**Practicing Mindfulness**

Gather students in a quiet, comfortable area.

Sit or lie down comfortably; however that means to you. If you choose to, close your eyes.

Mentally retrace the last few days. Take yourself through each moment. (pause)

You may notice your mind racing through the activities, bouncing from one thought, one place, one moment, to the next.

Now, become aware of the fact that you are breathing. Become aware of each breath as it flows into and out of your body. Don’t manipulate your breathing in any way. Direct your attention to noticing how this feels. When your mind becomes distracted - and it will become distracted - redirect your attention to the breath. No big deal. (pause)

Allow your attention to gently ride on the sensation of each breath, not thinking about breathing. Simply be aware that your body is moving naturally.

After a short time, you may notice that the mind wanders off to other thoughts; anticipation of tomorrow, planning, wishing, or judgements of this exercise. You may find yourself thinking about what you’ll do later, or what you could be doing instead.

As soon as you become aware that your attention has moved off the breath, guide it back. Use the awareness of your breath to refocus your attention, to return to this moment. It’s this redirection that is exercising your brain; retraining it to work for you instead of run on auto-pilot. (pause)

For the time remaining, let go of your attention to your breath, allowing yourself to simply be here in this space. Mentally go through each of your senses to fully take in your present environment.

Now imagine you are sitting peacefully atop Machu Picchu. You’re off by yourself. (pause) Think of how being mindfully in the present moment, with the auto-pilot switched off, will enhance your experience that day…the days before…and the days after.

Edited from, *Minding the Bedside* by Jerome Stone, MA, RN

**Part II** *(at a later date)*

**Play, *Exploring the Breath* on the Smiling Mind app. Press play after, *“…resting on the floor.”***

**Emotional Resilience**

Similar to intercultural effectiveness, Emotional Resilience relates to one’s ability to adapt and adjust under stress.

Most study abroad students say they are ready to “*step out of their comfort zone*.” This willingness helps, but like Perceived Orientations, they often are not as prepared as they think they are to deal with discomfort.

Challenge students to confront difference, and support those who struggle to adapt and adjust to it with ease.



**Mindfulness for Intercultural Learning**

[By Tara Harvey, Ph.D.](https://www.truenorthintercultural.com/about)

We spend most of our lives operating on automatic pilot, with unconscious scripts guiding our actions. This is necessary and useful because it frees up mental capacity to focus our attention on more complex tasks. However, there is a limit to the efficiency and helpfulness of operating on autopilot. Since our habitual responses are culture-bound, they are likely to be inappropriate across cultures. For example, being on autopilot while driving on the right-hand side of the road would be very problematic in the UK. Such situations require us to act mindfully, being present in a way that allows us to respond to the world in an intentional way – consciously, intentionally *respond* instead of unconsciously *react*.

Some people think of mindfulness and meditation as synonymous; however, meditation is simply one means of practicing mindfulness. There are other ways of practicing, most of which focus on bringing awareness to the present moment. It can be as simple as taking a few intentional breaths before walking into a meeting or in a moment of stress. One of my favorite practices is taking a mindful walk mid-day. During these walks, I try not to ruminate on work or my to-do list, but instead focus on the present moment, tuning in to how I’m experiencing the world through my five senses.

**Research on Mindfulness**

The research on mindfulness has exploded since the early 1990’s invention of the fMRI *(Functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging)*, which allows researchers to map and measure neural activity. Practicing mindfulness has been linked to increased activity in the anterior cingulate cortex (ACC), which is associated with self-regulation, meaning the ability to purposefully direct attention and behavior, suppress inappropriate knee-jerk responses, and switch strategies flexibly. In addition to self-regulation, the ACC is associated with learning from past experience to support optimal decision-making. Scientists point out that the ACC may be particularly important in the face of uncertain and fast-changing conditions.

Research has also demonstrated that practicing mindfulness can impact activity in the prefrontal cortex, which is responsible for executive functions such as perspective-taking, impulse control, decision-making, and also influences how emotionally resilient a person is in the face of stress and adversity. The left & right sides of the prefrontal cortex regulate emotions differently; mindfulness has been shown to shift activity from the right to left side. Jon Kabat-Zinn explains that “resilience in the face of emotional challenges is characterized by greater activation of the left side of the prefrontal cortex.”

The body of scientific research illustrating the positive effects of mindfulness training on mental health and well-being—at the level of the brain as well as at the level of behavior—grows steadily more well-established: *Mindfulness can improve attention, reduce stress, and lead to better emotional regulation and an improved capacity for compassion and empathy.*

**The Link Between Mindfulness & Intercultural Learning**

**Noticing & Slowing Down Our Automatic Reactions:** Practicing mindfulness helps us learn to slow down, notice when reacting on autopilot may not serve us or the situation, and respond in an intentional way instead.

**Increasing Self-Awareness:** “Culture” is essentially the habits of our mind – how we have been programmed. Increasing intercultural competency requires becoming more aware of our own cultural programming—understanding how the ways we make meaning of the world are socially &culturally constructed. This includes the need to get in touch with our emotions and physical sensations, and consider what they offer us in any given moment. Mindfulness helps increase our awareness of our emotions, experience, and habits of our mind. Practicing mindfulness helps us get in touch with who we are on a deeper level.

**Increasing Awareness of Others:** A key component of intercultural learning is understanding how others may make meaning of the world differently than we do. This requires being attuned to our external environment, observing and identifying patterns. Mindfulness increases our ability to pay attention and notice the world around us.

**Engaging Ambiguity:** Intercultural experiences involve a lot of novel situations and require us to engage ambiguity, to get comfortable not knowing. Mindfulness helps us connect with the present moment and become more comfortable not knowing.

**Increasing Creativity:** Bridging across cultural differences often requires outside-the-box thinking. By helping us slow down, increasing our self-awareness, and making us more comfortable with ambiguity, mindfulness also improves our capacity for creativity. Being mindful allows us to see possibilities and opportunities that we may not have otherwise.

**Enhancing Resiliency:** Crossing cultures can be stressful. There is so much new and unknown. Mindfulness has been shown to reduce stress and increase resilience and well-being. By practicing mindfulness, we improve our ability to handle and respond to the fast-changing conditions inherent in intercultural experiences.

**Cultivating Compassion & Empathy:** Being able to empathize with others and see the world from their perspective is critical. Mindfulness has been shown to increase compassion and empathy for others.

[Link to full article + more from True North Intercultural](https://www.truenorthintercultural.com/blog/mindfulness-for-intercultural-learning-part-i)