

ACTIVITY: MY MIND IS A CAST OF CHARACTERS¹

Materials: Name tags, index cards, and a math worksheet or something similar

Directions and Preparation: This is an activity used to demonstrate inner speech (chattering mind). Ask for one student volunteer (number 1) to sit in the front or middle of the class. Ask for several other student volunteers to be that student's "thoughts". After student volunteer 1 is seated in the front or center of the space, have the other students stand in a circle around the seated student. Let's begin!

Let's try an exercise that shows how the mind's chatter can affect us. This student, _____ (name), is a stand-in for all of us. I am going to ask them to do something in a minute. The other students (*use their names*) stand in for their "thoughts". I'm going to give each of the other student volunteers a name tag and a "thought" to read.

Give each of the other volunteers a name tag with the name of a role (parent, teacher, friend, self) and an index card with an appropriate message written on it. See suggested messages for the various roles below.

Put the name tag on each student. Using name tags on a cord that can be placed around the student's neck makes this easy. Allow each actor to read the message quietly before the activity begins.

Now I am going to give _____ (name of the seated student) a math worksheet to do. While they are filling out the worksheet, all the "thoughts" need to walk around them in a circle and keep repeating the same sentence on your index card. You don't need to yell or walk too close to the student in the middle. Just remember that you are the thoughts in _____ (seated student's) head.

The first "thought" reads the message aloud and begins circling the seated volunteer as that person works on the math sheet. One by one, each "thought" enters the circle. Students in the "roles" walk in a circle around the working student and repeat their scripted message over and over. If the facilitator uses more than four volunteers and space permits, make the circles concentric. This may be done for three to four minutes while the student volunteer works on the problems. At the end, all roles might speak their "thoughts" at the same time.

After the demonstration, discuss the following questions with the actors and with the whole class:

How did this experience affect your concentration?

Were the messages (thoughts) helpful or unhelpful? Pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral?

How did listening to this affect your mood?

How difficult was it to stay focused?

What other kinds of messages or thoughts did you find in your mind at times?

SUGGESTED ROLES AND MESSAGES: You may develop additional roles if you wish.

Parent 1: "Did you do your homework?"

Parent 2: "Hurry up and finish, or you'll be late."

Teacher 1: "This test is worth 40% of your grade."

Teacher 2: "This material will be on your final exam."

Friend 1: "Why are you always studying so much?"

Friend 2: "Did you hear what she said about you today?"

Self 1: "I'm not good at math. I'm afraid I'm not doing well."

Self 2: "I hate math. It's so boring."

For a variation, include some positive thoughts like "this is easy because I'm good at math."

¹Broderick, Patricia C. "Theme R: Reflections." *Learning to Breathe A Mindfulness Curriculum for Adolescents to Cultivate Emotion Regulation, Attention, and Performance*, by Patricia C. Broderick, New Harbinger Publications, 2013, pp. 49–50.

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Call attention to several elements demonstrated in the activity: the repetitive nature and automaticity of self-talk, the positive and negative tone of self-statements, the impact of mind chatter on attention and concentration, and the universality of this “wandering mind” experience. Some discussion from personal experience may be helpful.

Potential questions include:

Have you ever been lost in thought?

Have you ever been unable to sleep or study for a test because your mind was racing?

Sometimes we have thoughts that bother us over and over again. They’re a little like Velcro: they seem to stick in our minds, and we have trouble getting rid of them. Demonstrating these “sticky thoughts” using a toy ball that sticks to a Velcro board can be useful. Sometimes we try to stop them.

What happens when you try to do this?

Is there a way we can stop our thinking?

How helpful has this been for you in your experience?

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