

Mind as a Muscle

Two activities for developing concentration power

Activity # 1 - Mind as a Muscle (used successfully with middle school age students)

The theory:

Present students with the concept of the mind as a muscle that can be strengthened through routine practice, just as regular physical exercise enhances the ability to play a sport, just as regular practice on an instrument leads to strengthened ability to play and perform. Present the activity of “centering” as a way of strengthening the muscle of the mind enhancing its ability to observe, focus, concentrate, and learn.

Talk about the activity of centering as countercultural - a challenge for us, given the pace and style of life in our modern western culture, where we are constantly bombarded in our environments with stimulation to all of our senses. Brainstorm the sources of stimulation, e.g. traffic sounds, radio, TV, telephone, advertising. Talk about the idea of silence. Where do we have times in our culture to stop and to sit in silence? Brainstorm when and where students have experienced moments of silent reflection in their lives.

The practice:

Invite the students to experiment with a mind muscle activity. This involves sitting in a centered posture (feet flat on the floor, spine straight, body relaxed), closing the eyes, and focusing the muscle of the mind on the experience of breathing for 30 seconds. Use a small bell to indicate the beginning and the end of the 30 seconds. Remind students to pay attention to the breathing in experience and the breathing out experience. After the experiment, ask what students noticed. How easy or difficult was it? What made it easy? What made it challenging? What sounds might have distracted them from focusing their minds. What thoughts, worries, feelings, sensations might have been distractions from focusing their minds on their breathing.

Suggest keeping an awareness of other sensations (sounds, thoughts, feelings) in the background, while keeping the focus of the awareness of the breath. Use the image of a flashlight, shining a beam of light on the breathing experience.

Ask the students to close their eyes - this time for 60 seconds, sitting in a centered posture and focusing their minds on their breathing. At the end of 60 seconds, ask for a show of hands of those who felt they were more able to do centering this time. Ask those students to talk about how they did it. Ask for a show of hands of those students who had more difficulty and invite them to talk about their experience.

Experiment for one week by starting each class with the mind as a muscle practice of centering. Feel free to experiment with different

amounts of time each day: 30 seconds, 60 seconds, two minutes. Each time, ask students what they noticed during the experiment. Make space for acceptance of all observations without judgment. Remind students that this is not a competition; this is an exploration. A different experience each day is likely. Invite students to try the centering practice at other times during the day and let you know what they are noticing. Encourage everyone to continue practicing centering.