



The Art of Learning *project* A JWF Foundation Project

The Teacher's Guide to The Art of Learning: *Peak Performance*

Developed by Katy Wells and the JWF Team





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A Note About the Guide

The Teacher’s Guide, Peak Performance module supports you in implementing four key learning principles in your classroom – The Power of Presence, Finding Flow, The Soft Zone, and The Downward Spiral.

The first step is to examine your relationship to these learning principles in the sections entitled Look Inward. These are followed by actions to take, and habits for you and your students to incorporate into your everyday lives. Finally, there is a sample Family Letter to be sent home when you introduce each new concept.

Whether you are probing this material on your own or collaborating with other educators, we hope it deepens your self-awareness and guides you toward developing concrete teaching strategies that further student performance and growth.

Make this work your own by focusing on the content that is most relevant to you and your colleagues. It is not designed to be a curriculum in its own right, but rather a collection of suggestions for ways in which you can incorporate these concepts into your existing curriculum. You may find it helpful to participate in group discussions and to keep a response journal as you work through the guide.

Our work with educators is constantly growing and evolving, and your insight and experience play an enormous part in that growth. Please [share](#) with us the materials that you create – [lesson plans, unit outlines, creative assignments and more](#) – as well as the work your students produce in response to these learning principles. We believe that by sharing your own interpretations of these concepts, we and the many educators with whom we work will continue to achieve higher levels of understanding and success with our students.

As always, we are here to support you – please don’t hesitate to [contact us](#) with questions or comments, or if you’d like an invitation to join our online community of educators and coaches.

Enjoy!

Sincerely,

Katy Wells
Program Director – JW Foundation

To share materials - <https://theartoflearningproject.org/contact-us/>

Resources for educators and coaches - <https://theartoflearningproject.org/resources/for-educators-and-coaches/>

Contact us – info@jwfoundation.com



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Introduction and overview – Family Letter

Dear Families,

Our class is embarking on an exciting learning journey in which we will explore how our brains work, develop our strengths as learners, gain tools for improving our areas of need, and lay the foundation for a lifelong love of learning and a path to excellence!

We have begun a program with the [JW Foundation/Art of Learning Project](#), a non-profit educational initiative centered on the learning principles outlined by Josh Waitzkin in his book *The Art of Learning*. In this book, Waitzkin, an eight-time National Chess Champion in his youth and World Champion in the martial art of Tai Chi Chuan, developed a theory of learning based on a set of principles that enabled him to compete and excel at the highest level in two disparate creative fields.

As a class, we will explore *The Art of Learning* principles as they relate to our own unique characters and learning styles. We encourage you to familiarize yourself with these learning principles as well so that you can reinforce these important concepts at home. Visit the [resources section](#) of the Art of Learning Project website for a detailed description of each learning principle, download a free [Parent Guide](#) to learn how to use the principles at home, and read the letters that will come home as we introduce each new principle.

We look forward to this exciting new learning adventure and the incredible potential it will create for your child!

Sincerely,

Resources - <http://theartoflearningproject.org/educate/resources/>
Guide downloads - <http://theartoflearningproject.org/educate/guide-download/>

For further information about The Art of Learning Project, or to provide feedback about your child's experience, please send an email to info@jwfoundation.com or visit the website at <http://theartoflearningproject.org/educate/>.



Peak Performance

The Power of Presence (Chapters 15, 17)

“Those who excel are those who maximize each moment’s creative potential – for these masters of living, presence to the day-to-day learning process is akin to that purity of focus others dream of achieving in rare climactic moments when everything is on the line.” (p. 172)

Have you ever had an experience that jolted you out of your regular state of being and forced you into an intense state of presence – your senses were heightened, you were focused solely on the problem in front of you, all outside distractions faded away? For some, this moment comes during a car accident, when focus narrows to the point where nothing exists but the steering wheel and the view through the windshield, allowing you to drive with a presence of mind that saves your life. For others, it might occur during an unexpected fall down a flight of stairs, while giving birth, or when thrown from a bicycle after hitting an unseen rock. The common thread is a sudden and intense focus on only the most relevant details, a feeling that the outside world has faded away, and a perceived slowing down of time.

This true presence is not only reserved for our most extreme moments. We have all experienced pure presence in our day-to-day lives as well. These moments occur when you look up from a good book and are surprised to discover that hours have passed without your notice; when you are so immersed in solving a problem (how to fix a leaky sink or broken toy) that you don’t hear your spouse, child, or friend calling your name; when you are deeply involved in a conversation and the world around you seems to disappear; when you push through the early stages of discomfort or exhaustion when exercising to achieve a “runner’s high,” and so on. Rather than wait to experience the power of presence in our most extreme moments, our goal should be to live and breathe it in as often as we can. When we become attuned to these more subtle points of presence in our lives, we develop the ability to be deeply engaged and perform at our best in all moments, both large and small.

LOOK INWARD:

1. When interacting with your family or friends, are you fully present and engaged, or distracted by outside sources (technology, thoughts of work, school, etc.)?
2. What might you subtract from your own life to allow you to be fully present with those around you? What could you subtract from your students’ lives within the classroom to do the same?



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3. Take a moment to remember a time when you experienced true presence in its most extreme form (an accident, near-death experience, etc.) and the feeling of being in that pure state. Next, consider the more subtle experiences of presence (when you are fully absorbed in a project, watching your newborn baby sleep, a good book). What internal and external factors do you think allowed you to enter this state when extreme circumstances were *not* a factor?
4. Which moments in your classroom bring you the most joy, engage you the most, and give you the greatest sense of excitement about teaching? What are the common threads in these moments?
5. Think about times in the classroom or on the playing field when you and your students were fully absorbed and present in your work. Perhaps you were so immersed in a project that you were surprised when the bell rang and it was time to move on. Or you may have been working together on solving a difficult problem when a new solution seemed to come to you out of left field. How did this project, activity, or conversation differ from other parts of the school day? How would you describe your level of engagement and that of your students in these moments, and what factors do you think contributed to that engagement?
6. In what ways do you think your goals or the structure of the school day help or hinder your students in achieving this state?
7. If you were asked to recreate these moments and this quality of presence at will, how do you think you would do it?

ACTIONS:

1. Take note of the moments in which your students are most engaged throughout the day. Do they tend to become deeply immersed in peer or group conversations, independent explorations, research projects, presentations, experiments, or another type of activity? Now explore the moments in which they tend to be distracted or disengaged. How might you change the approach or structure of these lessons to encourage a deeper quality of presence? Include your students in this exploration by asking them to think about the moments in their lives (either in school or out) when they feel most engaged, joyful, and energized. Consider their suggestions for how to bring that level of presence into their class work.
2. Step back and observe yourself in moments when your students are fully engaged. How often do you interrupt the flow of their work with your own agenda, timelines, etc.? Consider conducting an experiment in which you become a silent observer during these moments. What do you notice about the quality of your students' work and focus when you take yourself out of the picture? How long are they able to remain present and engaged and how can you support them in stretching that time, rather than cutting it?



DAILY HABITS:

1. Commit 5 minutes daily to practicing [mindful breathing](#) with your students.
2. Commit 10 minutes daily to developing your own mindfulness practice
3. Do a [guided body scan](#) practice with your class daily.
4. Model choosing one distraction to eliminate daily. For example, teach one lesson with no technology; have students listen to a short story with their eyes closed; or commit to a 10 minute work time with no talking or interruptions. Help your students choose one distraction that they will eliminate daily as well. For example, turn the phone off between the hours of _ and _; commute to school without listening to music; don't check social media or email until after completing homework, etc.
5. Practice one simple classroom task each day with a dedication to presence. For example, unpacking backpacks, walking from the desks to the meeting area, or passing out papers. Briefly discuss the impact this has on the quality of how that task was performed (no papers were lost, everyone found a seat quickly, etc.).
6. Schedule a few minutes daily during which your students will use their senses to scrutinize small details. They could spend one minute listening intently to the ambient sounds in their environment, spend one minute studying the visual details of an object like a rock or the pattern of the floor tiles, or a few minutes sharing a snack and discussing the flavors and textures they experience. Regularly practicing these kinds of detailed observations will help cultivate their ability to remain present to the small moments in their lives.

Mindful breathing activities for class transitions - <https://www.mindfulschools.org/inspiration/3-mindful-breathing-activities-class-transitions/>

Three-minute body scan - <https://www.mindful.org/a-3-minute-body-scan-meditation-to-cultivate-mindfulness/>



The Power of Presence – Family Letter

“Those who excel are those who maximize each moment’s creative potential – for these masters of living, presence to the day-to-day learning process is akin to that purity of focus others dream of achieving in rare climactic moments when everything is on the line.” (p. 172)

Dear Families,

This week we will begin to explore the learning principle [*The Power of Presence*](#).

We can all acknowledge the importance of maintaining presence of mind and clear, focused effort in high-stakes moments such as high-pressure competitions, performances, and life-or-death situations. But how present are we to the small, day-to-day moments in our lives? These are the moments when our presence matters the most. By learning to tap into a deep level of presence moment to moment, we set ourselves on a path to growth and learning that becomes an essential part of our lives.

As we learn about *The Power of Presence* in class, we will work on analyzing our level of presence throughout the school day and thinking about how to deepen presence in moments where it is lacking. We will explore the factors that lead to our greatest level of engagement in and out of school, and will practice honing our observation skills through all of our senses to encourage us to become more deeply attuned to small moments.

You can support this work at home by helping your child evaluate the sources of distraction in his life, minimize them whenever possible, and learn to simply experience them when they can’t be removed. Teach your child to [practice mindfulness](#) on a daily basis to increase focus, calm, and self-regulation skills. Think about which activities most engage your child and at what time of day she is most present. Encourage her to take a few moments each day to drop everything, take in her surroundings, and notice and enjoy the small details.

Sincerely,

The Power of Presence – <http://theartoflearningproject.org/educate/resources/the-power-of-presence/>
Why and How to Teach your Kids Mindfulness - <https://www.parents.com/health/healthy-happy-kids/why-and-how-to-teach-kids-mindfulness/>

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Finding Flow (Chapter 17)

“To have success in crunch time, you need to integrate certain healthy patterns into your day-to-day life so that they are completely natural to you when the pressure is on. The real power of incremental growth comes to bear when we truly are like water, steadily carving stone. We just keep on flowing when everything is on the line.” (p. 187)

A flow state, also known as being “in the zone,” is what one achieves when so deeply immersed in an activity or project that one experiences intense focus, a slowing down of time, and a sense of deep happiness or satisfaction with the work at hand. The state of flow is its own intrinsic goal, so whatever activity brings it on receives the utmost concentration and any unnecessary distractions simply disappear. For most of us, these moments are experienced in rare bursts. Perhaps you’ve felt it while playing a game of tennis, when you’re able to return every shot in split seconds, but the next time you play you find it difficult to recreate the experience. Or when a song you love comes on the radio and you feel as though it’s washing over you, transporting you to another place. Although flow can be elusive, you can learn to trigger it. Imagine if your students were able to attain a state of flow at will. They would be deeply immersed in projects, coming to incredible new discoveries, and loving the process of learning. If you’d like to learn more about flow, we’ve compiled a list of resources [here](#).

LOOK INWARD:

1. What activity brings you a feeling of joy, fulfillment, and satisfaction?
2. How do you feel during this activity? Describe the sensations, smells, sounds, etc.
3. Recall a time when you felt challenged and pushed beyond your comfort zone, rising to the occasion. What factors supported you in embracing that challenge?
4. Have you experienced moments in which you were so deeply engaged in something that you lost track of time and your surroundings? What were you doing? What did you feel?
5. Have you had an experience in which you were attempting to solve a complex and difficult problem and the solution seemed to appear to you out of thin air, seemingly without effort? What factors do you think contributed to this?

ACTIONS:

1. In a classroom that is conducive to flow, students choose from a variety of activities based on their own interests. These activities are complex enough to fully engage their minds and senses and push the students to move slightly beyond their comfort zones. The educational experience is exploratory and



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- project-based, rather than top-down, lecture-based. Their projects and activities do not have fixed outcomes. Rather, students are discovering the possibilities and may be surprised by what happens. Students receive large blocks of time to work on a project with limited distractions. Students work in partnerships or groups as much as possible to increase feedback, engagement, and unknown outcomes. As you plan your units of study, think about how to foster a flow-inducing approach to learning as often as possible.
2. When planning lessons, incorporate as much active participation and structured group work as possible. Be sure that your students are clear on what they are working toward as a team. In group activities and projects, their immediate feedback will come from the other members of their team, as well as from breaks taken to share findings with the rest of the class. It's essential that the structure of the day include regular time to confer with peers or the teacher. This is where feedback comes in (peers especially, as they can point out where they are confused, tie it in with what they're discovering, and note "aha" moments).
 3. Your classroom environment must be conducive to [risk taking](#) – where students feel comfortable asking questions and are eager to try new things. Develop a community of learners who feel safe jumping into the unknown with each other and who celebrate each others' attempts at discovery, regardless of outcome. If you find that many of your students struggle with this, consider working through the [Resilience](#) guide first.
 4. How do you support your students in maintaining presence and remaining thoughtful throughout the school day – regardless of whether they are participating? Several ways to encourage accountability are:
 - a. Include "[turn and talk](#)" time in your lessons, so that students are expected to share thoughts, ask questions, and contribute ideas with a partner, allowing the entire class to participate at once.
 - b. Use peer tutoring or the [jigsaw teaching](#) method so that each student is responsible for teaching others about what they've learned.
 - c. Build [regular self-evaluation](#) of progress and plans for improvement into each week so that children are setting their own goals and actively working toward meeting them.
 5. Think about the organization of your classroom environment and the effect it has on your students' level of participation and engagement. Include your students in setting up their workspaces and the classroom space to limit distractions and encourage engagement.
 6. Limit the amount of time spent in lecture-based or teacher-directed activities and provide daily opportunities for project-based explorations.
 7. According to Dr. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, the researcher and psychologist who coined the term "flow," you can create a flow state with certain properties such as clear goals with immediate feedback, a balance between the level of challenge and the level of skill – where the challenge is slightly greater than the skill level,



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2. Devote a portion of each day to students working on passion projects or some curricular focus of their choice. Consider allowing this time to be ungraded so that students explore and create without fear of mistakes carrying negative consequences.
3. Provide immediate feedback to students as they're working, and allow time for them to adjust their approach based on that feedback. After modeling this yourself, you might incorporate peer feedback as well.
4. Brief moments of physical activity sprinkled throughout the day can increase focus and concentration. Consider incorporating short intervals of [physical exercise](#) into your academic day.

BUILDING A FLOW TRIGGER:

1. Spend a few minutes each day guiding your students through a visualization of their personal experiences with flow. Have them sit in a comfortable spot and close their eyes. Initially, you may need to provide more structured support and taper off over time as they are able to go through the visualization process on their own. Some things you could say are...
 - a. Take yourself back to a moment when you felt open and free, like life was at its best. Maybe you were listening to a song that you love; smoothly weaving through the opposing team in a soccer match as you got closer and closer to the goal; performing in front of an audience, hitting every mark just right.
 - b. Put yourself back in that space. How do you feel? What are you feeling in your body? In your heart?
 - c. Let those feelings wash over you now as you experience that moment again.
2. After the visualization, encourage your students to take note of how they feel and to bring that feeling with them into their next activity.
3. Once you have developed a series of lessons or activities that are conducive to flow, you can incorporate a mindfulness routine that will allow your students to enter a state of flow at will. It is important that you practice this routine at a time when your students are in a calm and positive frame of mind to avoid developing negative associations with the routine. Choose from one of the options below and have your students practice it immediately before embarking on a flow-conductive project or activity.
 - a. Sit with feet firmly planted on the ground, back straight, hand on your lower abdomen. Take three deep breaths, in and out, focusing on the feel of your abdomen moving.
 - b. Sit with feet firmly planted on the ground, back straight, hands on your thighs. Close your eyes and visualize the space between your eyes for 10 seconds.



Finding Flow – Family Letter

“To have success in crunch time, you need to integrate certain healthy patterns into your day-to-day life so that they are completely natural to you when the pressure is on. The real power of incremental growth comes to bear when we truly are like water, steadily carving stone. We just keep on flowing when everything is on the line.” (p. 187)

Dear Families,

This week we will begin our exploration of the learning principle *Finding Flow*.

Our lives are not made up only of the exciting moments – the big games, important presentations, and Oscar-worthy performances – but all of the little moments in between as well. The reality is that we rarely know exactly when that most important moment is going to occur, so we must learn to live our lives prepared to excel at every moment, ready to meet a challenge whenever it presents itself. [Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi](#), the psychologist and researcher who coined the term *flow*, discovered that people are happiest and most fulfilled when they take on experiences that challenge their abilities and fully engage their senses.

As we learn about *Finding Flow* in class, we will use self-evaluation, personal goal setting, and peer and group teaching methods to encourage active engagement at all times throughout the school day. Students will discover flow states in immersive group projects and challenging assignments.

Once students have begun to experience flow within the school day, we will develop a routine to trigger the flow state at will. Eventually we will work toward employing the routine before high-stress activities and condensing it for ease of use. The ultimate goal of this routine is to create something that can be played out in your child’s mind in a matter of seconds, which will put her in a calm and focused state at a moment’s notice.

You can continue this work at home by providing support as your child takes on new challenges, and having high expectations for how your child will tackle those challenges. Allow your child the opportunity to come up with his own solutions to problems and to try them out without judgment. Be cognizant of your child’s developmental abilities and encourage her to work within the [“flow channel”](#), which exists on the line between anxiety-producing activities and boredom. As your child masters skills, increase the challenge level so that he is always stretching just beyond what he was able to do before.

Sincerely,

The Pursuit of Happiness - <http://www.pursuit-of-happiness.org/history-of-happiness/mihaly-csikszentmihalyi/>

What is Flow? - <https://www.parentcorticalmass.com/2011/06/what-is-flow.html>

For further information about The Art of Learning Project, or to provide feedback about your child’s experience, please send an email to info@jwfoundation.com or visit the website at <http://theartoflearningproject.org/educate/>.



The Soft Zone (Chapters 2, 5)

“Mental resilience is arguably the most critical trait of a world-class performer, and it should be nurtured continuously. Left to my own devices, I am always looking for ways to become more and more psychologically impregnable. When uncomfortable, my instinct is not to avoid the discomfort but to become at peace with it.” (p. 60)

Life is full of random, unexpected events and demands. It is vital that we gain an awareness and understanding of our reactions to these intrusions to cultivate the ability to remain calm and collected when they arise. To maximize our ability to develop and draw on our knowledge base, we should not brace against disruptions and the emotions they stir, but rather adopt a nonresistant attitude. This allows us to absorb information, process it smoothly and quickly, take appropriate action, and grow from the experience; we become resilient in the way a flexible blade of grass can bend and sustain most any kind of pressure. With a resistant approach to stressors, however large or small, we cannot sustain focus and call on our full wisdom. We become inflexible and lose our ability to clear the hurdles, brittle like a dry stick snapping under pressure.

LOOK INWARD:

1. What is your personal response to intrusion, pressure and upheaval? How do you speak and act in the face of unexpected, trying events?
2. Think of a time that you were able to bend and flow with an unexpected intrusion, and another time in which you were not able to. What enabled you to be within the Soft Zone the one time and not the other? What action could you have taken to create a different outcome?
3. Think about your relationship to routines now and as a child. How strictly do you or did you adhere to routines and how does/did it feel when a routine is interrupted or changed?

ACTIONS:

1. Discuss the importance of flexibility with your students and its effect on absorbing and processing information. Show your students a soft piece of play-doh and a hard, dry piece. Demonstrate how the soft piece bends in response to pressure, while the hard piece simply crumbles.
2. Allow your students opportunities to meet minor challenges and unexpected turns of events with flexibility and an open mind. Consider playing [Exquisite Corpse](#), in which they work with a partner on an assignment taking turns adding elements to the same drawing, piece of writing, or presentation, so that they must adapt to each others' ideas as they work. Alternately, you might include short [theater](#)



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- [games](#) in your day to encourage flexible thinking in the face of unknown circumstances.
3. Consider incorporating regular partner and group work into the school day to give your students repeated opportunities to [learn to think flexibly](#) and further develop their ideas in response to those of others. Have partnerships and groups present their thoughts and discoveries to the class as a whole to encourage clarity and the ability to unify their thinking.
 4. If you have already worked through the [Resilience Guide](#), remind your students of the focused breathing techniques suggested in the “Using Adversity” section. For older students, discuss how using these techniques clears room for a more thoughtful consideration of how to respond to trying situations with a nonresistant, calm attitude.

DAILY HABITS:

1. Incorporate a daily eraser/delete free portion of the day during which students practice working with their mistakes, rather than going back and starting over. Depending on the subject area, you might have them use the mistake as a stepping off point for creating something new – this could work well with certain art lessons. For a subject like mathematics, where accuracy is important, have students look back through their work to identify where they erred and make a new attempt from that point. Students can begin to find patterns in the types of mistakes they make and formulate a plan for how to approach those problems differently going forward.
2. Model your own Soft Zone approach to daily stumbling blocks by thinking out loud as much as possible to show the process of making plans, changing plans as needed, flexibility, etc.
 - a. We have 45 minutes in this class period, so we’ll talk about the concepts for 10, practice it together for 5, practice it independently for 20, then share our work together for 10. Oops, we spent 20 minutes on the conversation, so let’s change our plans and work independently for just 10 minutes before we come back to share.
 - b. We’re going to go down this hallway to get to gym. Uh oh, there’s a toilet overflowing and we can’t go that way, let’s take this other route instead.
 - c. I’m going to divide the class into groups of three by partnering people with the students sitting on either side of them. No, that leaves too many groups of all boys or all girls. Instead, I’ll have you pick partners’ names out of a hat.
3. For younger students, have them walk a different route to the meeting area each day, vary routines such as schedule and partnerships to create greater flexibility, or teach lessons from different areas of the classroom.
4. For older students, regularly change seating assignments and partner and group-work assignments. Select one student each day who will take the lead on a 10-



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minute lesson, so the presenter gains the experience of thinking on his or her feet, answering unexpected questions, and so on, and the class has the opportunity to learn the subject matter from a different perspective. Be sure to give that student advance notice so he or she can prepare for the lesson.

Exquisite Corpse lesson - <http://adriennekitko.weebly.com/uploads/5/1/6/6/51662221/exquisitecorpsegame.pdf>
Theater games - <https://smarts-ef.org/blog/theater-games-you-can-use-to-teach-flexible-thinking/>
Building Students' Cognitive Flexibility - <https://www.edutopia.org/blog/building-students-cognitive-flexibility-judy-willis>



The Soft Zone – family letter

“Mental resilience is arguably the most critical trait of a world-class performer, and it should be nurtured continuously. Left to my own devices, I am always looking for ways to become more and more psychologically impregnable. When uncomfortable, my instinct is not to avoid the discomfort but to become at peace with it.” (p. 60)

Dear Families,

This week we will begin our exploration of the learning principle [*The Soft Zone*](#).

Regardless of what we may desire, the world around us is, for the most part, outside of our control. If we meet every challenge with the expectation that it will bend to our will and accommodate our needs, we will meet with failure and disappointment time and time again. However, if we learn to be flexible, to flow with the unexpected and change our own responses in the face of those challenges, we will develop a resilience that allows us to effectively process and positively react to whatever comes our way.

As we learn about *The Soft Zone* in class, we will work on developing a flexible and adaptable mindset that allows us to process and creatively respond to the ideas of others. We will work with partners and groups to strengthen our cooperative learning skills and practice calming techniques such as focused breathing to clear the mental space necessary to respond to trying situations with a calm and non-resistant attitude.

You can support this work at home by helping your child [practice flexible thinking](#) through games such as Parcheesi, Risk, chess, checkers, or role-playing scenarios in which he must adapt to an unexpected turn of events. Make a point of having fun with doing things in an unexpected and unusual way, such as taking a different route to school each day or cooking a meal together without a recipe.

Sincerely,

The Soft Zone - <https://theartoflearningproject.org/resources/peak-performance/enter-the-soft-zone/>
How to Build Flexible Thinking Skills - <https://bitsofwisdomforall.com/build-flexible-thinking-skills/>

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The Downward Spiral (Chapters 5, 6)

“Musicians, actors, athletes, philosophers, scientists, writers understand that brilliant creations are often born of small errors. Problems set in if the performer has a brittle dependence on the safety of absolute perfection or duplication. Then an error triggers fear, detachment, uncertainty, or confusion that muddies the decision-making process.” (p. 63)

When we cling to the troubling emotions that result from an obstacle or loss, we abandon the present for the past. In short order, we find ourselves using our personal resources to wage an internal war instead of using them to handle what is going on now and move forward. By focusing on a past problem it becomes easy to believe that things have taken a turn for the worse. In not being awake to the present, we magnify the original loss, allowing it to produce a ripple effect of additional problems. These, in turn, take us even further off a course of growth. We must stay cool under fire and fully in the present to glean the most we can from every experience and achieve success.

LOOK INWARD:

1. Josh writes that one can regain clarity of mind when it is being swept away by “being present” and mentions some simple strategies, such as taking deep breaths or splashing cold water on one’s face. What are your strategies for being present?
2. Have you ever experienced a downward spiral, in which you clung to turbulent emotions stemming from a past incident, which shifted your focus away from the present? What happened as a result of this downward spiral? How could you have used your strategies for being present to regain clarity in that situation?

ACTIONS:

1. As you assess and evaluate student work, identify what was done well alongside what needs improvement. Encourage your students to do this with frequent [self-evaluations](#) as well.
2. Discuss the value of mistakes as learning opportunities with your students. Help them develop strategies for letting go of disappointment and maintaining presence, and create a chart of acceptable methods of doing so during the class session (get a sip of water, take a quick walk down the hallway, etc.). If your students have already begun a focused breath work routine, this would be an opportune time to use it (for a detailed description of how to develop such a routine, please see the Using Adversity section of the [Resilience Guide](#)).
3. Teach your students about their bodies’ physical responses to a downward spiral, such as headaches, tense muscles, or rapid breathing brought on by an increase in cortisol levels, and how to use physical exercise, breath work, and sleep to help [reset the system](#) before making decisions.



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4. For students who are especially attached to the idea of perfection and strongly affected by disappointments, have them maintain a journal in which they write about positive moments within the disappointing event and make plans for how they could approach the situation differently next time.
5. For these same students, review the Beginner's Mind principle in the Resilience Guide and work on changing their mindsets from an entity-based frame to an incremental one.

DAILY HABITS:

1. Build [short stress and recovery routines](#) into the daily fabric of your classroom.
2. Include a daily reflection on a positive moment that came out of something unexpected or unplanned for (teacher will have to model this quite a bit – for example, “At breakfast I discovered my favorite cereal was all gone so I had to eat toast. It was delicious!” or “I had planned on reading _____ book, but when I got to the library it was already checked out. I was really disappointed, but the librarian suggested I read _____, and I’m loving it!”)
3. Regularly practice the [Failure Bow](#) technique to alleviate the tension of mistakes and physically open the body up in moments of stress (model this with every simple mistake made in class and encourage students to do the same).

Grading Tips video - <https://www.teachingchannel.org/video/math-test-grading-tips>

5 Simple Ways to Lower Your Cortisol - <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-athletes-way/201301/cortisol-why-the-stress-hormone-is-public-enemy-no-1>

In Class Physical Activity Breaks - <https://www.fueluptoplay60.com/-/media/files/play-page-downloads/2018-19-playbook/in-class-physical-activity-break-ideas.ashx>

Failure Bow video - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cXuD2zHVeB0>



The Downward Spiral – Family Letter

“Musicians, actors, athletes, philosophers, scientists, writers understand that brilliant creations are often born of small errors. Problems set in if the performer has a brittle dependence on the safety of absolute perfection or duplication. Then an error triggers fear, detachment, uncertainty, or confusion that muddies the decision-making process.” (p. 63)

Dear Families,

This week we will begin our exploration of the learning principle [*The Downward Spiral*](#).

When we are performing well, making all the right moves and sailing ahead of the competition, we feel unstoppable. But all too often, one small misstep shifts our confidence and leaves us stuck in the past, where everything *was* going according to plan. As a result, we fail to see each step moving forward, so mired are we in what has already occurred, and we begin to stray further and further off the path to our goal. To prevent this downward spiral, we must remain focused on the present.

As we learn about *The Downward Spiral* in class, we will practice using regular self-evaluation techniques to assess our strengths and areas in which we need improvement. We will develop strategies for letting go of disappointment and maintaining presence that can be used in and out of the classroom. We will also begin to learn about how the body responds physically to a downward spiral, and the important roles played by physical exercise, focused breathing, and sleep on our ability to make major decisions.

You can support this work at home by helping your child process strong emotions and disappointments through discussion and, once he or she has processed those feelings, making a plan for how to approach the situation differently next time. Ask your child to share the letting go strategies we’ve practiced in class and work on using them together at home as needed.

Sincerely,

The Downward Spiral - <https://theartoflearningproject.org/resources/peak-performance/avoid-the-downward-spiral/>

For further information about The Art of Learning Project, or to provide feedback about your child’s experience, please send an email to info@jwfoundation.com or visit the website at <http://theartoflearningproject.org/educate/>.