Ways to Manage Stress For Yourself & Your Students During Distance Learning

As caretakers, one of the best ways we can help our students and children is by cultivating mindfulness. Cultivating mindfulness can help us be aware of our actions and be present for the children and adolescents in our lives. “What does it mean to be mindful and to cultivate mindfulness? It is simply that we notice the thoughts, feelings, and sensations that arise within us from breath to breath” (Farhi, 1996).

Practicing breath work can be a beneficial part of managing stress and anxiety, and cultivating mindfulness. In many instances, your breath can be one of the first indicators that you’re undergoing stress; however, we are not always in tune with listening and watching our breath to notice those first signs of stress. For example, in a stressful situation you may find that your breath is rapid, shallow, or that you are holding your breath altogether. You may also notice that instead of having relaxed diaphragmatic breaths and belly breaths, you are breathing with the upper part of your chest and collar bones, and that your shoulders have risen towards your ears.

Spending time practicing breath work and focusing on your breath can help you notice your feelings and provide you with tools to help manage stress and anxiety. The first step in your breath practice begins with witnessing your breath or checking in with your breath. This can be done throughout the day no matter what you are doing. Checking in with your breath can help “gauge one’s physical and psychological state” (Farhi, 1996). According to Donna Farhi, to check in with your breath, you can ask yourself the following questions: Where do I feel my breathing; and what does my breathing feel like? As a visual, think about a puppy sleeping; they have deep belly breaths where they let their bellies swell and contract rhythmically without manipulation. Below are three breathing exercises that you can try yourself or include in your lessons to students and their families as ways to manage stress.

Three-Part Breath

Benefits: Helps with trouble sleeping, and with anxiety

Steps:

1. Start in a comfortable seated position or lying down, and close your eyes.
2. Place one hand on your tummy and the other hand over your heart.
3. Take a deep breath into your lower belly, feeling the hand resting over your tummy rise with the inhale.
4. Exhale completely drawing your belly button to your spine and feeling your hand lower with your exhale.
5. Inhale with the lower belly, then rise it up into the lower ribs, and higher yet into your heart, feeling the top hand rise.
6. Exhale starting with your top hand, lower ribs, and finally lower belly drawing towards the spine.
7. Think of a wave rising to shore (inhale), and receding back into the ocean (exhale).
8. Repeat three to five rounds then return to your natural breathing while being mindful to keep the relaxed belly breathing.

Alternate-Nostril Breathing

Benefits: Helps to calm nerves and relax you. This breath technique can also help if your mind is feeling too busy.

Steps:

1. Start in a comfortable seated position and close your eyes.
2. Using your right hand, place your index finger and middle finger between your eyebrows.
3. Gently close your right nostril using your right thumb, and inhale through the left nostril.
4. Once you've taken a complete inhale, release the right thumb, and close the left nostril with your right ring finger and gently exhale through the right nostril.
5. Continue three to five rounds.

**Note: If you don't wish to touch your face or if you're congested, gently place your hands in your lap and you can imagine the inhale going through one nostril and imagine the exhale through the opposite nostril.*

Counting Your Breath

Benefits: Helps with anxiety and relaxation. By counting your breaths, your mind has something to focus on when you're feeling overwhelmed or stressed.

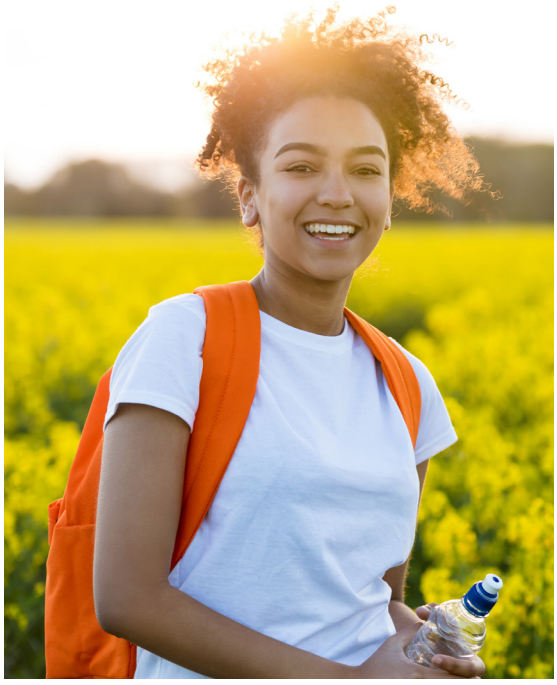
Steps:

1. Start in a comfortable seated position or lying down and close your eyes.
2. Starting from the low belly, take a full inhale to the count of three and hold at the top of your inhale for a couple of seconds.
3. Exhale completely to the count of three and hold at the bottom of your exhale for a couple of seconds (remember to draw the belly button towards the spine to fully clear out the exhale).
4. Repeat three to five rounds then return to your normal breathing with your eyes closed until you're ready to come back.

**Note: You can increase or decrease the counts of the inhale or exhale as needed.*

Other Ways to Help De-Stress During Distance Learning and Working Remotely

1. Get outside! If it is safe for you to go outside, maintain at least 6 feet from other people. You can go for walks and get to know your neighborhood more, run, bike, garden, etc. Safely getting outside during this time is important for our mental and physical well-being.
2. Exercise! Move your body every day either by getting outside, doing yoga, or your favorite type of exercise classes. Many fitness facilities and people are offering free classes online.
3. Read! Reading can help you relax. Reading also allows you to explore different people, parts of the world, and events while still practicing social distancing and self-isolation. Reading can also be a welcome form of escapism.
4. Learn something new! Start learning a new language, try out a new recipe, an arts project, etc.
5. Connect! Whether virtually or through phone calls, reach out to friends, family members, and people you haven't connected with in a while. Remember, we are all in this together.



Farhi, D. (1996). The Breathing Book