



Outdoor mindfulness exercises

Activity purpose: To ground and focus your class before and/or after your outdoor lesson. Use one of the exercises below to introduce your lesson in social studies, math, languages, art, and science/STEM.

Research shows mindfulness in nature reduces stress and enhances attention, which facilitates learning. Also enhances a sense of connection to nature.

Activity length: 5 – 15 minutes each

When to use

- When you arrive at your outdoor teaching location.
- (Optional) When you leave your outdoor teaching location.

Where to use

- In your school forest. Try to do your mindfulness activity in the same spot.

Audience: any age, preK to adult

Activities (choose the one most appropriate for your lesson)

1. [Social studies / Visual awareness](#)
2. [Math / Hearing](#)
3. [Languages / Touch](#)
4. [Arts / Perspective](#)
5. [Science, Technology, Engineering / Balance and Proportion](#)

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Box breathing

Each lesson begins with a **box breathing** exercise (sometimes called “square breathing”). Box breathing is a simple 4-step technique: breathe in for 4 seconds, hold for 4, breathe out for 4, hold for 4.

How to lead box breathing: It can be helpful for the facilitator to trace a box in the air, saying “breathe in ...2...3...4” on the upward movement, “hold ...2...3...4” on the upper horizontal movement, “exhale...2...3...4” on the downward movement, and “hold 2...3...4” on the bottom horizontal movement. Once the pattern is established the facilitator can stop counting and tracing the box, allowing the learner to continue at their own pace.

Social Studies / Visual Awareness

1. (Lead the group in a [box breathing exercise](#)).
2. Become aware of your surroundings.
3. Zero in on your sense of sight. Look all around you, up and down.
4. Locate EAST. What do you see? Look at things up close, farther away, up, and down.

Think of the east as the place of new beginnings, of birth. It's where the day's first light is born. The sun's light shines a light on the truth. It gives us insight. Take a mental snapshot of what you see to the east.

5. Turn to the SOUTH. What do you see up close, farther away, up and down? What's different about the view to the south compared to the view to the east.

The sun is at its highest to the south, providing us warmth for growth. This is the stage of youth. What do you see that suggests youth, or growth? Take a mental snapshot of the south view.

6. Turn NORTH now. Again, look near and far, up and down. The difference between the south and north might be the most stark, at least when the sun is visible. Note the differences.

North is the direction from which the cold harsh winds blow. This is a time of struggle and endurance. The winds are cleansing. What do you see that might be a sign of struggle, endurance, and resilience? Take a mental snapshot.

7. Finally, turn to the WEST. Look near and far, up and down.

The west is where the sun sets, representing the sunsetting of life. It's also the direction where water arrives in the form of rain, which makes life possible. What do you see that might suggest the ending of life? What do you see that suggests a gift from water? Take a mental snapshot.

8. Take one more look around, in each direction and think about the bigger picture of this land. How might you use the four cardinal directions to orient yourself on this land?
9. Just for a moment, turn your vision inward. Close your eyes and gaze at the insides of your eyelids. What colors, patterns, shapes, or movement do you see?

Deconstruction

10. Why might I have centered this exercise in the four directions and presented a meaning for each? *To prepare to understand the geography of this place. To introduce traditional ecological knowledge.*

TEACHER'S NOTE: This exercise is useful for making phenological observations. It helps one attach to a place and build emotional connections. Phenology is the practice of making and recording observations in nature. It also helps build emotional connection to nature. Emotions are more easily remembered.

Math / Hearing

1. (Lead the group in [a box breathing exercise](#)).
2. Become aware of what's around you.
3. Close your eyes, focus in on what you hear.
4. Turn your head in different directions. Do you hear different sounds from different directions?
5. Open your eyes. What do you hear nearby? Look for where you think that sound is coming from. What do you hear a little farther out? What do you hear in the distance? Look for where you think those sounds are coming from.
6. How far away would you estimate each sound to be? What units of measurement are you thinking? - inches, feet, yards, a block, fractions of a mile?
7. How much farther away is the medium distance and the distant sound from the close sound? Is the medium sound $\frac{1}{2}$, or 50%, of the distance of the distant sound?

8. How does the shape of the land affect *what* or *how* you are hearing and seeing?
9. Now turn your sense of hearing towards yourself. What sounds do you hear from your own body? Perhaps it's a noise your clothing is making. Can hear your stomach gurgling or your heart beating?

Deconstruction

Did you know that we learn better when we engage more than one sense? We are often focused on what we see. How did focusing on sound add to your understanding of this place? How did combining vision and auditory senses affect you?

Mindfulness is about both being both outwardly and inwardly aware. How did I focus your attention on both the outer and inward experience?

Math is the organizing theme of this lesson. How will we/did we tie math into this mindfulness exercise?

- a) Estimation
- b) Units of measurement
- c) Making quantitative comparisons - fractions, percentages, multiples
- d) Creating a relative scale, building a map of their surroundings through seeing and hearing.

Language / Touch

1. (Lead the group in a [box breathing exercise](#)).
2. Now direct your attention to your own body. What are you perceiving through your sense of touch? Perhaps it's how your clothes are feeling against your body, or how your feet feel as they are planted on the ground.
3. What words describe those sensations?
4. Now attend to your surroundings.
5. Quietly and intentionally roam this area. Use your sense of touch to find objects or elements with different characteristics - textures, sizes, shapes, hardness, temperatures, special features. Perhaps close your eyes as you use your sense of touch to fully explore your different objects or elements.

6. What words come to mind that describe what makes your objects or elements different from each other. Can you think of nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs to describe your objects?

Silent walk to school forest

7. We are going to finish our mindfulness time with a slow silent sensory observation walk.
8. Walk slowly and silently back to the building. On your way, use your various senses to observe your surroundings and specific objects or actions taking place in your surroundings. Make sure to go beyond what you see. What are you also hearing? What are you sensing through your skin? In addition to thinking about nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs to describe what you are taking in, think about words to describe your emotions in response to what you are taking in?

Deconstruction

9. Why did I suggest you close your eyes while you explored through touch? *To heighten your other senses, sensitivity to the details through touch.*
10. Why did I ask you to think of words to describe your objects? *To link to language theme, observation skills, deeper processing.*
11. Why did I ask you to come up with feeling words, your emotions? *To fill your word banks for creative writing. To build your connection to nature.*

Arts / Perspective

1. (Lead the group in a [box breathing exercise](#)).
2. Turn your attention to your surroundings.
3. Look around you. You are observing things, whether by seeing, hearing, or even smelling, from this standing up, eye-level perspective. That's giving you one perspective. Find something in this general area that you can observe from a different angle, whether you get into a different position, or move the natural object to get different perspectives. Use your various senses to observe this object or scene from new perspectives.
4. Can you share a new observation when you took a new perspective?
5. Please gather into groups of two or three.

- a) Think about your partner. What do you know about them? What do they like? What's going on with them right now? (Keep answer in your head.)
- b) What do you wish for them? Find one or more gifts from nature that you can collect for your partner that represent the wish you have for them.
- c) Offer your gift to your partner, quietly, mindfully, thoughtfully. Perhaps offer a word or two to help your partner understand why you chose these natural elements for them and your wish for them.

Deconstruction

Draw out ideas about perspective taking in art and how working with nature through art can enhance one's connection to nature and can increase empathy for both humans and more-than-human things like animals, plants, landscape features like a body of water.

- 6. I just asked you to observe something in nature from a new angle, and I asked you to choose some nature object or objects for a partner as an offering or gift to express or communicate something to your partner.
- 7. Why do you think I asked you to observe something in your surroundings from a new angle?
 - a. Perspective is an important concept. Finding different perspectives is especially important in art.
- 8. How does offering a nature gift to a partner connect to the idea of perspective, perhaps a different way of thinking about perspective?
 - a. We can think about taking a new perspective by taking another person's perspective and connecting to their emotions. When we create art it's both about how you, the individual artist, are feeling and what you want to express to your audience, and understanding the perspective of your audience and how they might be affected by your art, or trying to help them feel a particular emotion through your art.
 - b. Perspective in art is about the **senses** - literally the angle you observe something from, and **empathy**, being able to take the perspective of your audience.

TEACHER'S NOTE: We need empathy to connect to nature. Research shows that art and nature activities are effective ways to build connection between kids and nature. The act of expressing your interpretation or understanding through an artistic medium deepens the

reflection and the processing and helps information “stick.” It also helps kids sort out and express their feelings about the subject matter. That’s also a deeper level of processing.

Balance and Proportion / Science, Technology, Engineering

1. (Lead the group in a [box breathing exercise](#)).
2. Check in with each basic sense – see, hear, feel, smell
3. (Introduce balance as another sense)
4. Balance on one foot and think about what all parts of the body do to maintain balance.
5. What can you do to interact with your surroundings to improve your balance?

Deconstruction

6. Why do you think we focused on the sense of balance for this activity?

Making observations through our senses is important in scientific investigation. We observe through all the senses in science, not just the obvious ones like vision.

7. What engineering concepts are at play as various parts of your body adjust to maintain balance? *For younger students ask,*
 - *What did you do with your body or arms when you raised one foot? Why does the body do that? (Weight on one side of the body needs to match the weight on the other side.)*
 - *What happens if you raise one foot quickly? (You raise your opposite arm quickly too. Or you quickly lean the opposite direction.)*
 - *What happens if you raise one foot slowly? (You raise your opposite arm slowly too. Or you slowly lean the opposite direction.)*