

## Trees in a Forest

**Objective:** Trees in forests are connected by invisible systems of underground roots and fungi that share resources and nourishment, much as humans do. By connecting to our feelings for other people we discover our own humanity and sense of connectedness.

*Note: this lesson can be broken up over two consecutive weeks.*

### Preparation

- The group sits in rows or groups of two.
- Some students will need their cell phones. (We're not kidding)
- Option: you can share this wonderful [video](#) with the students, about how trees in forests communicate, if you have time.

### Facts (See more at end of lesson!)

- As human beings we are genetically hardwired to connect with other people.
- The hormone oxytocin (the "connection" hormone) is released when we are kind to other people (even strangers) and even if we just *think* about being kind to others!

### Discussion (5 minutes)

- There are scientists who study happiness, and what do you think they discovered makes people the happiest? (*Answers may be money, fame...*) They've discovered that once a person's basic needs are met (food, clothing, shelter) that material things make little to no difference in a person's level of happiness. The main thing they discovered was that happiness is about being connected to other people: family, friends and one's community. What do you think about that? *Let students answer.*
- Happiness is also *contagious*! What does "contagious" mean? Not only your *friend's* happiness can make you happier, but even your *friend's friend's* happiness can make you happier! What do you think about that? What are the implications?
- The Dalai Lama once said, "If you want others to be happy, practice compassion. If you want to be happy, practice compassion." What do you think this means? What does the word compassion mean? What does it look like in action? Right - it is active, it cares, it asks, "What can I do?"
- Mindfulness is not just about being attentive, but **it's about paying attention "in a particular way."** That particular way is with kindness. Mindfulness is sometimes called, "loving awareness." A thief coming to rob your house may be very attentive, but is he mindful? No, because being mindful always has a quality of caring and kindness.
- Just like we talked about how our challenging emotions connect us to other human beings, so do positive or happy emotions! We can feel happy for our loved ones when good things happen for them, right? And if we choose to pay attention to those feelings, then we're "soaking in the good," and creating more happiness for all!

### **Exercise One (5 minutes):**

1. Pair up with a friend or another person. One of you will be the Talker and the other the Listener, except the “listener” will be checking their phone the whole time. Preferably the talker should tell the listener something that is important to them. When I ring the bell, the talker will have one minute to talk. *Ring bell and proceed. Then ending bell.*
2. *After:* Can some “Talkers” share what that felt like for them? Now the “Listeners”? *Take a minute or two to debrief and reflect on this experience and what it brought up for students. Normalize that the talker may have felt sad or abandoned, and also (maybe more importantly) that the “listener” may have found it difficult to keep looking at their phone and ignoring their partner. Allow them to connect and make amends.*

### **Exercise Two (15 minutes):**

**Note to Facilitators:** *This exercise can be triggering if students bring to mind a loved one in prison, is no longer in their lives, or who has died, Please suggest they choose someone alive who they see regularly.\* Also – not feeling anything is common; reassure students that just strengthening the intention to be kind benefits their well-being and mental habits.*

- Now we’re going to try a mindfulness practice with **kindness**. *Repeat prompts and suggestions from previous mindfulness practices to start. Ring bell.*
- Imagine a person in your life who makes you smiles easily, or someone you really love\*. It can be a family member, a friend, a teacher, even a pet. See if you can picture the person/pet really enjoying themselves, maybe smiling, laughing or playing. Stay with that image for a moment and notice how you feel.
- Now we’re going to send some good wishes to this special person or pet, just in our own minds as part of this practice. I’m going to say some words you can repeat silently to yourself. Feel free to change or add to the words if you want to. *(Repeat each phrase 2–3 times with a pause after so they can repeat it to themselves silently)* **I wish you to be healthy; I wish you to be happy; I wish you to be peaceful.** Remember to try to picture your loved one and picture their face as your saying these words silently to them in your mind. Notice how it feels inside you to be wishing these things for them.
- Notice how you are feeling now. If you are having any emotions, can you locate them anywhere in your body?
- Well, just like you wished them well, I’m sure your loved one also wants the best for you, too! Sometimes we forget that we also need some kindness. So this time I’m going to say some phrases directed to “me” (that means you) that you can repeat silently to yourself. Feel free to change or add to the words if you want to. *(Repeat each phrase 2–3 times with a pause after so students can repeat it to themselves silently)*
  - *I wish myself to be healthy;*
  - *I wish myself to be happy;*
  - *I wish myself to live life with ease.*
  - (Possible additions: I wish myself to be peaceful, safe, etc.)
  - Notice how you are feeling in your body right now. Allow yourself to soak in any good feelings you are having.
- In a moment I’m going to ring the bell to finish our practice, and at your own pace you can open your eyes once the sound of the bell is done.

**Science Supplement:**

*These FACTS have special relevance to our POPS kids.*

Researcher Cendri Henderson has written, “As a species whose survival depends on the ability to build mutually-beneficial relationships with others, human beings have a deep-seated need to feel connected, to be trusted and loved, and to trust and love in return. Feeling connected to others increased psychological and physical well-being and decreases the risk of depression and physical ailments. A sense of connectedness also increased empathic response as well as acts of trust and cooperation, which tend to have mutually reinforcing effects: they beget trust and cooperation in return... How can we increase feelings of connected at an automatic level, most crucially toward those individuals not yet within our circle of trust?” The researchers Hutcherson and Seppala found that just seven minutes of Loving Kindness practice (basically the same practice we did in Exercise Two, above) increased the sense of social connection and positivity toward unknown people and this effect was observed on both explicit and implicit level.

Additionally, 24 studies including almost 2,000 people demonstrated that Loving Kindness practice increased daily positive emotions. Another meta-analysis of 22 studies showed that these practices were also moderately effective in reducing depressive symptoms, increasing mindfulness, compassion and self-compassion. Positive emotions overall were increased.

Additionally, the researcher S.G. Hoffman conducted studies on clinical conditions such as anxiety and depression, and concluded, “... existing research studies suggest that Loving Kindness and compassion meditation are highly promising practices for improving positive affect and for reducing stress and... anxiety and mood symptoms. We hypothesize that (these practices) may be particularly useful for targeting interpersonal problems such as anger control issues... relationship problems..”

Finally, mindfulness has been explored as a way to improve symptoms of PTSD. A recent article in the Journal of the American Medical Association explains how these practices have been explored as a component of treatment for PTSD in veterans. A large positive effect was found for PTSD symptoms and a medium positive effect was found for depression at 3-month follow up with those veterans who took part in the study. Increases in self-compassion seemed to account for some of these positive effects.