

MINDFUL ART MAKING

Take 5 – Mindfulness of the Senses

Practicing Mindfulness Through Art Making

Dropping our attention into the five senses can be a simple and accessible way to practice mindfulness of the present moment. Yet when feeling stressed or anxious, it can be difficult to even remember to pause and practice a mindfulness skill like this, let alone call to mind the specific skill that will be most beneficial. With this in mind, it can help to practice mindfulness in the calmer, quieter moments of the day, before we become overwhelmed. When our minds and bodies are in a state of rest, we are better equipped to learn new skills *and* remember them for later use.

In this exercise, we will take this idea of integration one step further by using art making and creativity to explore bringing our awareness to the five senses. Taking the intentional time needed for this activity along with using different areas of the brain related to creativity helps solidify the practice, making it more likely for us to recall the idea of noticing the senses when we really need it. This can be an exercise you do at home on your own, or it can be an excellent opportunity to include your children or even the entire family in your practice of mindfulness and self-care.

What You Will Need

- Paper
- Any colorful drawing materials:
 - Color Pencils
 - Color Pens
 - Markers

Instructions for Getting Creative

We will begin by finding a quiet, well-lit place and setting up your space. Lay out your art supplies on a flat surface where you have room to work. Take a moment to pause here before beginning the exercise. Notice where your body is supported by the chair and the floor. Take a deep breath in with a long exhale. By pausing to bring our attention to these things before we begin, we are inviting our attention to the present moment and thus signaling to our mind and body that we are taking a moment to rest.

Now, take a moment to notice your surroundings and bring your awareness to your senses. Identify:

- 5 things you can see
- 4 things you can hear
- 3 things you can feel
- 2 things you can smell
- 1 thing you can taste (if applicable)

Next, begin your art making by tracing your hand on the paper. To turn this simple act into a more mindful moment, pair the movements of your pen or pencil with your breath. So as you inhale, move your pencil up the length of a finger and around the top. Then as you exhale, bring your pencil back down the length of the finger on the other side. As you work, notice the feeling of the pencil along the sides of your fingers.

Now that you have an outline of your hand, we will use each finger to draw something symbolizing one of the senses you just noticed. So for example, in the space of the little finger, draw a symbol to represent something that you see in your environment. In the space of the ring finger, draw something to represent what you currently hear, and so on.

Remember, there is no right or wrong way to create during this exercise. It is more about the experience of getting creative and how we use our minds differently when we engage in art making than how your artwork looks.

Once you are finished with your symbols for the 5 senses, pause and notice how you are feeling. What is it like in the breath? What is it like in the body? What is it like in the mind? You may even think of a color or colors that you associate with how you are feeling after this exercise and use those colors to decorate the space around the outside of your hand.

Putting It All Together

The aim of this exercise is to, not only to create a sense of calm in the mind and body while creating your artwork, but to help you remember the practice of bringing your awareness to the present moment through the 5 senses in the future. Here are a few ways the exercise could be used later on when feeling stressed or overwhelmed:

At Work

In a tense moment at work, pause and tell yourself to “Take 5” before proceeding with any more items on your to-do list. Take a breath, focusing on releasing a long exhale, and identify:

- 5 things you can see
- 4 things you can hear
- 3 things you can feel
- 2 things you can smell
- 1 thing you can taste (if applicable)

Take another deep breath and notice how you feel before moving on with your day.

When feeling overwhelmed, practice tracing your hand with your breath simply using your finger. So, take the index finger of your right hand. As you inhale, move your index finger up the side of your thumb on your left hand. As you exhale, move your index finger down the other side of your thumb. Continue on with each finger as long as you need to slow and steady your breath and slow and steady your mind. You may even switch hands to give your brain an extra workout.

At Home

When your toddler throws a tantrum, sit or squat to bring your face to their eye level. Calmly and gently say, “I can see this is really hard for you. It’s hard for me too. Let’s take a break together. What’s something blue that you see in this room? What’s something you hear outside? I can hear birds. Do you hear them too?” And so on, moving through the different senses. Focusing on the senses can help even the youngest minds calm and come back to the moment when feeling dysregulated.

When your school age child is feeling nervous about starting a new grade with a new classroom and teacher, you may say something like, "I feel nervous about starting new things too. Do you know what helps me? I Take 5." Walk them through bringing their attention to the present moment through the senses by identifying:

- 5 things you can see
- 4 things you can hear
- 3 things you can feel
- 2 things you can smell
- 1 thing you can taste (if applicable)

Explain how focusing your attention on something in the present moment can help calm the mind and body, so we can find a sense of ease when feeling nervous about new things.

When your teenager is feeling anxious about an upcoming test at school, walk them through tracing your hand with your finger and pairing these movements with the breath. You may offer, "This is something I do at work when I'm stressed. Do you want to try it with me?" Explain pausing and focusing our attention this way can help calm the mind and body, and that when we are calm, we think more clearly and learn more easily.

**If you've done the Take 5 art making exercise with your children, they will already have some familiarity with what you are talking about in these moments and how to use the senses in these different ways to help ground them when feeling stressed and overwhelmed.