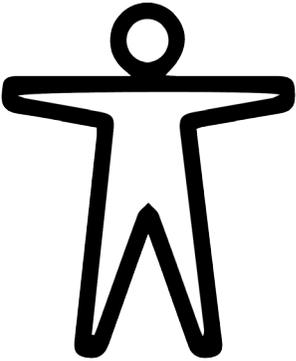


INTRODUCTION

The Random Acts of Kindness Foundation's (RAK) Focusing Strategies are designed to help students develop a better sense of intention, attention and attitude. These strategies are part of RAK's comprehensive approach to creating a culture of kindness in the classroom that also includes Problem-Solving Strategies, thematic lesson plans and other resources.

Through consistently practicing these Focusing Strategies for the body, mind and heart, research shows that students can better develop the skills needed to pay attention, have a more positive attitude, regulate their emotions, and boost their desire to learn (Goleman, 2013; Lantieri and Goleman, 2008; Schonert-Reichl, et al, 2007). Linda Lantieri (2008) states that practicing self-regulation strategies with students of any age "gives them a clear message that we value and recognize their inner capacities. And it is important to [practice these strategies] regularly to get the benefits they can provide."

FOCUSING =

BODY	MIND	HEART
		

RAK's Focusing Strategies can easily be integrated into group activities and lessons.

The strategies are detailed below and are also referenced in the

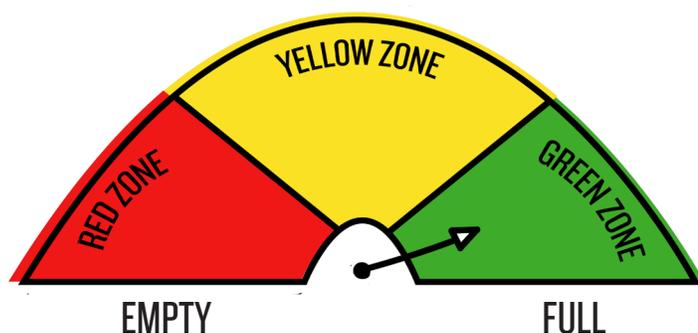
[RAK Lesson Notes and Activities](#).

FOCUSING THE BODY: *Elementary School Strategies*

Students may initially experience an inability to focus as discomfort in the body due to being fidgety, having a stomachache, headache, tiredness, or dysregulation of energy levels. Learning to focus increases one's ability to regulate emotions, while decreasing impulsivity and increasing self-control (Roeser, et al, 2014). Learning how to focus the body is one part of RAK's Focusing Strategies. RAK recommends three, five-minute sessions a day practicing the strategies that are listed below.

At the beginning of the year one minute may feel like a lifetime. The body needs time to develop its focusing strength. Be patient with your students and yourself as you slowly build the amount of time you all can practice focusing. The key is to keep practicing every day (or during your group meeting) in a planned and thoughtful way. During the group meeting, consider having your fellow students sit or lie quietly with their eyes closed. Timing the students focus will help them see progress. It would be helpful

for you to practice these strategies at another time, so that you can pay attention to the other students during their focusing sessions. These strategies can help when students are calm and also when they are stressed or upset. Reminding the students in the group to use these strategies during challenging times can help them calm their bodies so that their minds can think more clearly.



Examples to try:

- Use a chime, bell or tone to signal the beginning and end of your practice sessions.
- Talk students through breathing in and out through the nose while fully inflating the belly. (Goleman, 2014) With younger students you can try using a "Breathing Buddy" or favorite stuffed animal on their bellies to show how when they breathe in the belly rises and when they breathe out the belly falls. Use a calm, reassuring voice as you cue breathing in and breathing out.
- As students practice their belly breathing, talk them through visualizing each part of the body as it relaxes, starting at the toes and moving up to the head. This technique helps students pay attention to how their bodies feel while focusing on complete relaxation.
- Have students practice breathing while you describe a serene and peaceful scene. The goal of this visualization technique is to promote a sense of calm that focuses the body.
- Kindness Meter: To help students identify how they are feeling and how they might be able to better focus the body, mind and heart, RAK has developed a tool that we call the kindness meter. The kindness meter can be used both proactively and reactively with students to help them respond to situations, even those that are stressful, in kind ways to themselves and others. See the Grade 3 Feelings and Emotions lesson for a description of how to help students use the kindness meter to move from feeling angry, upset or afraid (red zone) to successfully managing these feelings (green zone).

Middle & High School Strategies

Adolescents have a unique opportunity to develop strategies to help focus their mind (Goleman, 2014). During adolescence, the brain is going through a process of remodeling, when synapses are removed or "pruned" as the brain starts to specialize and myelin is formed, which is a healthy sheath that allows connected neurons to communicate with each other more effectively. While adolescence can seem confusing and overwhelming at times, learning strategies to focus the body can actually help students calmly reflect on a situation rather than reacting in an emotionally dysregulated way. Through deep breathing, focusing the mind on one thing, having downtime, connecting with others, getting enough sleep, playing, getting exercise, and learning how to pay attention to thoughts and feelings, teens can learn to focus their minds and attention in ways that can change the activity and the structure of the brain. (Siegel, 2013) While teachers can encourage students to use these techniques at home, practicing simple breathing techniques in the classroom is one way to focus the body, which in turn helps focus the mind.

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Suggestions for starting a breathing practice in your classroom:

- Explain to students that they will be learning some simple breathing techniques, which can help them calm their body and focus their minds.
- Then explain the process:
 - Have students close their eyes or chose a point in the room to gaze at. Let them know that you will be leaving your eyes open.
 - You will sound the chime, bell or tone or start the timer on the projector to note the beginning of the practice.
 - Students will breath in through their nose for five then out of their nose for a count of five, a process that engages the parasympathetic nervous system and helps them calm their body. Students should continue breathing in and out until they hear the last chime or the timer sounds.
- Before beginning, also explain to students that they will do the breathing activity for a short time at first and you will increase the amount of time they do the breathing as they get comfortable and improve. Emphasize that while it might feel awkward at first, learning breathing techniques is like exercising: with practice, they can improve. To make this practice more comfortable for students, establish a routine and do it the same way everyday so that it becomes predictable for the students. When students understand the expectations, they can better identify what would help them do this activity successfully.
- Make sure to prepare students for what is happening next by saying something like: "We're going to practice a breathing technique and then afterward we are going to do an activity that is part of our RAK curriculum." That way they know they are not going to have to discuss what they experienced during the breathing activity.

- Some people find additional sensory input helpful when they are trying to quiet their body and mind. Note that students will need to determine what level of sensory input is useful and doesn't distract them from learning breathing techniques. The challenge is finding the right balance of input and focus; it is important for students to learn what works for best for them. Some examples of sensory input include:
 - Mandalas to color.
 - A stress ball to squeeze.
 - Headphones to listen to music, turned down low so students can still hear you. The silence can be overwhelming or distracting and, for those students, playing music can lessen distractions.
- If the students are struggling to use breathing to focus the body, have them write in a journal first about what they are grateful for or acts of kindness they have done or seen during the week. This can help them calm their bodies and their minds. Another great strategy is to have them write down their frustrations and shred them in classroom shredder as a way to metaphorically let them go.

FOCUSING THE MIND

RAK lessons include questions designed to help students move from a basic to an advanced understanding of a concept, and how to evaluate and apply their understanding to new and complex situations. These questions help develop the students' thinking around social and emotional issues. [Anderson, Krathwohl, Airasian, Cruikshank, Mayer, Pintrich, Raths, Wittrock (2001); Lee, C., & K. E. Picanco (2013)] The RAK lesson plans also include discussions, written or oral reflections, journal responses and evaluation questions that help students focus their minds. Dr. Maurice Elias, a psychology professor at Rutgers University, recommends using a reflective summary after teaching a unit with related social emotional concepts, which we have provided in each lesson. Elias sees this as a highly beneficial practice, as it gives students "a chance to think about what they have learned from the topic, as well as to allow teachers/group leaders to see what [concepts] students are taking away with them." (Elias, 2011).

Another way for students to focus their minds on how to live life kindly is through a group discussion of the 12 RAK Kindness Concepts (see RAK Mentoring Guide) to encourage them to reflect on how to evaluate their progress in internalizing these concepts. Actively reflecting with other students in the group helps them to recognize the steps they have taken to live a kinder life. This can be done through writing thoughtful comments in their RAK journals as an evaluation tool, referencing the Kindness Concepts when you are giving specific feedback to students, and reflecting on how well the class is demonstrating the Kindness Concepts during class discussions. The power of caring adults in a student's healthy development is the foundation for success, not just in social and emotional learning, but in all aspects of a student's growth. (Elias, 2004; Immordino-Yang & Damasio, 2007; Kusche & Greenberg, 2006; Schonert-Reichl & Lawlor, 2007; Zins, Bloodworth, Weissberg & Walberg, 2004) By showing that you notice and appreciate their growth, you are acknowledging the student's dedication to living a life of kindness.

FOCUSING THE HEART

The RAK Pedagogy ([see RAK Educator Guide](#)) discusses how developing an understanding of the self as a kind person is firmly rooted in the relationship between inspiration, empowerment, action, and sharing kindness. Our strategies for focusing the heart are grounded in this pedagogy through recognizing and celebrating the kind acts that happen every day. These can be small, simple acts such as holding a door open for someone or helping a friend by tying their shoe for them, to more elaborate acts such as having a school-wide canned food drive for the hungry or organizing a fundraiser for an important cause. Just as these kind acts range from simple to complex, recognizing and celebrating these kind acts can be done in both big and small ways. What is important for focusing the heart is not the size of the recognition but the recognition itself.

Elementary School Strategies

- Here are some ways to create a culture of recognition and celebrate kindness. You can pick what works best for your age group:
- Encourage and model using respectful behavior in the classroom.
- Have students use gratitude journals or share what they are grateful for at the end of each day.
- Create a bulletin board that celebrates kindness both in your classroom and in the community.
- Encourage students to bring in notes, pictures and articles to display.
- Have students recognize or compliment each other for doing something kind.
- Have your class create thank you notes for school staff for the things they do each day to make your school a kinder place to learn.
- Encourage students to celebrate the adults who care for them by creating a small gift that recognizes their kindness.
- Have a "Kindness Jar" that collects marbles or coins for kind acts that happen in the classroom, and discuss what it feels like to be filling the jar (and their lives) with kindness. When the jar is full, discuss what that means...should they start another jar? Does it mean they are done being kind? Do they want to celebrate their kind actions in some way?
- Create a slideshow with images of students doing a service project or fundraiser and show it at a school assembly.
- If students set personal kindness goals using the RAK Student Assessment, have them determine a celebrate their success once they reach those goals.

Middle & High School Strategies

- Make kindness cool through having the students initiate a club, group or flash mob where they promote or do kind acts around the school.
- Celebrate kind things that have happened at your school during a school assembly or pep rally.
- Produce a news segment on the school news channel or for the school website with "Kindness in the News," promoting kindness in your school community.
- Have students write "Random Notes of Kindness" and slip them into other students lockers.
- Celebrate your school support staff by having a surprise breakfast or clean-up day to show how much you appreciate them.
- Commit as a school to doing acts of kindness in the community through service projects or small actions. Post a thermometer or a kindness jar in the school and record the acts of kindness or community service and celebrate as the thermometer or jar gets filled.
- Add a school award along with the typical academic and sports awards for a student or students who make a difference at school and/or the community with kindness.

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