

React? Or Respond?

Objective: Building on Lesson 2, we'll learn more about how the different parts of our brains work and how impulses may not always be mindful. Mindfulness empowers us to make choices about how we react or respond to stimuli. Intro to helpful tool of S.T.O.P.

Preparation

- Facilitator should preview the video of Dan Siegel's hand model of the brain [here](#).
- With students, briefly review definitions of Mindfulness.
- Ask if any students used mindfulness since last time or what they remember.
- Preview the S.T.O.P technique [here](#).

Facts

- Your brain stem is where the "fight, flight or freeze" impulses come from.
- Your prefrontal cortex handles higher-level thinking and self-regulation. It's the last part of the brain to mature.
- Different stressors cause hormone release.
- Some emotions can be felt in the body.

Discussion (10 minutes)

"Between stimulus and response, there is a space. In that space lies our freedom and power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and freedom."

-Victor Frankl (from his book *Man's Search for Meaning*)

- Read the above quote (*Optional: give background on Frankl*) and ask kids to discuss...
- Remind / Review the "Have You Ever" list - Ask: which of those items might be linked to impulsivity?
- Can they imagine why it might be a good idea NOT to always follow your impulses?
- Introduce *Dan Siegel's hand model of the brain and the different parts and functions.
- Explain how "fight, flight or freeze" functions to keep us safe and how we share this with all other animals. Stress or emotional triggers can cause us to "flip our lids" and lose our ability to make good choices around how to respond vs. react. (*If appropriate, give examples from your own life when you've lost control/ acted impulsively.*)
- Share that the prefrontal cortex doesn't fully develop until age 25, but good news: mindfulness tools can help them develop this part of their brains ("brain plasticity")! Scientists measured the physical thickness of the prefrontal cortex in brains of regular meditators - not monks or gurus, but regular, working adults who did mindfulness every day for eight weeks - and to a person, each one had **measurably thicker** prefrontal cortex!
- "Name it to tame it." Research shows that being able to name our emotions can lessen their intensity and increase our ability to deal with them by lessening the fear circuit.

Exercise (6-8 minutes)

We're going to try a **formal sitting practice** and then imagine somewhat stressful situations and then explore a technique we call STOP. Please don't pick the MOST difficult thing you can imagine or remember, but rather, on a scale of 1 to 10, choose something that's a 4 or a 5: Maybe a misunderstanding with a friend or something frustrating. Also – when you notice an **impulse**, maybe to move, to scratch an itch or open your eyes, just take a moment 'before acting and see what it's like just to observe the impulse/ the feeling of wanting to do something. Does this sound OK? Would you like to give it a try?

1. If it feels okay, go ahead and close your eyes, or if not use a soft focus* with hands placed comfortably in your lap and feet flat on the floor. Now listen to the *sound of the bell* all the way until it disappears. ... See if you can notice the sensation of your feet on the ground – the slight pressure of gravity and weight. Can you also notice your seat and spine in the chair? Maybe you can feel the sense of the substance of your whole body sitting here.
2. Now, let's try taking two deep breaths together. Take a moment to try to actually feel the sensation of the breath in your body.
3. At any point during this practice you may feel like you want to change positions, open your eyes, look around or other such things. When you notice this happening, try taking just a moment to observe the feeling that's coming up – as if you're experiencing it for the first time. What is the actual physical sensation? As you're observing, does it change or even disappear altogether? (*Pause*)
4. Now bring to mind your challenging situation – this can be something that actually happened in your life or something you can imagine. Remember – not TOO challenging! A 4-5 on a scale of 1-10 is fine. Just something that's somewhat difficult, frustrating, annoying or stressful. Take another moment to imagine/ remember the details – what was happening? Were words spoken? Things you or another person did? What was happening in your emotions? Can you connect with that feeling? Now take this a step further and see if you can actually feel where in your body you notice the emotions – what do they feel like in your body? Stay with that a moment... Now, notice if you feel like you want to DO something, anything – again, try to connect with the impulse in the body.
5. Now I'm going to invite you to try S.T.O.P.: **S**top: Just stop whatever you're doing and notice that something is going on in your feelings. No need to judge – you're just taking a mindful pause. **T**ake a breath: As we learned last week, one or more slow, deep breaths can help regulate your nervous system and slow you down a bit. **O**bserve: Observe your experience in the moment just as it is, especially your emotions, thoughts and body sensations. If you can NAME your emotions, it will help lessen their power over you. **P**roceed: Move forward with more awareness while doing something that will support you in the moment such as talking to a friend, sitting in the sun, having a cup of tea, etc. Finding support will allow you to make good choices.
6. Open Sharing or Topic Question: Can you think of times when you might use this?

