

The easiest way to slow our breathing is to breathe more fully from our belly up through our lungs and in through our nostrils. Then we can exhale slowly through our noses and try to extend the exhalation longer than the inhalation. This triggers us into the parasympathetic nervous system response often described as rest and relaxation. By practicing this calm and slow breathing, we can regain our full brain's function and begin priming ourselves for feeling like powerful teachers.

### Create Space for Yourself

- ★ Find small moments in your day.
- ★ Create boundaries.
- ★ Make the most of mornings or me-time evenings.
- ★ Breathe intentionally.

For those of you who like the idea of having more personal space but then feel a bit doubtful you can pull it off or you wonder if you really deserve it, take a few minutes to reflect on what it feels like to not have any space for yourself and what it feels like to have some moments of space. Jot down your observations so you can come back to this description, and remind yourself why it is vital that you make space a priority.

What does it feel like when I have no space for myself at all?

What does it feel like when I have some space for myself?

## FOCUS ON HAPPINESS

When we are happy, we are better and more successful at our work (Achor, 2010). This means that our personal happiness is not a luxury or an added bonus; it is an essential part of being an effective teacher. This doesn't mean we hide or suppress the many other feelings that come up for us, but it does mean that being happy in our overall lives is vital.

## Pay Attention to Your Frame

Our ability to frame our life experiences in the most generous and positive way is a key aspect of being happy. In their book *The Book of Joy*, the Dalai Lama, Desmond Tutu, and Douglas Abrams (2016) help us understand how our outlook and thoughts shape our ability to experience joy:

A healthy perspective really is the foundation of joy and happiness, because the way we see the world is the way we experience the world. Changing the way we see the world in turn changes the way we feel and the way we act, which changes the world itself... with our mind we create our own world.  
(p. 194)

Abrams goes on to quote Viktor E. Frankl (1959), whose book *Man's Search for Meaning* illustrates how our perspective toward life is our ultimate human freedom (Dalai Lama et al., 2016).

While their book shares many ways to live a more joyful life, a few that struck me most do center around the concept that our perspective affects our sense of joy. They explain that people who take a wider perspective than their own personal vantage point are more joyful. They cite several studies that show that “being too self-regarding really does make us unhappy” (Dalai Lama et al., 2016, p. 200). One study found an association between people who use more personal pronouns and increased risk of heart attacks. Another study suggested that people’s degree of “self-involvement” may be a better predictor of death than smoking, cholesterol levels, and high blood pressure. A third study found that people who often use first-person singular pronouns (*I, me*) are more likely to be depressed than people who use first-person plural pronouns (*we, us*). What all three of these studies reveal is that when we focus our perspective too much on ourselves and our own struggles, our health, happiness, and well-being decline.

So how does this research on being too self-regarding connect to taking care of yourself? On the surface, it may seem like this is contradictory, but in fact, it is actually interrelated. In order for us to be happy, we need to take care of ourselves by creating space for nurturing our own needs, *and* we also benefit from viewing our life experiences from the broadest perspective that allows us to see other people’s experiences along with our own. Taking care of ourselves does not mean we disregard others; it means we step back so we can actually get the perspective that allows us to see the largest possible picture. When we take this wider perspective, we are more grateful for our life experiences and relationships.

Let’s take it a step further and really connect these ideas.

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## Be a Contribution

When we do finally carve out some moments for ourselves, it is important to consider where our mind goes and the ways we frame our reflections. Authors Benjamin and Rosamund Zander (2002) draw a distinction between focusing on success and failure versus focusing on contribution. They claim that when we are driven to be successful and avoid failure, we end up suffering due to the anxiety and pressure this produces. On the other hand, they suggest we focus on how much we have contributed each day. In other words, consider how you can be of service to others. They explain, “In the game of contribution you wake up each day and bask in the notion that you are a gift to others” (Zander & Zander, 2002, p. 58). They point out there is no negative flip side to being a contribution, unlike being successful, whose flip side is being a failure. They beautifully share this:

Naming oneself and others as a contribution produces a shift away from self-concern and engages us in a relationship with others that is an arena for making a difference. Rewards in the contribution game are of a deep and enduring kind, though less predictable than the trio of money, fame, and power that accrue to the winner in the success game. You never know what they will be, or from whence they will come. (p. 63)

One way to avoid the pitfalls of turning our self-nurturing and reflection time into a self-regarding time that leads to unhappiness is to focus on how you have contributed to others and how they have contributed to you. This is a form of gratitude practice that leads to a profound sense of purpose and joy. So there really is no contradiction between carving out time for yourself and being too self-focused because it all depends on how you frame that time. In order to avoid the self-regarding that is dangerous, use self-care as a form of rejuvenation. You can be of service to others, viewing your work and your self-care as an act of kindness to others, knowing you need to be healthy and happy to do that well.

One example that comes to my mind is the way young-adult author Jason Reynolds measures his success, not just by book sales or awards but by how he is positively affecting youth. In his interview on *The Daily Show*, he explains how he writes books for kids like he was so that they see their lives as having value and worthy of being the subjects of books. He is driven by writing authentic tales, and he views his role as being a contribution. All of the hours he spends alone, dreaming up stories, and then writing them down, he explains, are a privilege. He said, “I am of service to young people. They are not of service to me. I am grateful that they allow me the space to honor them with my stories. These are love notes” (Reynolds, 2018). What a powerful example Reynolds models for us about how to be a contribution.

## Believe in Possibility

In addition to writing about being a contribution, Zander and Zander (2002) write about the power of possibility: “The more attention you shine on a particular subject, the more evidence it will grow. Attention is like light and air and water. Shine attention on obstacles and problems and they multiply lavishly” (p. 108). If, on the other hand, you shine attention on what is possible, you begin to see evidence of all that possibility growing.

One of the ways we can focus on possibility is a practice called enrollment. Enrollment is “the art and practice of generating a spark of possibility for others to share. . . . Enrollment is about giving yourself as a possibility to others and being ready, in turn, to catch their spark” (Zander & Zander, 2002, pp. 125–126). I just love this idea of thinking about possibility as a spark that we can offer others. I see this playing out each and every day I work with young children. Just one example is the way I see kindergarten students gaining enrollment from each other during partner reading time. I recently watched as two five-year-old girls put their books down next to each other. The first girl asked her partner, “What was your book about?” As the second girl began to answer, she interrupted and prompted, “You need to show me the pages of the book so I can see too.” Then she leaned closer and began pointing at pictures with her partner. Both readers sat side by side, engrossed in the book, and shared a spark of reading energy. At the end of the conversation, the first girl said, “Now let’s switch books so we can read each other’s.” I could feel their excited energy and see the joy that enrolling each other in reading brought.

As adults, it can be difficult to share these sparks. We might be worried or self-conscious. It is cool to be super excited about learning when you are five years old. At thirty-five years old, it can often feel much less cool to be so obviously excited. In my experience, when we don’t share the spark of our own excitement we can’t enroll others in joining us. Luckily, Zander and Zander (2002) offer four steps for gaining enrollment from others:

1. Imagine that people are an invitation for enrollment. Act as if they want to join you or for you to join them.
2. Stand ready to participate, willing to be moved and inspired.
3. Offer that which lights you up.
4. Have no doubt that others are eager to catch the spark.

These four steps can be taken with anyone you want to connect with and enroll in your joy journey. Maybe it is a friend? A partner? A colleague? A family member? Be the kind of person who looks for opportunities for enrollment, and notice how much happier you become.

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## Don't Take Yourself Too Seriously

One of my all-time favorite stories is also from Zander and Zander's (2002) book (can you tell I love this book?). In this story, there are two prime ministers from different states. All of a sudden a man bursts into their room and begins shouting and banging his fists on the table. The hosting prime minister kindly tells the irate man, "Remember rule number six." The man calms down and apologizes and leaves the room. A little while later, a woman comes in and begins anxiously speaking and moving around the room. Again, the hosting prime minister calmly states, "Please remember rule six." She also apologizes and steps out of the room. When they are interrupted a third time and again the prime minister suggests the person remember rule number six, the visiting prime minister asks, "I have to know, what is rule number six?" The host smiles and says, "Rule number six is *don't take yourself so seriously*." The visitor pauses to let this soak in and asks, "What are the other rules?" The host smiles and says, "We don't have any other rules. We don't need them."

I have read this story dozens of times because it is just so perfect. If we remember rule number six, so many other issues just fade away. The ability to lighten up is a gift to ourselves and all of those around us. It helps us remember that humor is one of the best ways to get over ourselves. Whenever you find yourself in the grips of losing your cool, getting tangled up in drama, or beating yourself up, stop and remind yourself of rule number six.

Make sure you find something to laugh about every day. Research from embodied cognition reveals that our bodies affect our learning, thinking, and feeling. One study showed that Botox injections into patients' faces had a dramatic impact on combating depression because people literally could not frown. Another study found that people were less likely to find a story funny when they held a pencil between pursed lips. Many studies have found that people who attend laughter clubs—places where people purposefully come together to laugh—have higher levels of happiness (Beilock, 2015). What all three of these findings show is that how we hold our bodies affects our levels of happiness. It can help to laugh every day, to smile more, and to be aware of how you are carrying yourself. These subtle body cues send messages to your brain to experience certain kinds of feelings. Watching a funny show or finding a local improv or comedy club are all forms of self-care because the effects of laughter lead to spikes in joy and well-being.

The Dalai Lama clearly explains the connection between laughter and well-being. He explains, "It is much better when there is not too much

seriousness. Laughter, joking is much better. Then we can be completely relaxed ... it is very good for your heart and health in general" (Dalai Lama et al., 2016, p. 216). The Archbishop Desmond Tutu elaborates on the positive role of humor by explaining, "I don't think I woke up and presto I am funny. I think it is something you can cultivate. Like anything else, it is a skill... Start looking for the humor in life, and you will find it. You will stop asking, why me? And start recognizing that life happens to all of us" (p. 222). While humor is such a personalized and nuanced element, one commonality is that we all need it to be happy. Look for and seek out more opportunities to laugh, and see how much it changes your outlook and perspective.

Take these dispositions to work every day. Teaching like yourself means being yourself in the classroom. If being witty makes you feel happy, let students see that side of you. If you need to retreat for a few minutes to unwind or recharge, have the class pull out their independent books and grab that quiet time, sip that mug of tea—whatever it is you need. One teacher I know has set up this morning routine with her fifth graders so that she knows she's got this breathing room once a day. She taught the students to come in quietly while she has calming music in the background. The students put their bags and belongings away and then pull out their writing notebooks, taking about five minutes to read or write as a centering activity before the teaching day begins. When I taught third grade, I often needed a minute or two before each lesson to feel prepared. I taught my students how to give me that space with a daily routine. One student's job was to ring a set of chimes I had hanging up. As the chimes rang, the students gathered the materials they would need, pushed in their chairs, and silently walked over to the class rug where we met for daily lessons. They sat down in an assigned seat and waited for me to begin teaching. Once they learned how to do this routine, it ran smoothly without me needing to do anything. It helped students come to the lesson focused and calm, and it gave me an extra minute to come prepared to teach.

### Focus on Happiness

- ★ Pay attention to your frame.
- ★ Be a contribution.
- ★ Believe in possibility.
- ★ Don't take yourself too seriously.