



YMCA YOUTH EXCHANGES CANADA

Facilitating Mindfulness Practices with Youth



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Canada

Facilitating Mindfulness Practices with Youth

The Youth Exchanges Program connects youth across communities and provides an opportunity for youth to express themselves and explore Canada's diversity. By participating in the program, youth may face new experiences and relationships that expand their comfort zone. By learning how to be present and how to approach others and themselves with empathy, youth can develop coping skills, deepen connections across communities and build a better sense of belonging.

The YMCA Youth Exchanges Canada program has created this resource on mindfulness and compassion in order to support youth's participation in the program and practice evidence-based strategies to increase their coping skills. This resource includes information about mindfulness and compassion, a facilitation guide and example activities you could do with your group, and additional resources related to mindfulness.

Introduction to Mindfulness

Practicing mindfulness helps us connect with the present moment with acceptance and curiosity of our thoughts and feelings. We practice mindfulness to help train our brain to slow down, pay attention to the present moment, and try to not get caught in seeing things as "good" or "bad" or "wrong" or "right" but rather simply notice our thoughts, emotions, and physical sensations with openness and curiosity. This approach contrasts with many people's tendencies to negatively judge themselves.

Many youth may already experience states of mindfulness sometimes through a physical activity or by being in nature. With continued practice, it is a skill that can be honed and become a trait or approach to life.

There are also personal and professional benefits to practicing mindfulness as a Group Leader, including the ability to become fully present with those we are working with. As a Group Leader, in order to facilitate mindfulness with others, it would be important to have your own practice. We recommend practicing these exercises on your own before facilitating them with the group.

Benefits of Mindfulness

- Lowers anxiety and stress
- Strengthens self-control
- Improves health and body image
- Improves social skills and communication
- Improves emotional regulation skills, increases positive mood
- Increases self-esteem
- Better decision making

We would like to note that mindfulness is not the remedy for all challenges that youth may face. When working with youth who have experienced trauma, engaging in meditative exercises may increase feelings such as anxiety. We recommend starting with teaching some soothing and grounding techniques first.

Compassion: Where do We Start?

Why is it so difficult to be compassionate? To explore this, reflect a while on the following question: Why would you not practice compassion towards yourself?

Most common reasons are 'I will have to invest time and energy in something that might not even help', 'It might stir up pain and sorrow', 'I do not deserve it', 'I might become selfish or lazy', 'There are so many people in this world who need it more than I do' or 'I was raised to be firm with myself', 'I do not want to become a wimp', 'What would my friends think?'

There may also be arguments not to practice compassion towards others, such as: – I am already exhausted from looking after others' needs. – There is so much suffering in this world. It makes me feel so helpless. – Why should I feel compassion for people who hurt me? – How can you be compassionate with dictators and terrorists? We like to get these ideas and biases about compassion into the open, because they are common and fully understandable.

Having researched compassion for decades, Paul Gilbert defines compassion as 'a sensitivity to suffering in ourselves and others and a commitment to try to alleviate and prevent it. So, compassion is definitely not for the faint-hearted. It has a receptive and tender side, but also an active and powerful side. Clearly, it involves courage to face our suffering and deal with it as best as we can.

On the other hand, it is not about jumping into the deep end when you cannot swim. Compassion also needs wisdom and patience. We certainly do not want you to feel pressured to become compassionate, neither with yourself nor with others.

In this document you will find practical tools to practice compassion, and mindfulness exercises that could be done with your group.

Pathways to Self-Compassion

Christopher Germer helpfully described five pathways to practicing self-compassion, which are presented in the overview below. You may like to consider how various pathways to compassion could contribute to an exchange and brainstorm these practices with your group.

The way of ...	Characterized by ...	Practice
The body	Softening	Physical rest and relaxation, offering the body warmth, support and gentle exercise (bath, sauna, body scan, yoga, dance, sports, pleasure walk). Nourishing the body through all senses such as visual beauty, comforting sound, touch, fragrance, taste.
Emotions	Soothing	Befriending these inner messengers, even if they feel unpleasant. Holding painful emotions in the kind embrace of awareness, like a caring mother holds her upset child.
Thoughts	Allowing	An open, non-judgmental attitude towards thoughts and mental images, simply acknowledging their coming and going while not having to control, escape or follow them.
Relations	Intimacy, connectedness, generosity	Treating others as you wish to be treated yourself (The Golden Rule). Sharing ups and downs with sensitivity to each other's needs. Nurturing 'we-together' instead of 'me-first' or 'you-first'.
Spirituality	Commitment to deeper, non-selfish values	Setting and re-setting your intentions to connect to what you really value. Listening to what touches values your heart and gives your life meaning.

Considerations for Facilitators

Here are a few considerations for facilitators leading mindfulness exercises with groups of youth. After these considerations, we have outlined a few exercises that could be done with the group.

Time

Each exercise may take a few minutes or more depending on the type of meditation. These exercises could be done as a way to start or end a meeting or an activity with your group.

Preparing Participants for Practice

Before doing the practice with the group, you can consider introducing the concept of mindfulness, using some of the information shared earlier in this toolkit. Some example discussion points could be:

- What is mindfulness?
- Have you practiced mindfulness before (ex: informally through a sport, doing art, or formally through meditation)?
- How could it be helpful in your life? In the exchange?
- Share expectations from the group (ex: put away distractions)
- What to do if you become overwhelmed during the practice (Ex: take a break, get up and move, try gently and rhythmically tapping your body with your fingers and hands).


Example introduction of the guided meditation to the group *“We will be doing a guided mindfulness practice together for about X minute. During this time, I’ll ask that you remain quiet and once we’ve wrapped up the practice, we will discuss it together.”*

During the practice it can be helpful to close your eyes because there are so many things that we can look at around the room that might distract us and pull our attention away. If that doesn’t feel comfortable, try finding a spot on the floor down in front of you to look at.

I will be giving you instructions to follow along the way. All instructions are an invitation and you can choose what you’d like to participate in.”

Guidelines for Facilitators

Avoid telling them how they will feel. For example, you will feel relaxed after this, you should feel calm now. Instead invite them to be curious about any feeling that may come up for them. Youth could feel calmness, joy, peaceful, or sadness, discomfort, anger, overwhelm, sleepiness, among any number of feelings.



There is no wrong way to practice mindfulness. Simply try to follow along with the script and notice what happens for you along the way.

Remind them that they are invited to follow the practice but they may stop at any time.

They don't have to have eyes closed if they don't feel safe.

Acknowledge the environment. If certain sounds or things come up during the practice (e.g. a cell phone rings, someone laughs, sounds from outside the room) acknowledge them as they are without judgement (e.g. you might hear the sound of someone laughing, simply acknowledge this sound and then we'll come back to the practice...) and then come back to the script.

If possible, keep an eye on the group to see if anyone may be distressed or if online, look after the camera's turned back on. Check in afterwards if needed.

Tone and pace

If using a script, practice ahead of time, and modify the script to suit your personal style and use of words.

Use a moderate conversational tone, as if you were speaking rather than reading.

Pace yourself – not too fast or too slow

If you prefer, you can also use a pre-recorded guided meditation instead. Please see the end of this document for additional resources.

Debrief with the Group

After the doing the exercise, make sure to debrief the experience with the group. Individuals could also journal their experience before sharing.

Example Exercises to Do with Your Group

Breathing space with kindness

Find a comfortable position, either sitting, lying or standing ... noticing what you are experiencing right now ... thoughts, feelings, physical sensations, or sounds ... kindly acknowledging whatever arises, the pleasant and the unpleasant ... welcoming all experiences, just as they present themselves.

Then let your attention rest on the breath, following every in- and out-breath with relaxed attention.

Allow a calming, soothing breathing rhythm to emerge by gently slowing down and deepening the movements of the breath. Allow the out-breath to flow out all the way, until the direction of flow changes by itself. Let the body fill on the in-breath, until the next out-breath naturally follows.

A soothing breathing rhythm may be supported by consciously sensing the ground that supports you, allowing your muscles and face to soften, your chest and heart to open like a flower towards the light, your belly to freely rise and fall ...

Be kind when you realize your mind has drifted off. It is what minds normally do. As soon as you notice this, mindfulness has returned. Acknowledge what is there right now. Gently guide your attention back to the breath, and if you lose the soothing rhythm, allow it to return.

Then expand your awareness to the body as a whole, the breathing body as it sits, lies or stands here.

Tune into yourself and notice what comes up when you ask yourself: 'What could be a kind, supportive wish to myself right now? For instance, 'May I feel safe' ... or 'May I feel healthy ... happy ... at ease'.

Choose the words that come from your heart and that can be taken to heart ... If you like you can allow this wish to flow through you on the rhythm of the breath.

For instance, 'May I...' on the in-breath and '... feel safe' on the out-breath.

Repeat the whole phrase or just one or two keywords and mindfully acknowledge what arises while you let this kind wish flow through you.

A gentle smile may accompany the offering of the wish, like you would also do when you give a present to another person.

Feeling the touch of one or both hands on your heart may support your receiving of the wish.

Every experience, pleasant or unpleasant, can be welcomed as part of the practice.

When you are ready, slowly open your eyes and bring your attention back to your surroundings.

A Safe Place

As a start of any exercise, you can always begin with the first two steps of Breathing Space with Kindness, as described in the first exercise. Also, when you feel stuck, you can remind yourself of simply being mindful of whatever arises and reconnect with a soothing breathing rhythm. You can gently resume the exercise when you feel ready to do so.

Now imagine yourself being at a place where you can feel secure and at ease, a safe place where you can be peacefully alone, just the way you are, without anybody else around. It may be a place coming up from memory or fantasy, or both ... It can be a place outdoors, at the seaside, in a forest or garden ... or indoors in a cozy corner of your home ... or anywhere. What does your place look like? Does a visual image emerge? ... What shapes, what colors do you see? If there is no clear visual image, that's fine too. Perhaps your imagination reveals what your other senses would notice at a safe place? What sounds? What fragrances? How does the contact with the surroundings feel? Do you feel warmth or coolness? A particular touch or support? It may be just a subtle sense of an atmosphere of safeness. Observe the details of your experience.

Images can be fleeting, or different places pass by. That's fine. It is how our minds work. Just acknowledging what arises. There is no wrong experience. This exercise is at the same time a practice in mindfulness. All experiences can be welcomed with playful curiosity; and every response to what you experience, pleasant or unpleasant, can be noticed with a non-judgmental mind. Just imagine the safe place welcoming you with whatever experience you may have.

What sensations arise in the body when you imagine yourself in this safe place? How do your muscles feel, your face, chest, belly? What feelings and thoughts do you notice?

Now imagine the place really appreciates your presence, however you feel. That it finds joy in welcoming you and wishes you well ... How does that affect you? Continue as long as you wish, knowing you can always return to this practice, wherever you are and however you feel. At any time, you can practice imagining a place to come home to, again and again, in whatever form it will reveal itself.

When you are ready, slowly open your eyes and bring your attention back to your surroundings.

If you wish, you can journal your experience of this exercise guided by the following questions.

- Which place(s) arose during the exercise?
- Which senses were you most aware of during the exercise?
- Which bodily sensations, feelings and thoughts did you observe?
- What was it like to imagine that the place really appreciated you were there?
- What are you noticing now, while reflecting on the practice?
- What could be a kind wish to yourself?

Body Scan

Lie down in a comfortable place. Although you may feel sleepy or your mind may drift, the goal is to try and remain alert and aware of the present moment.

Gently close your eyes. Bring your attention to your breathing. Breathe in...and out... and just allow yourself to continue to breathe naturally.

Bring awareness to the physical sensations in different parts of your body. Notice what you feel without judgment. It's not about good or bad, it's just about noticing.

Continue to breathe at your own pace; notice how your lungs slowly fill with air when you breathe in and deflate when you breathe out.

Bring your awareness to where your body makes contact with the surface below you. On each breath out, let go and sink a little deeper into the surface below you.

Begin by bringing your attention to your left foot for any sensations; simply become aware of them. Notice your left calf. Scan up slowly, now through your thigh. Allow yourself to feel any and all sensations. Scan your right foot, then your calf, then your thigh. Focus on your stomach next; feel it rising and sinking as you breathe in and out.

Remain aware of your stomach, your breath. If your stomach is tense or tight, can you allow it to soften? Take a breath.

Scan for any sensations in your left hand and arm. Then scan for any sensations in your right hand and arm. Continue to bring awareness and a gentle curiosity to the sensations.

Come up to your chest. Continue scanning up along your neck and to your face. Feel the sensations in your jaw and your throat. Notice how the back of your head rests against the surface under you. Bring your awareness to the top of your head.

Take a moment to notice how all your body parts are connected. Let any sensations come to you. Just notice what kind of sensation it is – tingling, warmth, coolness, heaviness, floating, nothing. Accept whatever sensation there is as just that, a sensation that will arise and slowly and gradually change. It is just another part of you.

Continue to focus on your breathing for as long as you like. When you are ready, slowly open your eyes and bring your attention back to your surroundings.

Additional Resources

[Mindfulness-based programs for youth: A toolkit for youth workers](#) (English)

<https://www.mindfulschools.org/> (English)

Coholic, D. (2019). Facilitating mindfulness: A guide for human service professionals. Northrose Educational Resources. (Book, English)

[5 Tips for Teaching Mindfulness to Teens](#) (English)

[Activités de pleine conscience pour la salle de classe](#) (français)

[La pleine conscience à l'école](#) (French)

[Guide de présence à soi](#) (French)

[Ressources et enregistrements de pleine conscience](#) (French)

Apps

Insight Timer (Bilingual)

Over 30, 000 free guided meditations available.

HealthyMinds (Bilingual)

Developed by The Royal mental health care and academic health science center. This app was created to help students cope with emotions and daily stresses.

Smiling Mind (English)

Developed by psychologists and educators and has dedicated programs for children and youth.

Breathr (English)

A free app developed by youth and the BC Children's Kelty Mental Health Resource Centre and BC Children's Centre for Mindfulness.

Stop, Breathe, and Think (English)

An app for children, teens, and young adults with over 400 activities.

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