

School Health Programs Department

## Stress Reduction Activities for Students

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# Stress Reduction Activities for Students

## Introduction

Stress is a natural part of every young person's life. Stress is any change, internal or external, positive or negative, to which a young person must adapt; simply, "stress is anything that causes physical and/or mental wear and tear on the body and mind" (Joyce V. Fetro, Personal & Social Skills, 2000).

Students' stress is usually related to everyday experiences, worries and challenges at school, home, in the community and within their peer group. For example, young people may experience stress resulting from bullying, name calling, social isolation, not getting what they want, body image, academic difficulties, and unsafe neighborhoods. While each student will respond to and resolve stress differently, the impact of ongoing and/or unresolved stress can lead to feelings of anxiety, depression, irritability, poor concentration, aggression, physical illness, fatigue, sleep disturbance and poor coping skills such as tobacco, drug and/or alcohol use.

Therefore, young people, like adults, can benefit from learning and practicing stress management skills. Students who develop stress reduction skills learn how to feel and cope better without hurting themselves or others. Identifying and acknowledging the causes of stress and expressing feelings about them are usually the most effective tools students have to reduce stress, in addition to learning practical stress reduction skills.

The attached classroom activities are designed to teach students a variety of practical and fun stress reduction techniques. These activities may be used to address a stressful situation in the moment (such as: during a lockdown, before and/or after a morning full of testing, or following difficult transitions). It is important to practice these skills prior to the onset of a stressful event (for example: incorporate as part of health lessons, use as an activity for morning circle/carpet time).

When introducing the concept of stress management to students, it is useful to review the following general behaviors and techniques that will help students manage stress (as part of the discussion, have students brainstorm other ideas and strategies that work for them):

- Eat healthy meals with plenty of fruits and vegetables
- Maintain daily routine and schedule
- Exercise regularly
- Avoid caffeine (can increase feelings of anxiety and agitation)
- Do things you enjoy (for example: art, listening to music, being outdoors, dancing, writing poetry, reading, etc.)
- Get good amounts of rest and sleep
- Avoid alcohol, tobacco and drugs
- State feelings in a clear way (for example: "I feel angry when you yell at me.")
- Decrease negative self talk (for example: transform "My grades will never get any better." to "I may not be doing to well now, but my grades can improve if I get extra help and I do all my homework.")
- Be with friends who help you cope in a positive way
- Learn relaxation techniques (such as: deep breathing, muscle relaxation, meditation)
- Talk to caring adults
- Humor/laughter

# Deep Breathing Exercise (Belly Breathing)

## Audience:

Activity is appropriate and can be adapted for all levels K-12

## Purpose:

Students practice deep breathing techniques as part of stress reduction

## Materials:

No materials needed

## Content:

Teacher/facilitator introduces and demonstrates the concept of deep breathing as a stress reduction strategy that can be used in the present moment as well as an excellent skill to master to more effectively cope with future stressors.

Teacher/facilitator has all students stand with comfortable space between each other or seated in a chair.

### Provide students with the following directions:

1. Stand straight up with feet shoulder-width apart
2. Arms and hands are relaxed downward
3. Body is relaxed
4. Eyes closed
5. Focus on lower abdomen (belly) and imagine a small balloon in that space
6. Breath in slowly and deeply through nostrils, imagining the balloon inflating (*getting bigger/larger/growing*) slowly, hold a few seconds
7. Slowly exhale through the mouth, imagining the balloon gently deflating (*getting smaller, shrinking*); blow out of the mouth as if blowing out a candle
8. **Tip:** Place a hand over the lower abdomen to feel it go up and down, and make sure you're not breathing with the chest
9. Repeat at least 10 times

Ask students how different their bodies feel after the exercise. (Are they more relaxed/calm? Do they feel lighter? Great? Tired?)

## Extension:

Practice several times with the class until they achieve a comfortable competence with deep breathing. Encourage students to practice on their own as well (e.g. while they are waiting in line for something, sitting on the bus to school, at bedtime, etc.). Have students teach the deep breathing technique to a friend or family member. Once students develop this habit, they will automatically go into deep breathing mode and relaxation.

# Progressive Relaxation

## (Deep Muscle Relaxation)

### Audience:

Activity can be adapted for all levels K-12 (if needed, modify choice and number of directions for Kindergarten and First Grade students)

### Purpose:

Students learn deep muscle relaxation as an easy stress reduction activity

### Materials:

No materials needed (**Tip:** Show students diagrams/illustrations/model of human muscles to help them identify/visualize muscle groups in preparation for the exercise)

### Content:

Teacher/facilitator introduces the concept that relaxation is a good way to reduce stress. Tell students that they are going to do an activity that will help them relax by tightening and releasing different muscle groups in their bodies. Students may sit or lay down on their backs (depending on space).

Demonstrate/model each step for students in preparation for their participation. Then **read and model** the following instructions to your students twice for each direction:

1. Raise your eyebrows and wrinkle your forehead. Try to touch your hairline with your eyebrows. Hold for 5 seconds...and relax.
2. Make a frown. Hold for 5 seconds...and relax.
3. Close your eyes as tightly as you can. Draw the corners of your mouth back with your lips closed. Hold for 5 seconds...and relax.
4. Open your eyes and your mouth as wide as you can. Hold for 5 seconds...and relax. Feel the warmth and calmness in your face.
5. Stretch your arms out in front of you. Close your fist tightly. Hold for 5 seconds...and relax. Feel the warmth and calmness in your hands.
6. Stretch your arms out to the side. Pretend you are pushing against an invisible wall with your hands. Hold for 5 seconds...and relax.
7. Bend your elbows and make a muscle in your upper arm. Hold for 5 seconds...and relax. Feel the tension leave your arms.
8. Lift your shoulders. Try to make your shoulders touch your ears. Hold for 5 seconds...and relax.
9. Arch your back away from the back of your chair (or off the floor). Hold for 5 seconds...and relax.

10. Round your back. Try to push it against the back of your chair (or against the floor). Hold for 5 seconds...and relax. Feel the tension leaving your back.
11. Tighten your stomach muscles. Hold for 5 seconds...and relax.
12. Tighten your hip and buttock muscles. Hold for 5 seconds...and relax.
13. Tighten your thigh muscles by pressing your legs together as close as you can. Hold for 5 seconds...and relax.
14. Bend your ankles toward your body as far as you can. Hold for 5 seconds ...and relax.
15. Curl your toes under as far as you can. Hold for 5 seconds...and relax. Feel the tension leave your legs.
16. Tighten all the muscles in your whole body. Hold for ten seconds...and relax. Let your entire body be heavy and clam. Sit quietly (or lie quietly) and enjoy this feeling of relaxation for a couple of minutes.

**Extension:**

Practice this activity with the class at other times to help students acquire competency with the technique. It may also be useful to calm and focus students in transitions (e.g. after recess) using just a few of the directions. Encourage students to practice this activity on their own to reduce stress. Have students share this activity with a family member and/or take turns leading directions for the class periodically throughout the school year.

# Simple Meditation

## Target:

Activity is appropriate and can be adapted for all levels K-12.

## Purpose:

Introduce students to meditation as an effective, widely practiced activity that can reduce stress.

## Glossary:

Meditate – to think calm thoughts in order to relax or have a spiritual activity.

Meditation – the word was adopted in late nineteenth century to refer to various spiritual practices from Hinduism, Buddhism, and other Eastern religions (*may show students Asian continent on a map or globe to identify where Eastern religions/practices originated*) and is usually defined as one of the following:

- A state that is experienced when the mind is free of all thoughts; when the mind is quiet
- Focusing the mind on a single object (such as one's breath or a mantra/chant)
- An "opening up" to the divine or to a "higher power"
- Focused thought on a topic (such as thinking about kindness)

## Materials:

Seated exercise in a chair or on the floor.

## Content:

Introduce students to the activity by talking about the widespread practice of meditation throughout the world. Check in with students by show of hands how many have done meditation before (e.g. in martial arts practice, at a temple, in a church). Explain to students that through this activity they will calm their body, mind and spirit. OPTIONAL: Have students take their heart rate before the activity begins and then after the meditation exercise.

## Instructions:

### Warm up (Optional: take heart rate and note it)

1. Begin by sitting comfortably, balanced, and relaxed (if seated in a chair, feet on the ground). Breathe easy and from the abdomen/"belly breathing" (not chest breathing).
2. Practice a few deep breaths with the group.
3. Rotate the head in easy, slow circles; change direction and rotate in slow, easy circles.
4. Look up; tilt your head way back. Look down; put your chin on your chest.
5. Drop your arms and hands to the side and shake them gently and easily.
6. Raise your feet off the floor and gently and easily shake the knees.
7. Straighten your spine while meditating.

**Practice (repeat two times)**

8. This is done SILENTLY.
9. When teacher says, “**Close your eyes**”, close your eyes. *[Once your eyes are closed, simply relax your mind and do not make an effort to think about anything; slowly your mind will clear and relax]*  
When teacher says, “**Open your eyes**”, open your eyes.
10. Now, sit straight up, relaxed, and balanced.
11. “**Close your eyes**” (two minutes elapse)
12. “**Open your eyes**”
13. Check in with students: *how was that?* (Students may give thumbs up or thumbs down.) *Now everyone practice it again.*
14. Repeat exercise: “**Close your eyes**”...two minutes elapse...  
“**Open your eyes**” (Optional: take heart rate and compare to heart rate before meditation)
15. Check in with students

**Extension:**

Teacher may follow-up by having students practice meditation at other times during class. Encourage students to practice meditation on their own to develop the habit of using meditation for stress reduction and overall health. Have students teach this method to a friend or family member.

# Visual Imagery

## Audience:

Activity can be adapted for all levels K-12

## Purpose:

Students learn the process of visual imagery as a technique to help themselves calm down

## Materials:

No materials needed

## Content:

Teacher leads students through the process of visual imagery as a relaxation technique

## Instructions:

1. Students sit comfortably for this activity
2. Use a calm, low, slow voice and give sufficient time between each visual suggestion for students to “ease” into the vision and “see” each step
3. Create your own visual scenario appropriate to students’ age, experience and interest. Example:

**Close your eyes.** “See” in your mind’s eye a beautiful beach. The sun is shining warmly, the breeze coming from the ocean is soft and warm, palm trees are overhead and a few seagulls circle about. Imagine walking barefoot in the warm sand, feel your feet sink in the sand with each step. Walk toward the water’s edge and let the water roll over your feet. Jump in the water; it is warm, gentle and very refreshing. Come out of the water and walk to your big beach towel, lay down and relax. Rest for a while in all the peace and beauty surrounding you. Imagine how it looks, how it sounds, how it smells. Breathe in deeply the warm ocean air, stay as long as you like.

When you are ready to leave, go to the edge of the water and throw in anything that has been bothering you, anything you wish to be rid of in your life, anything you are feeling sad or angry about, anything you worry about (e.g. problems at home, violence in your neighborhood, bullies, death of a loved one, issues with friends). Picture it as a big rock, a chain, a heavy bag over your shoulders, or any image that helps you see it as undesirable. Throw it in the ocean as far as you can. Watch it sink and get taken by the waves. When the “visit” is done, be thankful for the release of the burden, the problem, the worry; then walk peacefully back through the warm sand and take a rest on your beach towel.

4. Practice this imagery in class for 10-20 minutes, depending on grade level



5. Allow time for students to debrief and share about where they went in their visualization and what they felt about the experience/technique. This can be done in pairs, small groups or sharing with whole class. Sample guiding questions:
- Where did your visualization take you?
  - Do you feel more calm/relaxed after going through this exercise?
  - What did you see, hear, feel, smell during your visualization/did anything in particular stand out?
  - What was it like throwing your burdens into the water?
  - How does it feel to be back in the classroom?
  - Is this technique/exercise something you might do in the future to clam down, relax and reduce your stress?

### **Extension:**

Practice visualizations with the class several times until students achieve competence with the technique. Encourage students to practice this at home or at any time to relieve stress. The activity may be reinforced by having students write down how they felt after completing the activity. They could keep a journal of post-visualization feelings and thoughts. You may also provide students with time to create their own visualizations and take turns leading the class through visualization exercises periodically throughout the school year.

# Peer Sharing (Co-listening)

## Target:

Activity is appropriate for grades 3 - 12

## Purpose:

Students have the opportunity to share thoughts and feelings within a safe and structured activity. Listening skills are taught and practiced.

## Materials:

No materials are needed for this activity

## Content:

This is a two-part activity that provides students an opportunity to: 1) relieve stress by talking about what they are thinking or feeling in the moment, while being intentionally listened to, and; 2) talk about opportunities and solutions related to the topic at hand to help move beyond current feelings of stress and/or tension. The activity involves one student talking while his/her partner(s) listens without comment.

Set the stage with students by establishing rules for safe sharing. For example: Be respectful, no teasing, information shared is not talked about once activity ends (stays in the classroom), respect all feelings, ideas, opinions. Before beginning, model the activity using yourself and student volunteers to clearly demonstrate the activity.

## Instructions:

### *Part One*

1. Students should be in pairs; have students find a partner (e.g. you can number off students 1, 2, 1, 2...).
2. Student #1 talks while student #2 simply listens (e.g. *ask Student 1 to share how they are feeling today and why? Or how they are feeling at the moment Or about any concerns or worries they are experiencing*).
3. After 1-3 minutes the students switch roles and student #2 talks while student #1 listens for another 1-3 minutes (*Student #2 now talks about the same question, e.g. how they are feeling today and why?*).

### *Part Two*

4. After the pairs are done sharing, group students in triads (groups of three; again you may number off students 1, 2, 3, 1, 2, 3 ...).
5. Student #1 talks while students #2 and #3 listen (e.g. *ask Student 1 to talk about opportunities and solutions related to current issue or stressors he/she is experiencing or concerned about*).
6. Every 1-3 minutes switch until each student in the group has a turn to talk.

7. OPTIONAL: Students may share with whole class their experience of sharing thoughts and feelings while being listened to and what it is like to listen intentionally without comment.
8. Check in with students to see if they feel any sense of relief, calmness, focus or less stressed as a result of the activity.

**Extension:**

Teacher may follow-up by having students practice peer sharing at other times. Encourage students to practice this method on their own amongst themselves for mutual support.

# Animal Charades

## (Physical Activity)

### Target:

Activity is appropriate for elementary students.

### Purpose:

Students participate in a fun physical activity to reduce stress and tension.

### Materials:

- Several folded pieces of paper with different names of animals on each
- A hat or container to hold the folded pieces of paper
- Optional: A CD or tape player (it can be fun to play music during this activity)

### Content:

Students pick a paper from the hat and figure out how to present their animal charade. Since charades is a non-verbal activity, playing music in the background can add to the fun of “acting out” the animals.

### Instructions:

1. Depending on class size, break class into groups of 2, 3 or 4 students.
2. Write several different names of animals on paper; one name per folded up piece of paper (students may help with this as part of the activity).
3. Put names in the hat.
4. Each group picks a name and figures out how to present their charade to the class.
5. Each group takes a turn presenting their charade, while the “audience” guesses the animals presented.
6. Depending on time, number of groups and number of folded papers, teacher determines how many rounds of charades each group presents.
7. OPTIONAL: At the end of the activity, distribute paper, pencils, and crayons/markers for students to draw and color their favorite animal.

### Extension:

Teacher may follow-up by checking in with students about how much they enjoyed the activity. If it is popular, use the activity at other times and make the connection between physical activity, humor/fun and creative thinking to stress reduction.

# Silent Ball

## (Physical Activity)

### Audience:

Activity can be adapted for all levels, but is particularly useful with elementary and middle school students

### Purpose:

Students utilize a fun, safe, quiet physical education activity to relieve tension/stress

### Materials:

Use one or more Nerf ball(s), gator skin ball(s), or lightweight ball(s). *If you do not have one in your classroom, please see your physical education instructor or appropriate staff person at your school site.*

### Content:

Teacher introduces the idea that physical activity is an excellent stress management tool and explains the rules of silent ball:

- **Teacher is the only referee regarding bad passes and missed catches**
- Talking or making sounds is an out
- Missed catch or bad pass is an out
- A “good” throw is within arm’s length of the intended catcher and does not include “fast balls” (model good throws for students)
- Students that are out must remain quiet at their desks and not interfere with the game in any way

### Instructions:

1. No one can talk or make a sound; that is the object of the game
2. Students may stand by their desks or position students in any arrangement to facilitate tossing the ball to each other around the classroom
3. Make a good throw to a classmate; explain that students cannot throw back to the person who threw to them
4. If student misses the ball or makes a bad pass, student is out and must sit at his/her desk until the next round
5. Play until all students are seated; last two are the champs!

## Extension:

Teacher may follow-up by using this activity with the class at other times, such as a rainy day. It may be useful to calm and focus students in transitions (e.g. after returning from lunch/recess to the classroom), to break up an extended/lengthy lesson or as an incentive for successful completion of a task/lesson.

Have follow-up discussion with students regarding the health benefits and stress management benefits of fun, safe physical activities. Guiding questions:

- Activity provides a way for the body to relieve tension and frustration; what are your favorite physical activities? (e.g. basketball, running, hiking, swimming, dancing, etc.)
- How does it feel to be tense/frustrated/stressed? Where in your body do you feel tension or stress?
- How does it feel to be relaxed and calm? How does your body feel when you are relaxed and calm?
- Which of these activities can you do alone?
- How do you feel after doing your favorite physical activity?

# Movement to Music Freeze Dance

## (Physical Activity)

### Target:

Activity is most appropriate for elementary students.

### Purpose:

Gross motor activities provide stress reduction for young students.

### Materials:

- A CD, iPod (with portable speakers) or tape player
- Music (5 to 15 minutes of music)
- Note: It is best to use instrumental music/no lyrics; you may download music from an internet source, ask your music teacher or a coworker, or look in instrumental, new age and dance/DJ mixes sections of your favorite music store or library)

### Content:

Students move/dance to match the tempo, beat and rhythm of the music. When the music stops, students FREEZE, when music resumes, students continue to move/dance to match the music. It is suggested that the sequence of music starts slow and calm, moves to fast, upbeat pace and then returns to slow and calm to end the activity.

### Instructions:

1. If necessary, arrange classroom to provide ample space for the activity.
2. Students take a place in the designated "movement/dance" area with sufficient personal space so as not to run into other students OR students may be positioned in a circle and move in the same direction around the circle.
3. Review activity rules with students:
  - Move to match the music
  - FREEZE when the music stops
  - When the music starts again, move to match the music
  - Activity involves only movement, no voices
4. Start the music.
5. Stop music at timely intervals.
6. Note suggested sequence of music; always end with slow, calming music.

### Extension:

Teacher may follow-up by using Movement to Match Music at other times to relieve tension, stress in the classroom. Make connection for students between regular physical activity, health and stress reduction.

# Paper Mosaics

## (Art Activity)

### Audience:

Activity can be adapted for all levels K-12, but is particularly useful with elementary and middle school students.

### Purpose:

Students learn to make paper mosaics as a creative stress reduction activity.

### Glossary:

Mosaics – an ancient art form usually made by arranging small pieces of stone or glass to create a beautiful picture or pattern.

### Materials:

- One 8.5"x11" or 9"x12" piece of colored construction paper
- Colored construction paper scraps or discarded magazines
- Pencil
- Scissors
- Glue
- Pictures of mosaics from books, internet and/or teacher's samples (*see attached samples*)
- Modification: for K-1 prepare mosaic patterns and pre-cut paper tiles

### Content:

Teacher introduces the concept of mosaics as a creative, calming and fun stress reduction strategy. Show students pictures of mosaics from books or from the internet. Ask students about their own experiences in making mosaics or seeing mosaics in their community/city. Point out very simple "mosaics" students can easily relate to, for example, bathroom ceramic tiles (this gives a clear picture of how "paper tiles" will be arranged on their drawings). Teacher reviews materials to be used and general rules applied to this type of activity in the classroom.

### Instructions:

1. Students clear their desks of books, folders, etc.
2. Using a pencil, students draw the outline of an object, shape or scene on a 8.5"x11" or 9"x12" piece of paper (see examples attached of Butterfly, Elephant, Flowers, Cat's Face).
3. Students then cut small colored square paper "tiles" from the scrap construction paper or the magazines (tear out pages you would like to use and then cut the pictures up into little square "tiles"). Modification: for K-1 prepare mosaic patterns and pre-cut paper tiles.
4. Explain to students that each outline should be filled with tiles of the same color.



5. Working with one shape/area/figure at a time, students apply glue to the inside of their outlined shapes, and then place the paper “tiles” in the shape/outline, leaving a small space between each paper “tile” (for some shapes, students may have to cut “customized tiles” to effectively fill in the shape).
6. Students repeat the glue and placement of “tiles” in each shape/outline of their drawings until the mosaic is complete.

**Extension:**

Follow-up by having students share their mosaics with the class and facilitating a discussion about what students liked and found challenging about the activity. Make connection between the activity and stress reduction and discuss the impact of the activity with students. If students enjoyed the activity, plan a follow-up lesson to give students a chance to improve their mosaic making skills.





