

Tip Sheet

OPRE Report No. #2023-306

Breath to Focus

Co-Regulation Strategies Tip Sheet



Breath to Focus is the act of taking slow, deep breaths. This strategy is designed to model and teach students how to practice self-regulation in times of stress.



Introduce it early. Decide when to introduce Breath to Focus, ideally in the first lesson. Possible times are when establishing group agreements or describing how the curriculum teaches self-regulation skills. Videos that show techniques like a breath bubble, box breathing, or a 4-7-8 breathing exercise may help you introduce the strategy.



Look for natural fit. Mark where you might use Breath to Focus in the curriculum. Add PowerPoint slides throughout the lessons to cue where a breath fits, such as when class starts and during transitions between intense topics (for example, dating/domestic violence). Think about other times to use the strategy in class, such as when students are excited, having a disagreement, or coming back together after a high-energy activity or disruption like a fire drill.



Use it to prove it. Use the strategy in your daily routine—for example, during your morning coffee, afternoon snack, or bedtime routine. Use it during team meetings or practice it regularly with colleagues or others. The more you use and experience the benefits of deep breathing, the more comfort and confidence you'll have sharing it with your students!

Use your own language to frame the strategy so you feel comfortable doing it. Use personal and relatable examples of how you use deep breathing, such as sports, performing arts, or family situations. Talk about the benefits of using Breath to Focus, such as focusing for better performance or smoother communication, or calming down stressful situations (like exams or class presentations).



Visualize it. Ask students when they might see themselves taking a breath—for example, when they want to focus more or when they are stressed or angry. Visualizing themselves using the skill in specific situations can help students apply the skill in their lives.



Make it routine. Use the strategy one to three times per class so it becomes part of your classroom culture. Building comfort with this skill takes time and practice. Skeptical or hesitant students will build comfort over time. Trust the strategy and push through any early awkwardness!



Invite a student to lead. Invite students to lead the class through taking a breath to give them ownership and increase the likelihood they'll use the strategy outside of the classroom. It also provides additional topics to talk to students about during meets and in four-part praise notes.

Suggested citation: Friend, Daniel, Lauren Mattox, Sheila Cavallo, Alisha Jordan, Rebecca Piatt, and Heather Zaveri. (2023). Co-regulation in Action Video Series and Tip Sheets. OPRE Report #2023-306, Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.