

# ACT

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Promoting Acceptance and Commitment in the Classroom

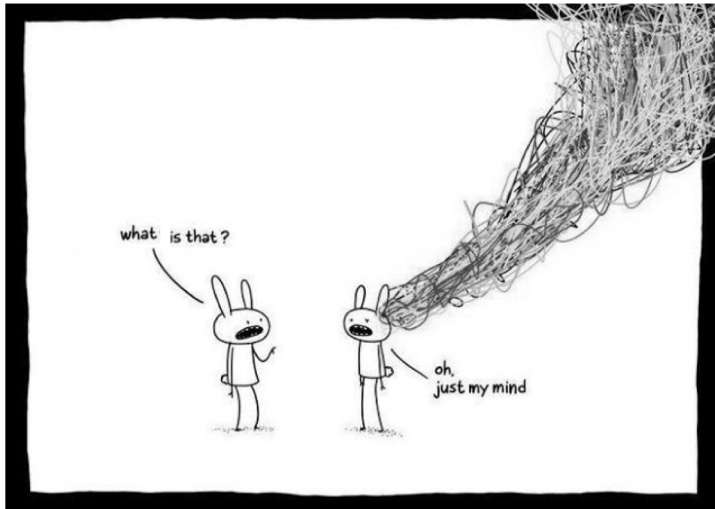
Mark. R. Dixon, Ph.D.  
University of Illinois Chicago

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## PRACTICE

Spend the next 2 minutes doing absolutely nothing.

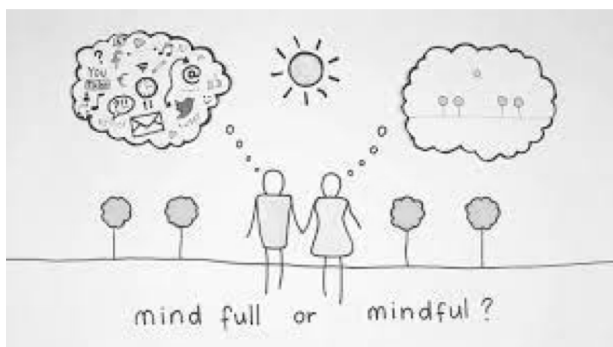
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AS YOU SAT  
AND PAUSED,  
WHAT CAME  
TO YOUR MIND?

3

## DEFAULT MODE



We sit and  
worry.



We fall back  
into the past.



We jump ahead  
into the future.

4

## POP DEFINITIONS

Clearing your mind

Listening to meditative music or sound effects

Letting go of your worries

Just breathing

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## SCIENTIFIC DEFINITIONS

Actively attending to the present moment

Willingness to experience everything that is now

Narrowing or expanding stimulus control

Reducing of referential relations

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## HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT



### Mindfulness History

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## SCHOOL APPLICATIONS

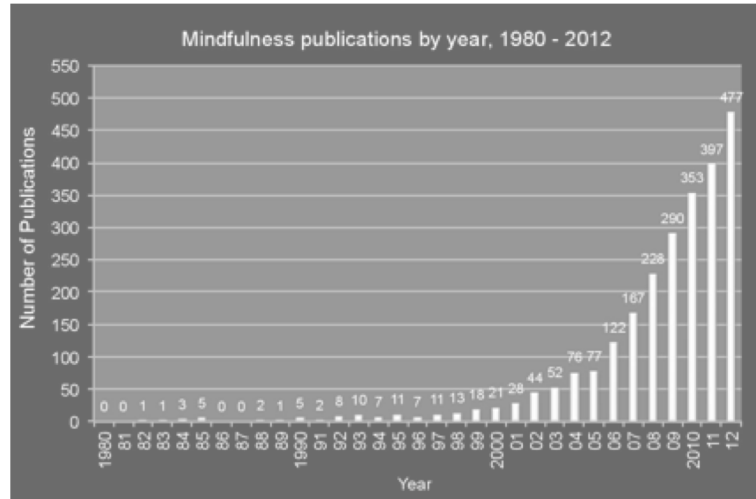


- Creativity
- Cognitive flexibility
- Memory
- Reaction time
- IQ
- Decrease in anxiety
- Mood change
- Pre-frontal cortex activation
- Immune response

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## SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH



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## CONCERNS AND CRITICISM

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Being mindful isn't enough

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Skip the present when the  
past and future haunt you

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School is for education  
not therapy

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## Psychological and Social-Emotional Needs

The number of children in school with psychological distress have doubled in the past 10 years



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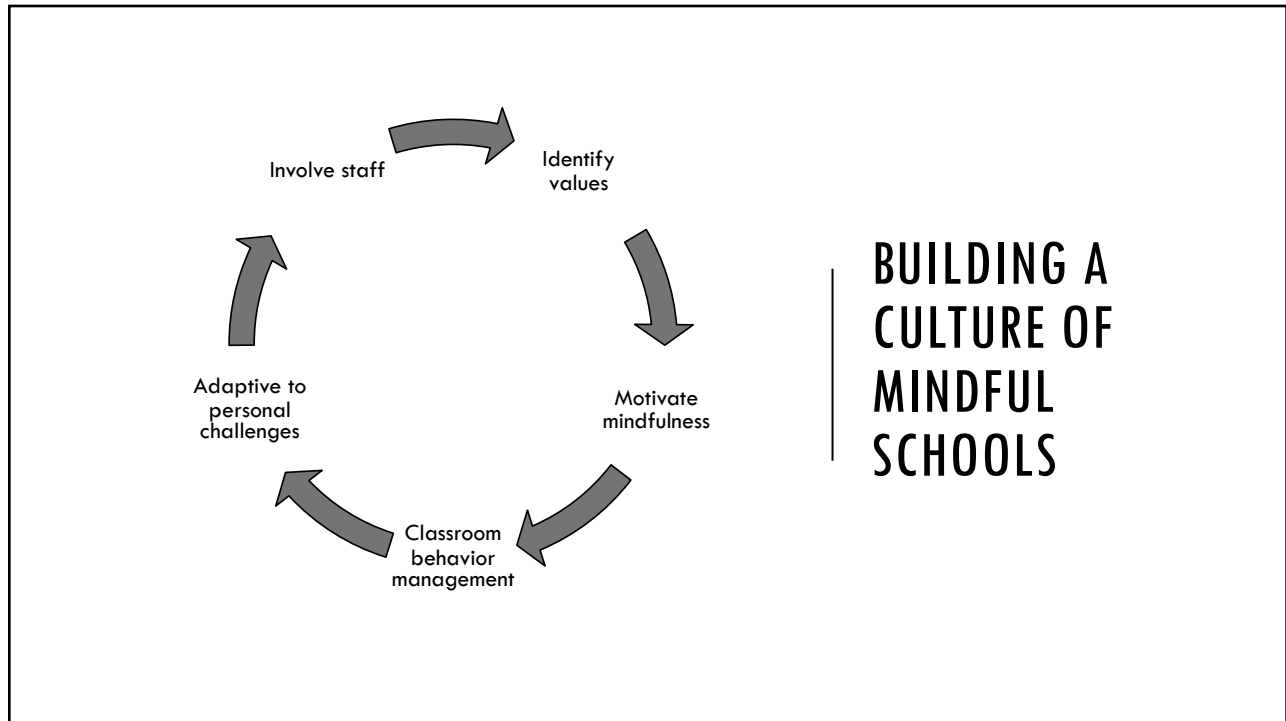
## Intervention

The stuff that makes us anxious, sad, and worried is rarely the actual stuff itself

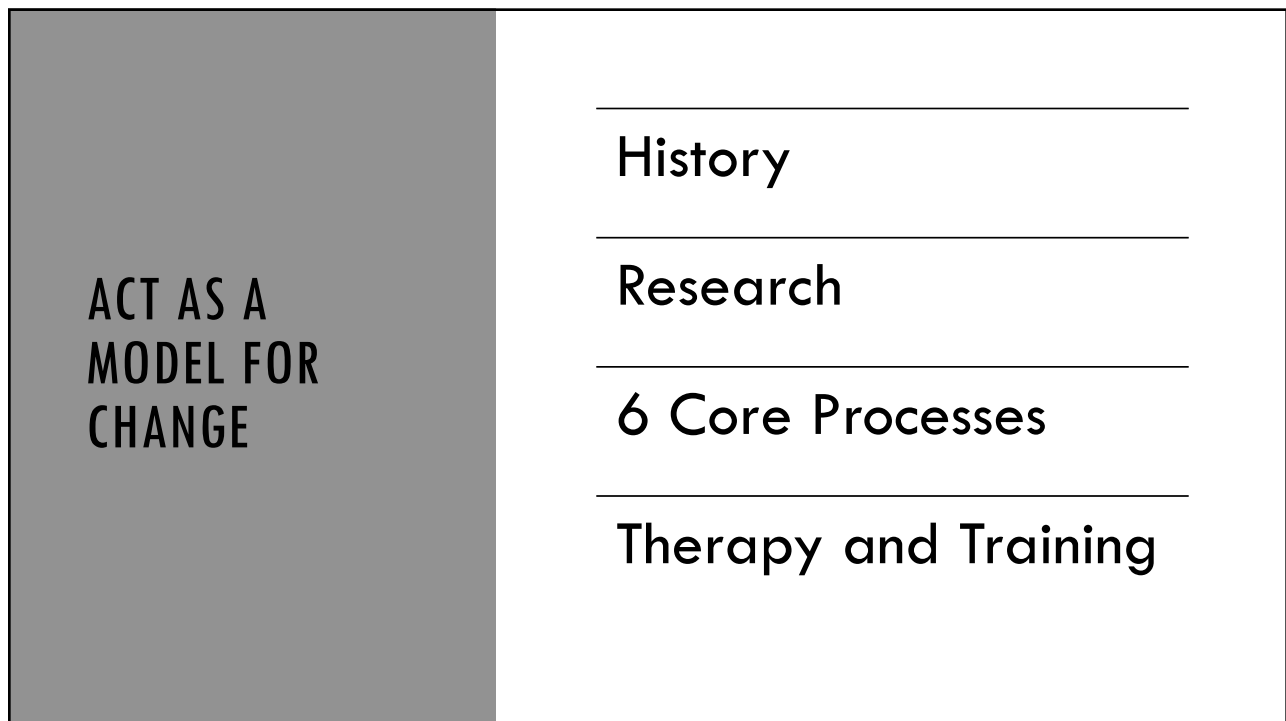
Instead it's our verbal interactions that are far removed from the actual stuff



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## TRADITIONAL PERSPECTIVE OF SUFFERING



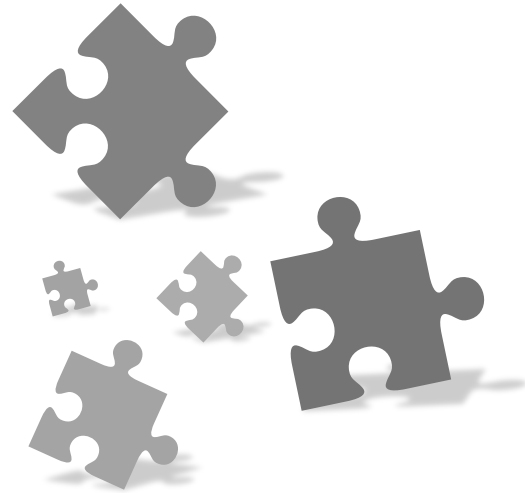
Children, given the right circumstances, are naturally psychologically healthy, happy and content



Psychological pain is abnormal, meaning something is wrong that needs to be fixed



If we are suffering due to difficult thoughts, feelings, or emotions, then we should (*and can*) avoid, reduce, alter, or eliminate them



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## WHAT IS THE WORST THING IN YOUR LIFE RIGHT NOW?

How long

How much time

How is it working

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THE GODS OF FOOD  
NAMES EVERY FOODIE SHOULD KNOW  
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## Yes, I Suck: Self-Help Through Negative Thinking

Contrary to the "love yourself" message propounded by countless self-help books, a new study suggests that for people with low self-esteem, positive thinking hurts more than it helps

By John Cloud | Wednesday, July 08, 2009

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In the past 50 years, people with mental problems have spent untold millions of hours in therapists' offices, and millions more reading self-help books, trying to turn negative thoughts like "I never do anything right" into positive ones like "I can succeed." For many people — including well-educated, highly trained therapists, for whom "cognitive restructuring" is a central goal — the very

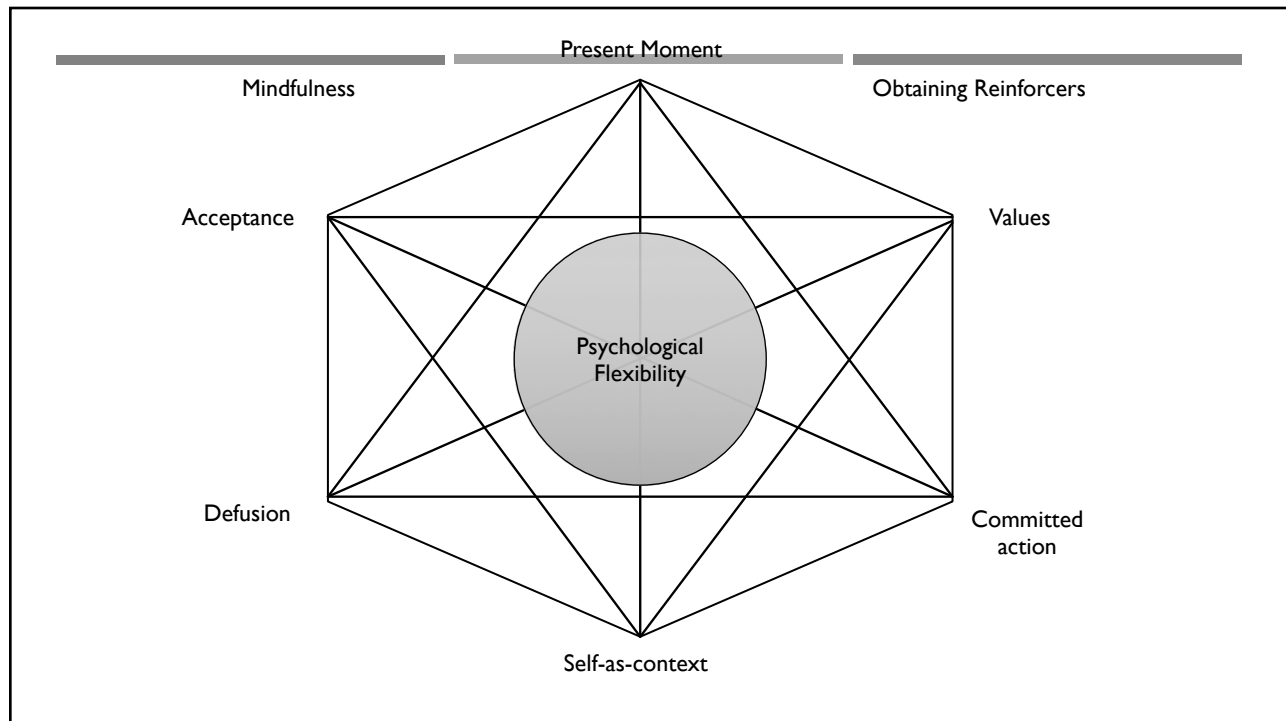
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## AN ALTERNATE PERSPECTIVE

The normal processes of emotions (thoughts, feelings, memories) are often destructive, and create distress for all of us at some point

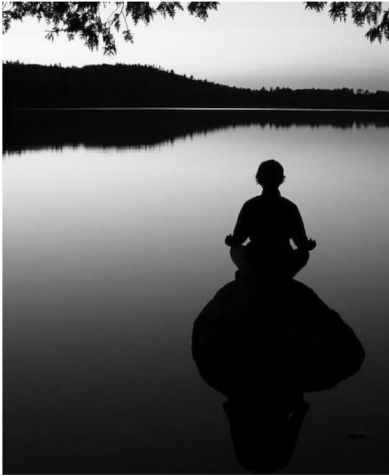
***If we are suffering, that means we are stuck, not broken or sick***

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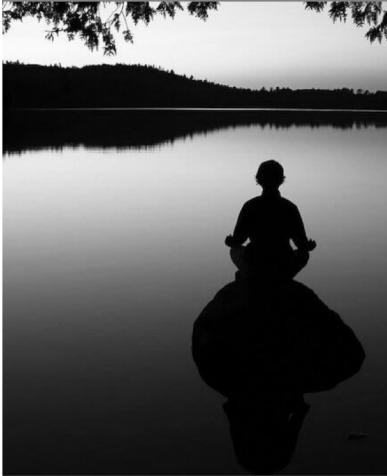
## PRESENT MOMENT



- Living in the here and now
- **Goal**
  - To attend to what is going on right now, psychologically, emotionally, environmentally
  - To be aware of thoughts, feelings, emotions, and bodily sensations as they occur
- **The Challenge**
  - Our minds remove us from physical stuff to abstract world
  - Predisposed to fixate on certain parts in environment, including verbal parts
  - Focusing on events that happened in the past
  - Worrying about what might happen in the future
- **Approach**
  - Redirection to physical world
  - Noticing parts of the environment that were not attended to
  - Reminding of values
- Example: "Be where your feet are, right here and now"

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## PRESENT MOMENT



### Schoolwide

Morning announcements engaging students to stop, pause, notice thoughts, let the past fade away, and concentrate on the day and the now of school

### Classroom

Prior to test, after transition back from playground or lunch, pause and just breath. Attend to certain sound, feeling, placement.

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## ACCEPTANCE

- The ability to tolerate good and bad situations, experiences, thoughts and emotions without trying to make them go away or avoid them
- **Goal**
  - Tolerating both good and bad (i.e., obtaining reinforcers and losing reinforcers)
  - Being willing to continue on and keep moving towards a meaningful life
- **The Challenge**
  - Impulsive behaviors come at the cost of obtaining bigger better things
  - Sooner smaller consequences override larger later consequences
  - It feels better to make the bad stuff go away, even if just for a little while
  - Avoidance or suppression may pay off in the short term, but not the long term
- **Approach**
  - Bring delays into the present.
  - "Bad" stuff is ok; Fighting bad stuff won't make it go away.
- Example: "Let's accept that things are different than we wanted and do our best do move forward"



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## ACCEPTANCE

### Schoolwide

Willingness to handle the lost sporting event

Recess is inside due to weather

Final exams this week

### Classroom

Just received a difficult assignment

The reality of ups and downs of the day, the week, our life

Noticing and letting in thoughts that are scary



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## DEFUSION



- Lessening the dominance of unworkable verbal stimuli and noticing as they are rather than as truth
- **Goal**
  - To reduce the believability or truth of private events
  - Letting go of thoughts that get in the way of meaningful behaviors
  - Stepping back from thoughts and noticing them as not part of self
- **The Challenge**
  - Becoming attached to thoughts or judgements others or ourselves have about us which result in unworkable or nonadaptive behaviors
  - Discrimination between a thought and the literal world
  - Thoughts become preservations and inability to discriminate truth from thought
- **Approach**
  - Making thoughts silly
  - Accepting that noise in head is just noise
- Example: "Are you letting your thoughts and feelings control you right now? Try stepping back from those thoughts and focus on your values"

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## DEFUSION



### Schoolwide

Ideas?

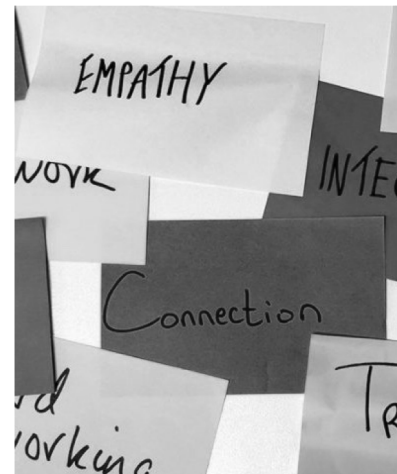
### Classroom

Ideas?

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## VALUES

- Life directions or ideals that are intrinsically reinforcing
- **Goal**
  - Focus on what is important, regardless of everything else going on, in order to contact reinforcement
  - Moving life in a direction of value and worth
- **The Challenge**
  - Easy to lose sight of delayed or future reinforcers
  - Feeling like nothing is important
  - Abstract concept, and is at odds with more immediate reinforcers
- **Approach**
  - Re-configure values as "stuff" that can be bigger than physical things as child becomes more advanced
- Example: "You are doing things that are moving you closer to your value of X. Keep doing those things and chasing that value!"



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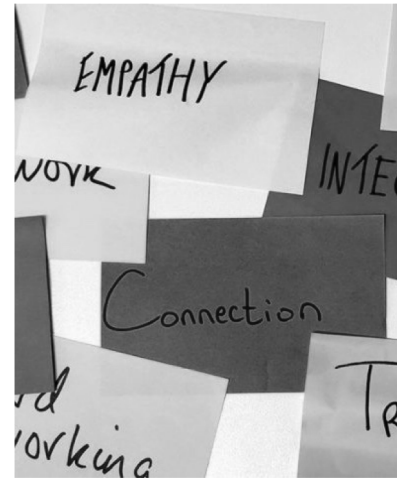
## VALUES

### Schoolwide

Ideas?

### Classroom

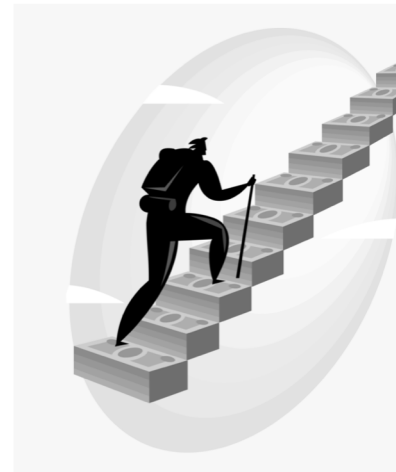
Ideas?



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## COMMITTED ACTION

- Engaging in a pattern of behavior that align with one's values
- **Goal**
  - Continue engaging in meaningful behaviors and move closer to one's values despite all other challenges and obstacles
  - Focus on value-based, adaptive behavior change
  - Keep engaging in behavior that moves towards values
- **The Challenge**
  - It is easy to give up
  - The behavior may not feel important in the moment
  - Easy to give up after one failure
  - Kids don't like to lose. Failure is a cue for more failure
- **Approach**
  - Its ok to mess up. Its ok to be a gigantic mess today. No consequences from prior days.
- Example: "You enjoy free time, right? We need to finish working nicely in order to get closer to free time. Not working and not following rules get us farther away from free time."



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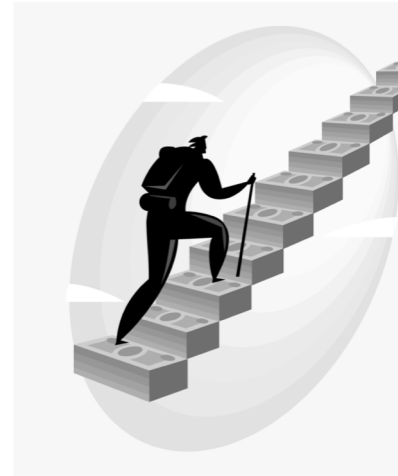
## COMMITTED ACTION

### Schoolwide

Ideas?

### Classroom

Ideas?



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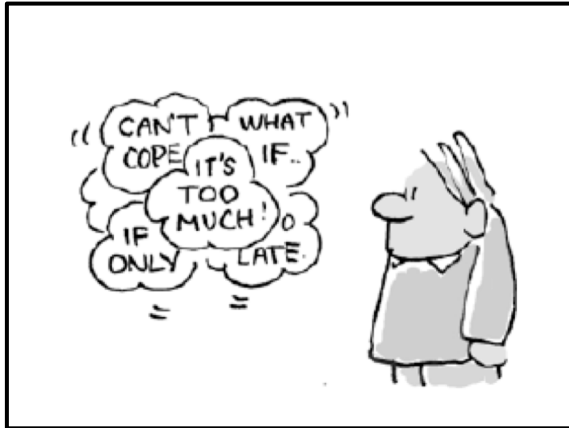
## SELF-AS-CONTEXT



- The "you" which remains constant across time, place, and experiences
- **Goal**
  - To recognize that we can continue being our true self no matter what we do or go through
  - Finding the real you that transcends different contexts
- **The Challenge**
  - We believe things about ourselves based on things that we have done or events we have experienced
  - It is easy for children believe things said about them
  - Abstract concept. Real self??
- **Approach**
  - Good / bad person?
  - The person we are sometimes – vs – the person we are most of the time
- Example: "Dumb is just a word we might think about ourselves sometimes. But you are Bobby, and Bobby can finish this worksheet."

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## SELF-AS-CONTEXT



Classroom

Ideas?

Schoolwide

Ideas?

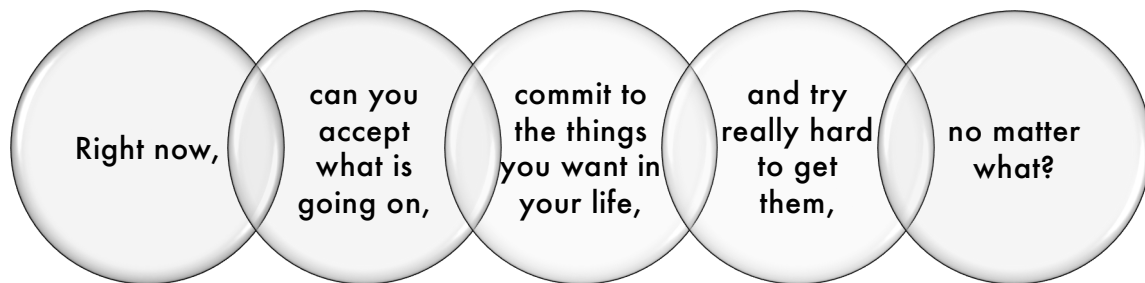
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## THE ACT QUESTION

- In this moment, are you – not the stories you tell yourself – but you, ready to show up to what you are experiencing without defenses, move your life in a direction you value, and when you find yourself off-path, gently return to the direction you value?

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## THE ACT QUESTION – FOR CHILDREN



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### ACT DAILY LESSONS

**Week 1: Introduction to the Hexaflex**

**Weekly Description:**  
This introductory week is designed to present the concepts of the Hexaflex to the student.

**Preparation Notes:**  
When preparing daily activities, consider if whole group or small group arrangements would work best for your students, and plan your materials accordingly.

Weekly Materials List:					
Tier	Day 1	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4	Day 5
2	»WS D1T2	»Paper »Pen/Pencils	»Balloons »Paper	None	»Tape
3	None	»3 different sounding bells, noisemakers, or chimes	»Balloons »Paper	None	»Tape

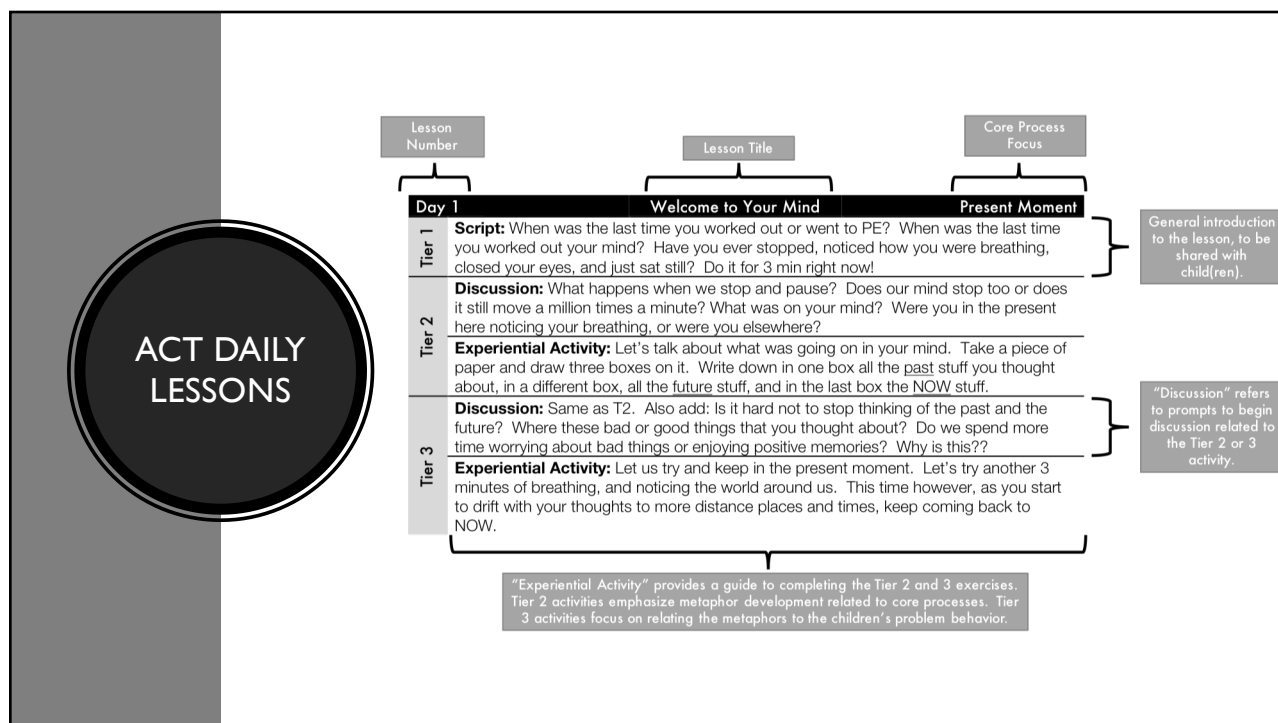
**Weekly Journal Prompt:**  
What are the struggles you experience in your mind? How do they get in the things matter most to you in life?

Overview of the weekly theme and considerations for implementers related to the content or activities for the week, or curriculum in general.

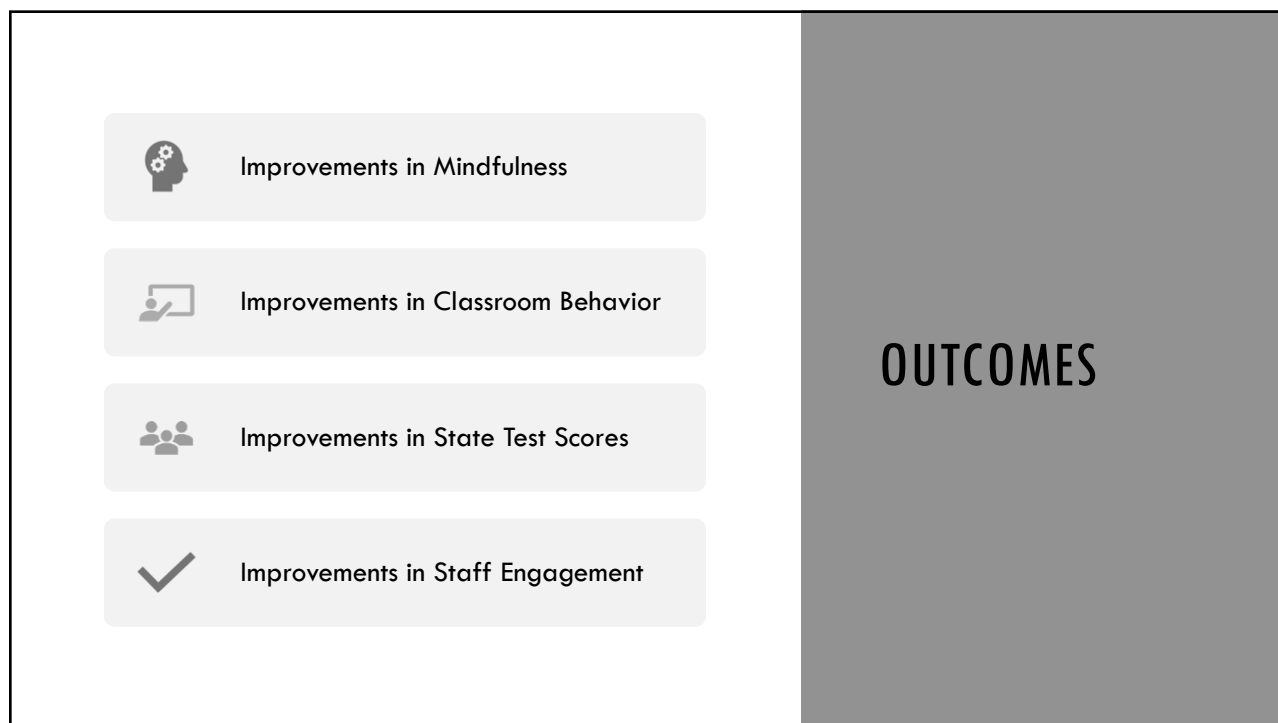
Materials required for each experiential activity, reported by tier, including associated worksheets (located in the Appendix).

An optional journal prompt is included each week; these can be completed in writing, or used as additional discussion starters.

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## IMPROVEMENTS IN MINDFULNESS

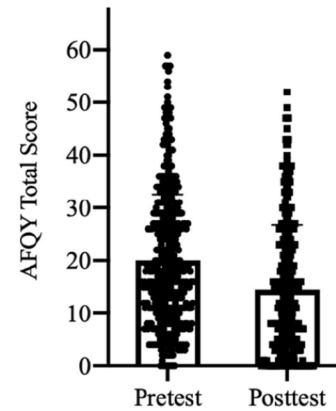
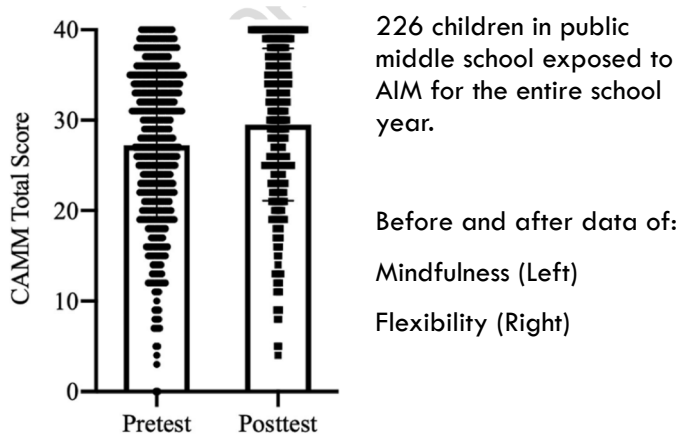


Fig. 2 Scatter dot plot of participant avoidance and fusion questionnaire for youth (AFQY) total score. *Note.* Markers represent scores for each participant, bars represent the mean, and whiskers represent the standard deviation

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## STATE TEST SCORES RISE

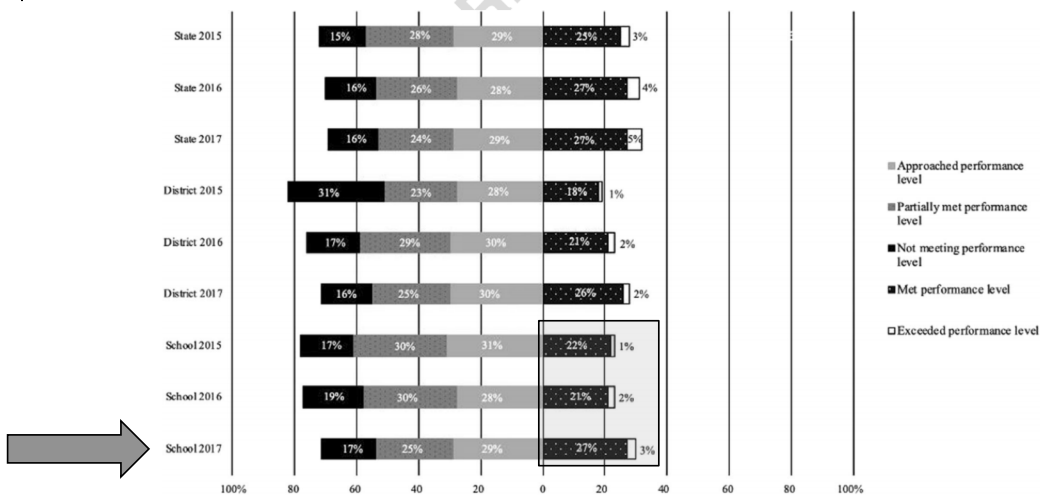
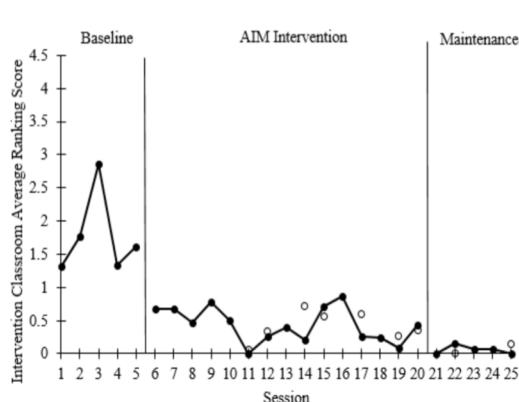


Fig. 6 State, district, and school state math testing results depicted from the publicly available data. *Note.* The AIM intervention occurred in 2017

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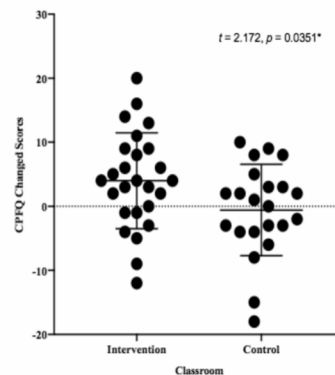
## CHANGING CLASSROOM BEHAVIOR



AIM implemented in a single classroom

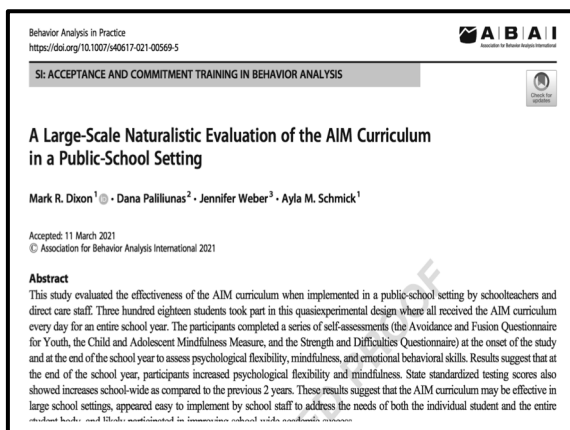
Evaluated challenging behavior (right)

Flexibility before/after AND compared to non-AIM room (right)



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## SCHOOLWIDE ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE IMPROVES



- 226 Middle School Children
- Measures
  - State standards for reading and math yearly testing
- Pre-Test/Post-Test with Natural Comparisons
  - School performance two years prior to AIM
  - District and State comparisons

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## STAFF INTERACT DIFFERENTLY

Behavior Analysis in Practice  
https://doi.org/10.1002/ba.0617-025-00528-6



SE: ACCEPTANCE AND COMMITMENT TRAINING IN BEHAVIOR ANALYSIS



### Utilizing the AIM Curriculum to Improve Job Performance in an Educational Setting for Children With Autism and Related Disabilities

Theodore Isсен<sup>1</sup> · Jessica M. Hinman<sup>2</sup> · Mark R. Dixon<sup>2</sup>

Accepted: 28 October 2020  
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#### Abstract

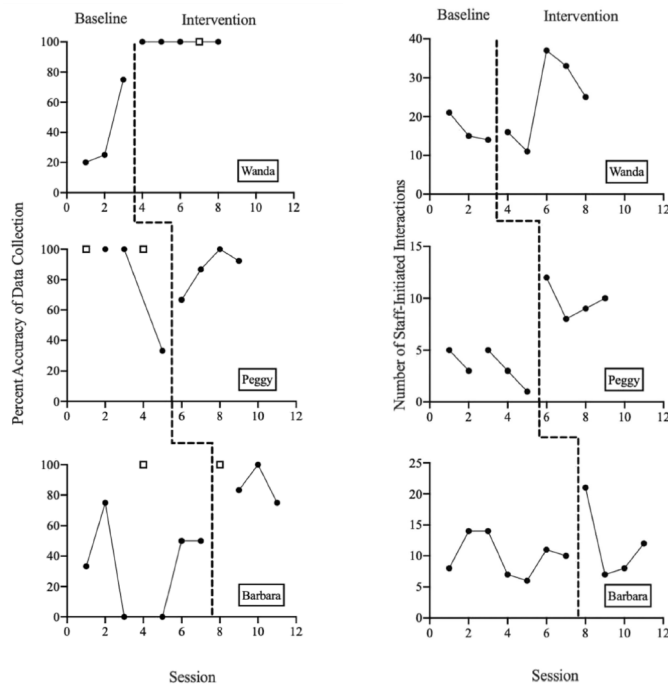
The current study evaluated the effect of brief, daily present moment awareness activities on the work performance of paraprofessionals working at a school for children with disabilities. A nonconcurrent multiple-baseline design across three participants evaluated changes in staff-initiated interactions with students and staff's accuracy of data collection on student behavior. Relative to baseline, participants demonstrated an average increase in staff-initiated interactions and an increase in the average percentage accuracy of data collection. Participants averaged 10.02 (range 3.4–16.67) staff-initiated interactions during baseline and 15.38 (range 9.75–24.4) during the intervention phase. Relative to baseline, two of the three participants demonstrated an increase in their average accuracy of data collection on student behavior. Participants' average data collection accuracy was 56.9% (range 40%–86.67%) during baseline and 91.98% (range 86.41%–100%) during intervention. The average percentage of nonoverlapping data was 61.67% (range 25%–100%) for staff-initiated interactions and 33.33% (range 0%–100%) for data collection accuracy. Implications and possibilities for future research related to acceptance and commitment training interventions in workplace environments are discussed.

**Keywords** AIM · ACT · Present moment · Staff · Stress

- 3 paraprofessionals
- Measures
  - Staff initiated interactions with clients
  - Accuracy of data collection
- Single subject design
  - Baseline
  - Brief PM activities before work

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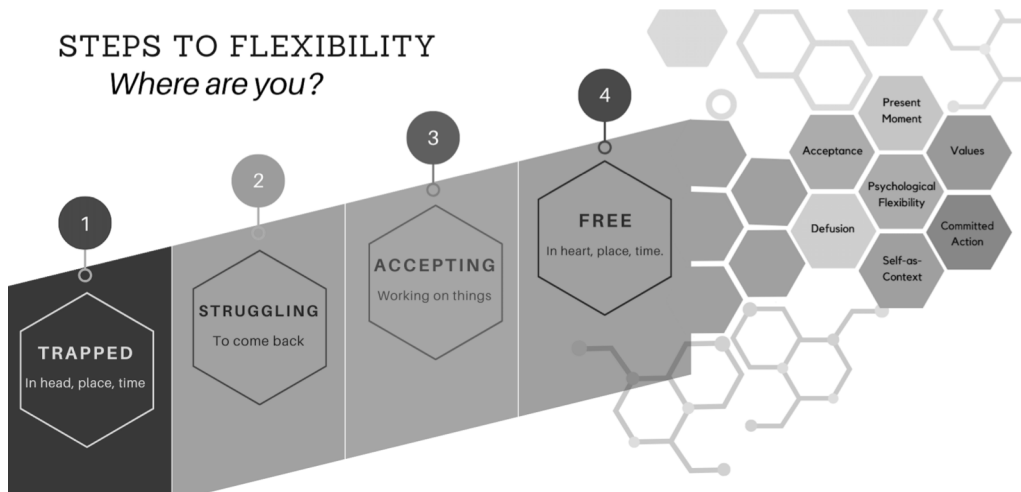
## AIM WITH STAFF (ISSEN ET AL., 2021)



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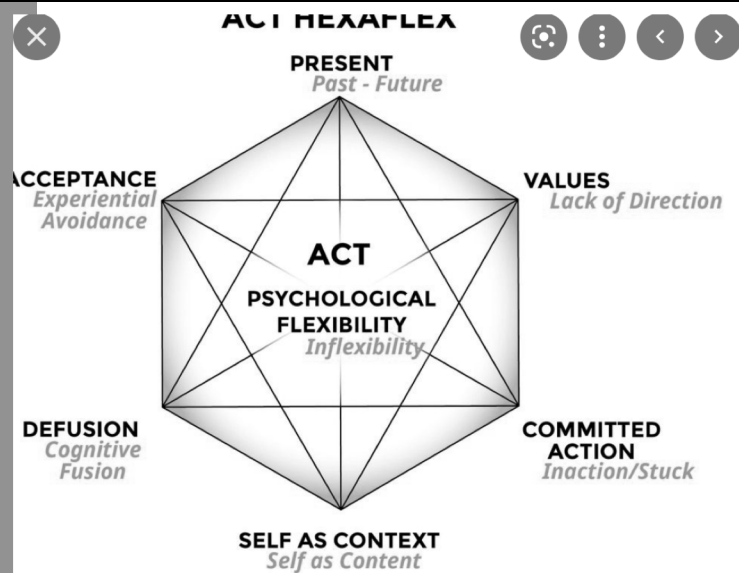
## SCHOOLWIDE SUPPORT

### STEPS TO FLEXIBILITY *Where are you?*



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## FLEXIBILITY AND INFLEXIBILITY



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## WHAT IS COMING SOON TO THE AIM UNIVERSE?



175 NEW LESSONS



DIFFERENTIATED  
INSTRUCTION



WORKSHEET / QUIZ  
TO EVALUATE  
COMPETENCY



MINDFUL EXPLORERS  
FOR YOUNGER  
STUDENTS

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## THE NEW LESSONS

Literal vs. Relational World

Complexity of Activity

Links to Supplemental Content

### Day 3. Magic

Self as Context

**Script:** Is magic real? What is the best magic trick you have ever seen? When you see a good trick performed for the first time you swear it must be real. If nothing else, you might find yourself wondering "how did they do it?" Yet when you watch the trick over and over again, it starts to look different. If someone tells you the way the trick works, the next time you watch the trick you might find it so obvious how you were once fooled. How are magic tricks like the tricks your mind plays on you? At first thoughts looked real, only later to be nothing more than an illusion of reality.

#### Discussion:

Basic	Advanced
What types of magic tricks do you like?	Magic comes in many different forms. People even talk about good and "dark" magic. What sorts of magic would you think are good/bad? If you could do magic what would you want to use the abilities for? Explain how your belief in magic is like your belief in other "not so real" truths.
Can you do a magic trick? If not, what trick would you really like to learn how to do?	

#### Activities:

Basic	Advanced
View an easy to do card, coin, or another magic trick online. Find out how to do the trick and teach it to each other.	Demonstrate a magic trick to your observer(s). Afterwards teach them how to do the trick. Work together to develop a new novel magic trick.

#### SEL Competencies:

- Self-awareness: recognize strengths
- Relationships skills: teamwork; social engagement

**ACT Process:** The concept of Self-as-Context is addressed as a sense of self that is actualized when taking a different perspective on seeing what might be "real." Here magic has the illusion of reality, just as our momentary roles we engage in (student, parent, friend) is an illusion of the real us.

**Mindful Explorers:** Ophelia appears to do magic by changing colors of her body. This trick is really part of her biology, or who she is. The real Ophelia is inside these color changes. Just like the real us is inside the various ways we behave, dress, or talk.

**Mindful Journal:** What are some of the tricks your mind plays on you? Describe how you can figure out these tricks with the same curious and truth-seeking skills you used to figure out the magic trick you watched.

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## LITERAL OR RELATIONAL WORLD



Can the student derive?



Can the student understand  
metaphor?



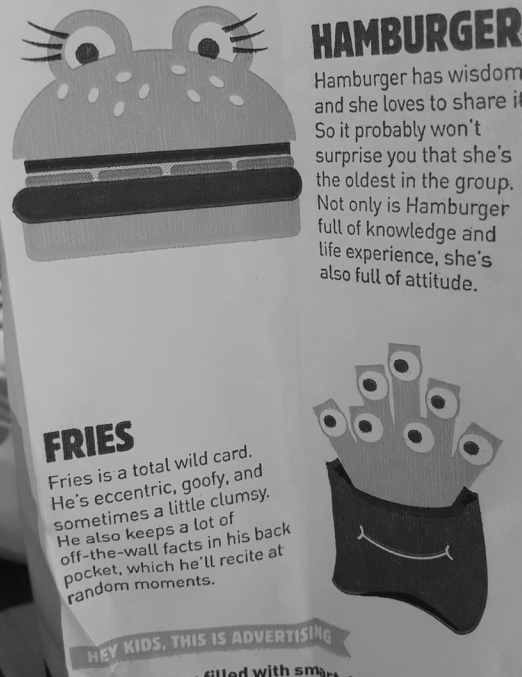
Can the student perspective take?



Can the student show empathy?

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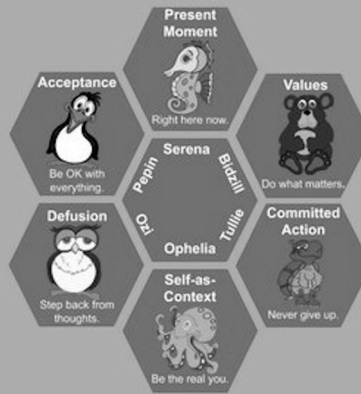
## MAKING ACT MORE FUN



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# MAKING ACT MORE FUN

## Mindful

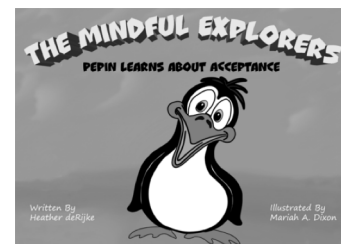
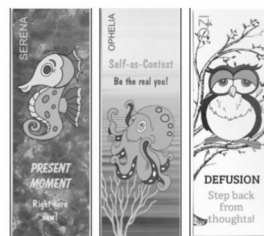
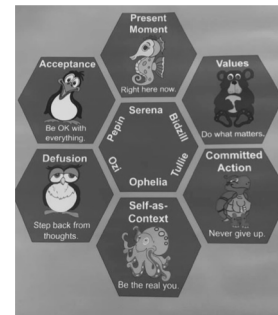


## Explorers

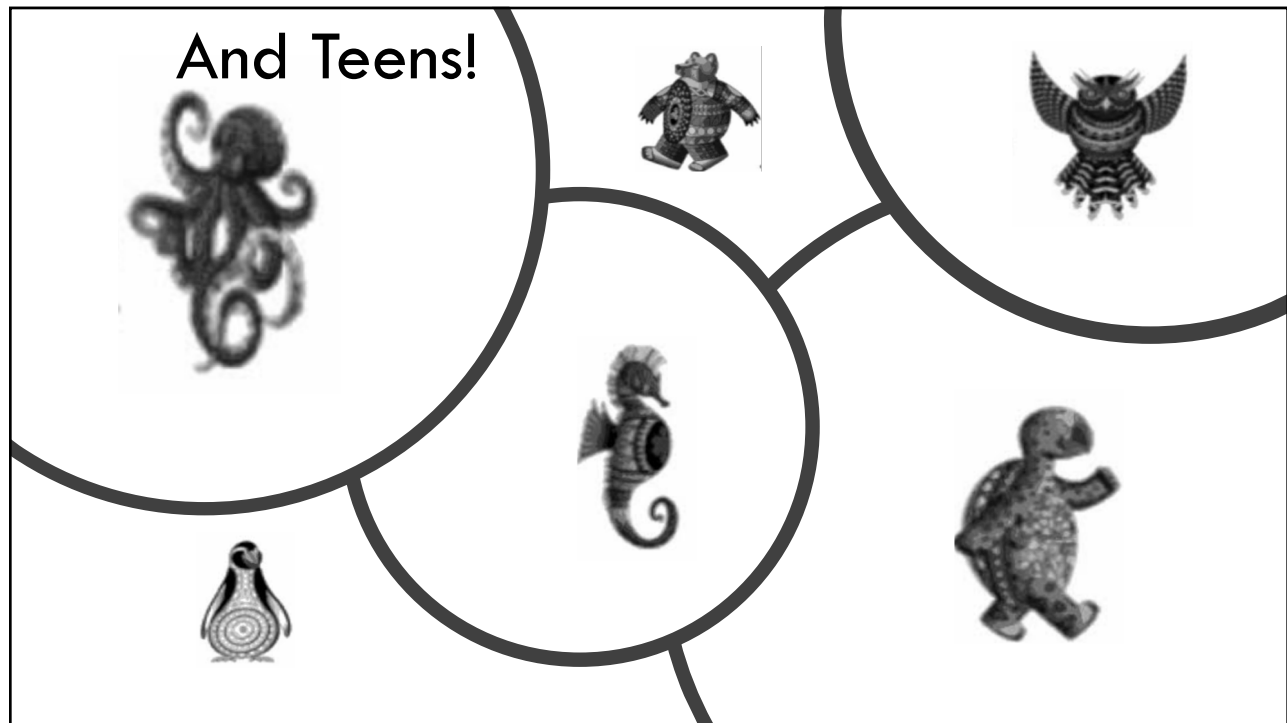
EMERGENT  
LEARNING

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# MAKING IT EVEN MORE FUN FOR LITTLE KIDS



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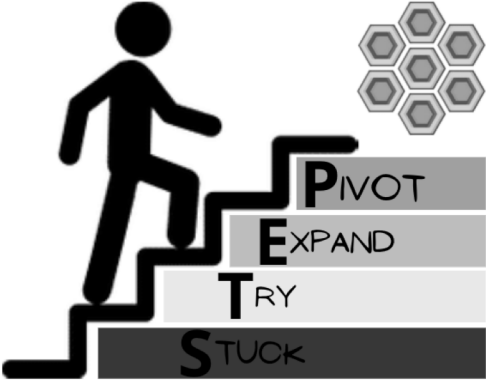


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## STEPS TO FLEXIBILITY



**Take the Steps:**

1. Stuck in your head, place, or time.
2. Try to let go and come back to the present.
3. Expand your mind and accept change.
4. Pivot towards a commitment to your values.

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# ACT

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