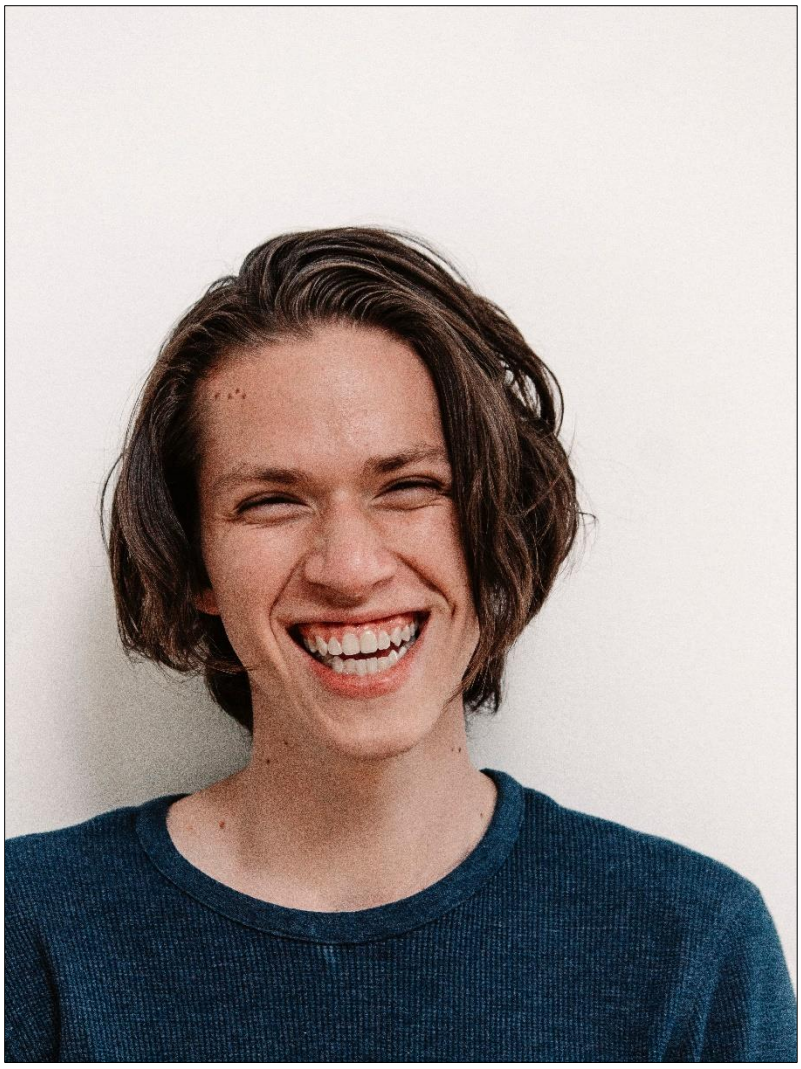
Again, notice if your attention has wandered away and come back to the process of breathing…notice also how you are feeling at this moment…This is what is happening now…

Now, slowly open your eyes and come back to the room…and smile, if you wish.

Script 2. Body, sound, gratitude

Sit upright but be relaxed…let your shoulders relax, let your hands rest on the table or on your lap…

Bring your hands out in front of you, and press your palms together tightly…feel the tension in your arms and hands…hold this for a few seconds…and let go…feel the relaxation permeate your arms, and hands…Now scrunch up your face, and hold that for a couple seconds…and then let go…explore the feelings of relaxation in the face…Now let's bring our attention to our breath…feeling the breath as it enters and leaves the body…(Pause here for a few seconds, allowing students to locate these sensations)...no need to force it or to be any different than it is…just noticing the in and out breathing…



Now we will listen for the bell (Ring bell)…If your mind wanders, just notice that, and bring it back to the bell…notice how the tone varies, and begins to fade…When it completely disappears, raise your hand…(Allow for some silence here)...Now just let your attention rest on other sounds…notice how some come and go quickly, while others are continuous…Some are near, some are far away…(Pause)

Finally, let go of sounds, and bring to mind one thing that you are grateful for…make a mental picture, the best you can…you can use words too, if that helps…dwell on that for a few moments…maybe it's a friend, or your favorite food…it can be very simple…just focus on that thing for a few more moments… Notice how you are feeling now as we dwell on gratitude, and begin to close this practice…

***Follow up**: You may wish to ask students what they were grateful for, or what they noticed during the practice. You can even make a list of responses on the board. Remember, we are just noticing, not judging responses.*

Script 3. Gratitude reflection

We often spend our time focusing on what is wrong...on what we don't have…Or we are focused on the next thing we want...Gratitude flips that perspective...It helps us appreciate what we *already* have, or the many kindnesses that people show toward us. It can impact the way we feel and see the world.
Begin by letting go of your books, pencils, devices, or anything else you are holding on to. Allow yourself to relax, in this moment, by closing your eyes, and resting your hands on your lap or the table. Take one deep breath in, and out...(Pause)

Now bring to mind something that you can be grateful for...it can be a big thing, or a small thing... maybe it's a relationship with a friend, or some prized object that you have. Maybe you're grateful for a sport or an activity that you are currently involved in...start seeing this in your mind's eye...

It could be as simple as visualizing the last meal you had...and for the people who prepared it for you... for the time and effort it took them to get it to your plate...(Pause)

Hold a picture of that thing for a few moments, seeing it in as much detail as you can...you could also silently say "thank you" in your mind, to that person or group of people…Notice how you feel as you do this...does it feel funny or weird?...Does it feel happy or warm?...just notice whatever you are feeling, and try to let it be there…(Pause)

Now, see if you can think of two or three more things you can be grateful for...again, perhaps whispering, "thank you" or "I am grateful for"...along with whatever the thing is you are recalling...(Pause)...

Now open your eyes...take a moment to notice how you feel…for a moment, appreciate where you are, right here…OK in this moment…

Thank you for doing this together.

Note: *You or the leader may wish to ask several students to share something they are grateful for.*

Script 4. STOA, a Stoic-inspired mindfulness script

Let's begin this short practice with a quote from Marcus Aurelius' *Meditations,* book 5, chapter 2…

> *To shrug it all off and wipe it clean—every annoyance and distraction—and reach utter stillness. Child's play.*

We can imagine that an ancient emperor of Rome was pretty much overwhelmed with politics and administrative duties. If you're alive today, your plate is also full, especially with all the information we have coming over social media: 24/7 news blasts (everything is an "alert" now), jobs, family obligations, pet care, etc. A lot of us are feeling the stress of overwhelm and our brains are in emergency mode…and yet Marcus says that we can let go of all those distractions and worries and be still. We can recover our basic tranquility and clarity. We can take a moment of stillness, of mindfulness.

Here's a brief meditation that I've created to help you do that, using the acronym **STOA** (the Stoa, of course, was the porch in Rome where the ancient Stoics gathered to share their teachings).

The S is for stop and be still; the T is for take a deep breath; the O is for observe, especially observing non-judgmentally; and the A is for allowing and accepting whatever we are experiencing.

So let's walk through this, and then we'll move on…

S stands for *stop*—let yourself become as still as you can. No need to be rigid—just stop what you are doing…Let your muscles relax as best as you can…just enjoying a moment of stillness…

T is for *take* a breath—so let's really focus on a nice deep breath: inhaling and exhaling…appreciating the miracle of being alive…(Pause and breathe again)

O is for *observe*—so here we expand our attention from our breath, *around* our breath to include the rest of the body…noticing ourselves sitting here, whatever posture you're in…just notice the sensations—the *information*—coming from your body, the inside as well as outside…giving attention to our legs and our feet…noticing the sensations that are present, without judging…moving up to our chest and stomach…now observing our arms and hands…and if your mind gets distracted, you can just "shrug it off" as Marcus says, and come back to the focus of your attention, which is the body…

Moving up into our shoulders…and now our face…now taking just a moment to notice what thoughts are running through your mind…again, just observing, as best you can…

And finally, **A** is a reminder to *accept and allow* what we notice, without trying to push anything away or wishing it were different. Just being with it as it is, at least for the time being…you might even say to yourself, *I accept this.*

And now we can open our eyes…and that's your STOA meditation…please have a good rest of your day.

Script 5. Like a tree

For this exercise, stand next to your desk or chair...let yourself become very quiet and still…(Pause briefly) ...let your hands fall by your sides...let your shoulders relax…take a deep breath...and let it out slowly…

Look straight ahead...don't let yourself be distracted by your neighbors, or by anything going on around you…

Now in your mind's eye, picture a tree...it could be an oak, a palm tree, or a tree you pass by everyday… it doesn't matter…how often do we stop to admire a tree?...see its powerful trunk…the branches...how it stands strong during even the most brutal windstorms, never complaining…its trunk and roots strongly anchored in the earth...

Now let's use that image, that strength of the tree, in our practice...bring your attention to your legs and feet...feel the aliveness inside...imagine your legs having roots that go deep into the ground...feel your feet connected to the earth...feel the gravity pulling them downward…(Pause for a few seconds here)...let any tension you feel in your legs drain into the ground...keep your knees soft, and relaxed...don't lock them...and if you worry that you're doing this wrong, let that go…and just do the best you can—your way.

Now move your attention up your body, to your belly...feel your breath moving in your belly and torso area...feel this aliveness inside you…notice how your belly moves in and out slightly with each breath… no need to force this if you don't feel it...you can place your hand over your tummy to help you notice this movement…

Your belly and torso are like the trunk of a tree...powerful and strong. When the winds of anger or fear blow, you can always bring your attention to your trunk and your breath…standing strong and steady during the gales of emotion...

Breathing in, breathing out...feel the aliveness inside of you...

Feel your trunk and breath, moving gently...if your mind wanders, bring it back…

Breathing in, breathing out…

Now bring your hands high up over your head, and spread your fingers out like branches reaching for the sky…stretch upward...hold it here for a moment…breathing, feeling your whole body…and now bring your hands back down slowly to your sides…

Being strong like a tree...

Now bring your attention back to the room, and let's proceed with our day.

Resources for Further Study

Mindfulness

*Educating Mindfully: Stories of Sc*hool *Transformation Through Mindfulness*, by Tracy Heilers (Author), Tim Iverson (Editor), Barbara Larrivee (Editor); (Coalition of Schools Educating Mindfully, 2020)

Mindfulness in Education Network website (mindfuled.org)

Everybody Present by Nikolaj Flor Rotne and Didde Flor Rotne (Parallax Press, 2013)

MindUp curriculum, grades 6-8 (New York: Scholastic, 2011)

The Mindful Child by Susan Kaiser Greenland (Free press, 2010)

Building Emotional Intelligence by Linda Lantieri, introduction by Daniel Goleman (Boulder: Sounds True, Inc., 2008)

The Stress Reduction Workbook for Teens: Mindfulness Skills to Help You deal with Stress by Gina Biegel (Oakland: New Harbinger Publications, 2010)

Full Catastrophe Living by Jon Kabat-Zinn (Delta, 1990)

Sitting Still Like a Frog by Eline Snel (Shambhala, 2013)

Stoicism

Stoicare website (stoicare.com)

Tranquility Parenting: A Guide to Staying Calm, Mindful, and Engaged, by Brittany Polat (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2019)

Modern Stoicism website (modernstoicism.com)

How to Think Like a Roman Emperor, by Donald Robertson (St. Martin's Press, 2019)

"Prosoche: Illuminating the Path of the Prokopton," article from *Traditional Stoicism*, by Chris Fisher (traditionalstoicism.com)

The Practicing Stoic by Ward Farnsworth (David R. Godine, 2018)

A Handbook for New Stoics by Massimo Pigliucci and Gregory Lopez (The Experiment, 2019)

The Art of Living by Sharon Lebell (a modern translation of Epictetus's *Handbook*); (HarperOne, 2015)

Meditations by Marcus Aurelius, translated by Gregory Hays (Modern Library, 2012)

Seneca: Letters from a Stoic (Penguin Books, 1969)

Philosophy for young people

Philosophy for Kids: 40 Fun Questions That Help You Wonder About Everything! by David White (Routledge, 2001)

Little Big Minds: Sharing Philosophy with Kids, by Marietta McCarty (TarcherPerigee, 2006)