



ICE CUBES

Reacting or responding.

Duration	10 minutes
Material	One or two ice cubes, one container and one towel per student
General workshop objectives	<p>Pay attention to sensations;</p> <p>Learn to manage an uncomfortable situation;</p> <p>Learn to respond instead of react.</p>

Explanation to teachers

What would you do if you came face to face with a bear or a speeding car bearing down on you? There's no time to think. You need to either flee, fight or freeze. These are perfectly normal reactions. The "fight, flight or freeze" reflex is innate and originates from the time when humans had to contend with their environment in order to survive, for example, when they were faced with a bear or a mammoth. That makes it especially useful in dangerous situations. The problem these days, however, is that this reflex has stayed the same, whereas most of the threats we perceive are very different. Mammoths have been replaced with text messages and bears with exams (The Hawn Foundation, 2011; McGonigal, 2013).

By incorporating mindfulness into our daily life, we learn to interpret this information as cues to take a pause and breathe before speaking and acting (Siegel, 2010). In the following exercise, the ice cube symbolizes a stressful or uncomfortable situation. Instead of reacting immediately and dropping the ice cube, the students will learn to recognize and explore their sensations and emotions as they hold the ice cube in their hands.

Why respond instead of react?

- To better cope with stressful or conflicting situations;
- To take a step back from a situation;
- To save energy.



Good to know...

The part of the brain that controls emotions and reactions (fight/flight/freeze) is called the limbic system. The prefrontal cortex, which has become more developed as humans evolved, is responsible for thinking and logic. It communicates with multiple regions of the brain, unlike the limbic system, which sends its impulses directly to the spinal cord, which explains its reactivity. The prefrontal cortex, which is stimulated by mindfulness, helps the limbic system to regulate its reactions.

(The Hawm Foundation, 2011)

Tip for facilitators

Encourage the students to hold the ice cube, but avoid being judgmental if they put it down. Focus their attention on what they are feeling.

INSTRUCTIONS

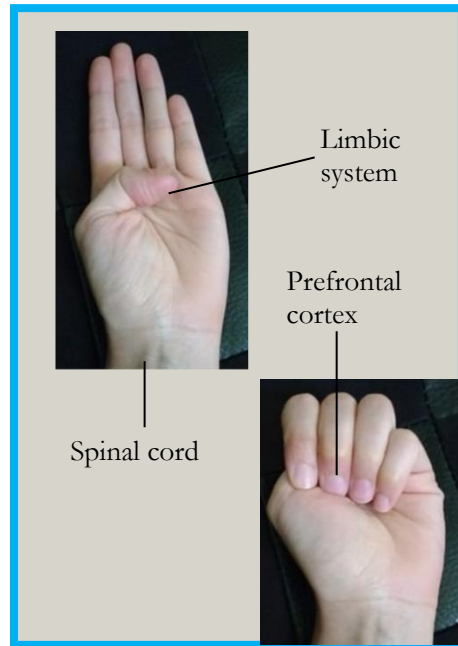
1. Give each student one or two ice cubes in a container, along with a towel to wipe up the water.
2. Explain that they are about to hold an ice cube in their hands, which may be uncomfortable at first, but that there's no danger involved.
3. Then, guide them with the following instructions:
 - Before picking up the ice cube, take the time to study your hands. How do they feel? Are they cold, hot, moist, dry?
 - Now, pick up the ice cube, close your eyes and roll it around between your hands. Pay attention to your sensations and thoughts. Try to keep it in your hands instead of dropping it right away. Roll it around or squeeze it and see what happens. If you start to feel uncomfortable, take a few breaths and try to relax your hands.
 - If it's too uncomfortable, that's fine. Put the ice cube down for a minute and pick it up again when you're ready.
4. Keeping your eyes closed, notice your sensations and thoughts as the ice melts in your hands.
5. If some students' ice cubes melt quickly, give them a second one and ask them to notice if things are different the second time around.
6. Finally, lead a discussion by asking the following questions:
 - What did you feel when you first held the ice in your hands?
 - How did your sensations/emotions change as the ice melted? What did you do to make them change?
 - Using the ice cube as an example, think about a stressful or uncomfortable situation. What things could you do to get through it?

DIGGING DEEPER

Use toys called "finger traps" to expose the students to the concept of reacting or responding. Finger traps are small tubes made of woven strands, open at each end, in which you insert your index fingers. If you try to pull your fingers out quickly, the pulling motion causes the strands to tighten around the fingers, trapping them inside the tube. Once your students have inserted their fingers in the traps, tell them to pull sharply and see what happens. Then, tell them to take a few breaths and remove their fingers slowly. Then, compare the finger trap experience to the concept of reacting and responding. When we take time to settle down, we're able to get through uncomfortable situations more easily than when we react impulsively, without taking the time to study the situation and how it makes us feel. Use the complementary sheet to further explore the concept of reactions in the brain.



COMPLEMENTARY SHEET



Let's talk about the brain for a few minutes. Using the images above, imagine that the hand is the brain, with the forehead being the knuckles and the back of the head being the back of your hand. The wrist is the spinal cord and the bottom of the hand, the brain stem. The thumb is the limbic system, i.e., the centre for emotions, reactions and the “fight, flight or freeze” reflex. The prefrontal cortex, which has become more developed as humans evolved, controls thoughts and logic (represented here by the fingertips). When the fist is closed, we can see that it communicates with many regions of the brain, unlike the limbic system. It also helps to control the reactions of the limbic system. When stress, anxiety or anger become overwhelming, it tends to lose control. The limbic system then becomes exposed and takes over, as seen on the image of the open hand, leading to strong reactions. Mindfulness helps to engage the prefrontal cortex, even in uncomfortable situations. This makes it easier to respond consciously, rather than impulsively. Here are the two possible paths (The Hawa Foundation, 2011):

