



Field Practice Resource: Brain Breaks

Mindfulness takes practice, but it also requires energy to maintain. With this approach to self-management, students, rather than instructors, make the call on when to take breaks.

Why this matters

By taking breaks from learning, students learn to address their personal needs, which range from self-care (e.g. eating, drinking, applying sunscreen) to recharging their energy (e.g. sitting quietly or running around). Brain breaks help students develop their self-awareness, allowing them to identify and address barriers to learning, then refocus their attention. By empowering students, they develop more intrinsic motivation for learning and solidify lifelong habits such as focus, commitment, and time management.

CASEL Competency Supported: Self-Management

Self-management is the ability to regulate one's emotions, thoughts, and behaviors effectively in different situations. This includes managing stress, controlling impulses, motivating oneself, and setting and working toward achieving personal and academic goals.

Getting started

Start by introducing the idea of Brain Breaks early on when working with a group. The introduction should take about 10 minutes, and each Brain Break can take 10-15 minutes, depending on the length of time you are working with the group.

How to do the activity

1. Share with students the idea that self-care is group-care. Ask students to name ways that they take care of themselves each day. At home? At school? What are ways they must take extra care of themselves while away from home? How do we take care of ourselves outdoors?
2. Explain that students will be responsible for their own self-care, both physical and mental. We are here to support with Brain Breaks. These are breaks that everyone in our group will take during the day to rest, socialize, or expend our extra energy. During this time, we will pay attention to self-care, ensuring we are taking care of our physical needs, as well.
3. Lay out the ground rules for students. It works well to define the time frame for taking breaks and how often they will happen. For example: "We get one 15-minute Brain Break during the morning session, and one 15-minute Brain Break during the afternoon session."
4. Delegate the decision-making power. One student can take responsibility for the timing of the break or the whole group can decide by consensus. If one student has decision-making power, rotate through students so that each student has a chance to decide. If students use their break early during the session, they are committing to staying engaged after the break.
5. Use follow-up questions for reflection. At what point during the day were you most engaged? What helped you to remain present? At what point did you feel distracted? What was the barrier to staying engaged? Did you remedy that barrier during your Brain Break? How do you plan to use your Brain Breaks more effectively in the future?

Extensions or further resources

If students show success in scheduling their Brain Breaks, explore other areas where they can assume responsibility. If they are traveling with a packed lunch for the day, could they assume decision-making power over their lunch time and location? If they finish their project thoroughly, could they organize a group game? Should they do work now, and organize a game later, or organize a game now and work later? What are the benefits or drawbacks to both?