Big Ideas For This Lesson

After focusing on emotions for the past few lessons, this lesson literally turns our attention to thoughts. By paying attention to our thoughts we can begin to understand their nature, their origin, and how to respond to them in healthy ways. This week we will use mindfulness to answer these guiding questions:

- Where do thoughts come from?
- How do we become an observer of our thoughts?
- Do we need to believe all of our thoughts?
- How do we let go of “stuck thoughts”?
- How does mindfulness help us with thoughts?

Students will watch a 1-minute video on thoughts to prompt discussion on thoughts in relation to mindfulness. You will then facilitate a mindfulness practice to help students experience letting go of thoughts.

The take home message for this lesson is that trying to argue or think yourself out of your negative thoughts will only dig you deeper. In other words, "you cannot think your way out of a prison made of thoughts." We escape our negative thought patterns when we step outside the stream of thoughts, become a non-judgmental observer of our thoughts, and then let them go.

Essential Vocabulary

Function
Stuck thoughts
Thoughts
Unstuck thoughts
Visualization

Materials

- Bell/Chime/App that rings softly.
- SEL Journal.
Preparation

1. Review mindfulness-teaching script below.
2. Practice the “letting go of thoughts” exercise on your own before teaching.

Teaching Script

BUILDING BACKGROUND KNOWLEDGE & CONCEPT MODELING (I DO)

Begin by facilitating a group brainstorm to define the word thoughts. Depending on time you may choose to use small group structures (e.g., Pair-Share, Round-Robin, etc.) or you may simply call on students to share their definition out loud.

Accept all answers and highlight the difficulty of defining thoughts.

It is hard to define thoughts, isn’t it? We are using thoughts to try to define thoughts and we are experiencing thoughts all of the time. Let’s focus on the function of thoughts. What do thoughts do for us?

Again, depending on time you may allow for some further group work or class discussion.

Students will likely name pieces of the definition and function, but not all. An agreed upon definition may look something like this:

Thoughts are interpretations (opinions) we form about ourselves, others, and our world; they are the result of processing and organizing information. Thoughts inform the ways we act and feel.

Encourage students to write their own working definition of thoughts in their SEL Journal.

Teaching Note: If your students are already familiar with the Cognitive Triad, this is a great time to quickly review the connections between thoughts, feelings, and emotions. You may simply draw the Cognitive Triad on the board as a reminder.

Once students have taken some time to define thoughts and write their definition in their journal, have them watch this video: How to Get Rid of Stress in 60 Seconds.¹

Facilitate a quick discussion emphasizing the following points:

a. You are in charge of your thoughts. You decide where to put your attention.

b. Thoughts are like clouds; they come and go, but stay and grow depending on which ones you pay attention to.

c. Stuck thoughts happen when we focus too much attention on the future and past. Being quiet, still, and directing your attention to the present moment is the easiest way to “unstick them.”
d. It is impossible to be stressed if you can focus 100% of your attention on your breath. 
   (Try it out!)

e. Question your thoughts. Not all thoughts are true or even useful!

Teaching Note: The concept of “letting go of thoughts,” while simple, is often in direct 
opposition to what we have learned to believe about thoughts. Rather than treating 
thoughts as significant and important, we are asking you here to view thoughts more as 
passing fads. We can witness thoughts arise and dissipate without any other action required 
from us.

The message is essentially: “You are not your thoughts. Thoughts will come and go. By using 
mindfulness to create space around our thoughts we become less reactive and more intentional 
in our responses and actions.” 

2, 3, 4, 5
GUIDED PRACTICE (WE DO)

Facilitate a mindfulness practice on “letting go of stuck thoughts.”

a. Instruct students to find a mindful body and begin mindful breathing. You may opt to turn out the lights or even encourage students to lie on their backs to deepen this practice.

b. Once you see students are calm and ready to participate, begin guiding them using your own variation of the following script:

c. “We will be using our imaginations to help us let go of stuck thoughts. I will be guiding you through a visualization. Our imagination is a powerful tool. The more you can use your imagination to visualize what I am saying, the better this will work. Begin by closing your eyes or looking at a spot just in front of you with a soft gaze. With your eyes closed, let’s all take 3 deep breaths together.”

d. “Good. Now, keep your attention focused on the feeling of your breath coming in and your breath going out. By focusing our attention on our breath we can begin to notice any thoughts that distract us from our breath - any worries about the past or fears about the future. Just notice these thoughts as they arise, label them as ‘thoughts,’ then let them go, and return your attention to your breath.”

e. “Great. Begin to imagine you are sitting or lying on top of a big grassy hill. Really use your imagination and picture all of the details. Imagine what the grass would feel like underneath you. Imagine how the sun would feel shining on your face. Imagine the feeling of a soft breeze and the sounds of birds around you. There is nothing else in sight - just you, the hill, and the open sky.”

f. “Now, imagine that each thought you notice is a cloud passing overhead. Notice each thought as it comes up and watch it just as you would watch a cloud passing on a sunny day. You are not trying to do anything about it, not worrying about it or trying to change it; just observing it with a smile. You will begin to notice more thoughts arising. Do not do anything about these either. Just watch them come into your sky and then gently float away. Breathing in, breathing out.”

g. “In a moment I will be silent. Continue focusing your attention on your breath and continue watching your thoughts come and go like clouds. This is your time to relax so just let go. I will ring a chime/bell when our time is up. Breathing in, breathing out…”

h. Allow at least 30 seconds of silence or up to 2 minutes depending on how well your class does with mindfulness. Gently ring a chime/bell with a soft sound to signal it is time to move on.
REINFORCING LESSON CONCEPTS (YOU DO)

As time allows, you may facilitate a class, small group, or individual reflection of the experience using the questions in the ‘Reflect on it’ section.

a. “What did you notice about your thoughts?”
b. “Were there any thoughts that were particularly ‘sticky’?”
c. “Were you able to let go of any thoughts and just be present in the moment?”
d. “What were some emotions you experienced?”
e. “How can we use this in our daily lives to help us get ‘unstuck’?”

EVIDENCE OF CONCEPT ATTAINMENT

Reflect on it

- What did you notice about your thoughts?
- Were there any thoughts that were particularly ‘sticky’?
- Were you able to let go of any thoughts and just be present in the moment?
- What were some emotions you experienced?
- How can we use this in our daily lives to help us get ‘unstuck’?
- Did you notice any changes in your emotions as you watched your thoughts? How did you feel?

Journal it

- Identify a thought that is really ‘sticky’ (e.g., one that is difficult to let go).
- Using your best descriptive writing, describe the thought as if you are a scientist observing the thought.
- What does it look like? Feel like? Even smell or taste like? How does it change your emotions and behaviors? What makes it come and go?
EXTENSIONS

**Classroom**

- Practice “letting go of thoughts” at least once per day this week during your mindfulness time.
- Encourage students to use the website: [Pixel Thoughts 60 Second Meditation Tool to Clear Your Mind](http://www.pixelthoughts.co/) during breaks and as needed.

**School-wide**

Incorporate an awareness of the difference between thoughts and emotions into school culture. Whether at recess, lunch, or in the classroom, continually prompt students to differentiate between their thoughts and their emotions.

REFERENCES


