

# HABIT #2

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## CHANGE YOUR MIND

**NOTHING IS GOOD OR BAD. IT IS THINKING THAT  
MAKES IT SO.**

**WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE**



**IN THIS CHAPTER YOU'LL READ ABOUT**

- **The role of fear in stress**
- **The impact of perspective on stress reduction**
- **Challenging negative thoughts and reframing them for better outcomes**
- **The power of breath, mindfulness, and meditation**
- **Humor and the brain/body connection**
- **Some brief thoughts on stress in the classroom**

If you look closely enough there are gifts in all life events. In his book *Illusions: The Adventures of a Reluctant Messiah*, Richard Bach writes:

*There is no such thing as a problem without a gift for you in its hands. You seek problems because you need their gifts.*

Stress is our body's natural response to perceived events, protecting and feeding us in a time of need. Stress is perfectly normal, natural, and healthy. But the stress response can be overdone; the accelerator pressed for too long, the brain sensing injury instead of recovery.

*Is everything as urgent as your stress would imply?*

Carrie Latet

The body will act to protect its interests, and by doing so, turn on itself with damaging effects. Sleep becomes a privilege, blood pressure rises, and the heart races more than it jogs. It takes an expensive toll physically, mentally, and most of all, emotionally.

*Give your stress wings and let it fly away.*

Carin Hartness

Perceived threats are ever-present, and your reactions to them are critical to your well-being. Our perceptions are based on our belief systems. These core beliefs cause us to love some things and fear others. This brings to light a prophetic, yet simple truth:

### **Underneath most stress lies quietly a fear.**

There was a point in my teaching career where my stress became unbearable. It wasn't the normal, day-to-day stressors that were concerning, it was a personal attack from a parent that had me reeling. His attack was unwarranted, and I had the full support of my supervisor, but that didn't matter. My skin had not grown thick enough at this point in my career. I had never dealt with anything like it before. This particular parent was not happy with the job I was doing. What I didn't know then, but know now, is that I was letting the situation control me instead of using my perspective to control it. Fortunately, I've gotten to the point that I'm truly grateful for the experience. That parent was an angel in disguise. Because of this situation, I learned how to manage my stress more effectively. I turned to meditation and learned how to recognize the fear underlying my stress. What was I afraid of? Why was it causing me stress? At its core I was afraid of not having this person's approval for the work I was doing. I wasn't scared of losing my job, but I was frightened that someone didn't think highly of me. It might sound silly, but it was very real and honest for me. If I had been able to identify that fear I might have been able to deal with it more effectively. Coming to terms with fear is a key to managing stress. I now subscribe to a simple two-step process for beating the stress that mostly exists "between our ears."

#### Step 1

*Identify the fear that is causing your stress. People try to deal with the symptoms of stress rather than with the fear that causes it in the first place.*

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## Step 2

Answer the following three questions:

- 1) Is the fear realistic? This helps create perspective.
- 2) What is the worst possible thing that could happen? This also helps create perspective.
- 3) How can I move past this fear? This creates action.

Often, the answers to these questions will help relieve your stress or cause you to act in chasing it away.

*Comfort your fears, list them, get to know them, and only then will you be able to put them aside and move ahead.*

*Jerry Gillies*

Fear can serve as a great teacher as long as its shackles do not imprison. Welcome your challenges with an open mind and heart; overcoming them makes the next joy sweeter.

*Only when we are no longer afraid do we begin to live.*

*Dorothy Thompson*

As I described, I feared not having this particular parent's approval. Was this fear realistic? In part, yes. In part, no. While he was disappointed in my performance, he never indicated he didn't like me or that he had anything against me personally. I was not able to differentiate the two. What was the worst thing that could possibly happen? I wasn't going to lose my job, so not too much. The worst possible thing that could have happened was to have a very frank conversation with this parent about his concerns and how we should move forward. How could I have moved past this fear? By taking a step back and looking at the reality of the situation and realizing that it wasn't nearly as bad as I was making it out to be—my choice; my perspective; my stress. I had the option to change my mind. I just didn't even realize that I had a choice!

In the spring of the same school year, I took the concert, jazz, and marching bands to Virginia for a weekend of intense competition—and fun. I've never worked harder to prepare students for performance. During the morning of the second day, all three bands competed. The entire year's preparation culminated on this one day. I was quietly very stressed but was very proud of the effort of these young musicians. The rest of the day was spent in an amusement park where the kids could finally let loose, have fun, and not have me breathing down their necks. Me? Not so much. I had so much stress thinking about the evening awards ceremony and was so tired from everything that lead to this moment, I could barely move. I did not yet have the ability to change my perspective and was completely letting events control me. My body finally shut down, and I fell asleep at a table right in the middle of the bustling amusement park. As it turns out, we could not have performed much better. Every band rated in the highest category, and we won numerous individual and group awards. The relief was overtaking my brain and body. While this should not have been what relieved my year of stress, it certainly helped.

Two years later, I received a letter of thanks from this very parent for the wonderful experience his son had during our time together. It was an apology without saying I'm sorry but one that was certainly good enough for me. In turn, I should have written a thank you note to this "angel."

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## REFLECTION

Take a moment to reflect on a school-related stressor. Can you identify a fear that is causing or has caused this particular stress? Is the fear realistic? What is the worst thing that could possibly happen? Is it possible to move past the fear and relieve the stress? What steps would you need to take?

Write your response here:

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## CHALLENGE YOUR THINKING

Identifying the way experiences or events are viewed in order to challenge and change thought patterns would have been helpful to me in overcoming this perception-induced stress. Research suggests that cognitive reframing, or changing the way we perceive a stressful situation, can help alleviate the stress. It becomes a path to “changing your mind.” Along with identifying my fear and exactly what was causing my stress, it would have been useful to have analyzed my initial adverse thought processes as follows:

“I can’t believe he thinks I’m doing a terrible job.”

“I am doing a terrible job.”

“Do others think I’m doing a terrible job?”

If I had done that it would have been easier to identify contradictory evidence to my initial negative thinking, such as follows:

“My supervisor completely supports me.”

“No other parent has complained about the work I’m doing.”

“The majority of parents think I’m doing a wonderful job.”

“I think I’m doing a good job and don’t need the approval of others.”

“Can I learn anything from his comments to improve?”

The above statements and question are more reasonable and rational. This sort of reasoning would have helped to control my perception and corresponding stress.



### FOR YOUR INFORMATION!

- Cognitive restructuring has been used successfully to treat a wide variety of conditions, including depression, posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), addictions, anxiety, social phobias, relationship issues, and stress.

## REFLECTION

In the example you previously cited, what were your initial thoughts that caused the stress response? What more realistic thoughts might you have used instead to transition the experience to a more positive one?

Write your response here:

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*We can't solve problems by using the same kind of thinking we used when we created them.*

Albert Einstein

## SAME STORY, NEW MORAL

To make a point about how quickly our brains and bodies go into action when a threat is perceived, I often tell this story:

It was the Saturday after Thanksgiving in 2007, and my young family was tired, irritable, and most of all, hungry. Anybody who has changed a residence understands the difficulty in finding cookware, or food, on the day of the big move. Having drawn the short straw to go find a suitable dinner, I made off to the store, armed with a list. I entered the self-checkout line and successfully scanned seven bags of food. I pleasantly envisioned my family's first dinner together in our new home. Noticing the line behind me growing considerably, I quickly slid a credit card through the card reader. "Please try again," it read. I tried again; *declined*. The stress alarm began ringing in full force.

The empathy always grows in the room as I continue my story . . .

My body warmed, and my pulse began racing. I was in fight or flight. Staring customers and a hungry family dominated my thoughts. "What do I do with all these groceries?" I pondered. I handed my card to the self-checkout clerk. It didn't work for her either. I had no cell phone and no cash with me. The reality of the situation was beginning to take hold. No matter what the people behind me thought, and no matter how much scorn I faced at home, I would have to leave with no food. And I did just that. I knew I had paid my bill on time, and there was plenty of credit left on my account. Then it dawned on me what had happened. This particular card carried with it so much security that every so often the bank wanted to make sure it was really me who was using it! "Couldn't you have checked that another time?" I asked of the agent on the other end of the line. "Possibly when I was not standing in the grocery store self-checkout with seven bags of groceries and fourteen people staring at me?" It was pointless, and it didn't matter. Now cleared with full security, I went back to the store to pick up what I had left.

There was one particular time that upon finishing this story, a hand rose slowly from the audience. A gentleman with an uncomfortable grin on his face had a question, or

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comment—I was not sure which. “Yes?” I asked. “I had my identity stolen,” exclaimed the man who would single-handedly change the point of this story.

You see where this is going . . .

“I love the fact that my bank makes sure that I am the only one who is using my credit card. It’s not a bother. In fact, it’s a relief.” The room went silent. All eyes were upon me waiting to hear my reaction. Straight from my brain to my mouth came the most intellectual response I could muster, “Oh.” From that point on the lecture changed; new moral noted:

### **One person’s stress is another person’s joy.**

Stress is nothing more than our response to any given moment in time. Change your mind, change your life! We always have multiple perceptual responses from which to choose. Choose well.

*The tragic or the humorous is a matter of perspective.*

*Arnold Brisser*

Peaceful Loving Grateful Caring Understanding Happy  
Appreciative Joyful Gleeful Glad Jolly Pleased Jubilant Playful  
Light Tender Pleasant Affectionate Enthusiastic Blissful Elated  
Lively Thrilled Cheerful Mirthful Ecstatic Overjoyed Content  
Delighted Humorous Tickled Festive Blessed Sparkling Upbeat  
Giving Friendly Serene Kind Mindful Generous Jubilant Thoughtful  
Gentle Blessed Upbeat Elated Lively Gratified Harmonious

## **FIFTY STATES OF MIND WHERE STRESS CANNOT EXIST**

### **LESSON ON A WALK**

I have the great fortune of working for someone who is my professional role model. Diana Ramsey is unquestionably the spiritual leader of our company. As president, she helped to grow the Regional Training Center by aspiring to change classrooms, one teacher at a time. Her vision and wisdom over the past three decades have taken RTC from what was literally a humble beginning in the basement of her home to a multimillion-dollar educational consulting firm. She regularly inspires me to stay focused on what is most important in life. Long before I was tuned into the concept of mindfulness, I particularly remember one walk we took together. During our conversation, she noticed my stress levels were a bit high due to my schedule in the coming weeks. As we walked, she began pointing out subtle signs of animals, highlighting different types of trees, and generally impressing me with her grasp of natural life.

More importantly, I was also receiving a crucial life lesson. She finished with this thought:

**You cannot live mindfully, and at the same time, be upset about what is staring down at you—they are incompatible.**

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The more closely we pay attention to the moment, the further away our troubles sail.

From that day forward, I made a conscious effort to be present in the moment. It affords me two rewards—basking in the glow of life and reducing unnecessary stress.

*Life is a succession of moments. To live each one is to succeed.*

Corita Kent

By definition, mindfulness is the fact or condition of being present;

paying attention in a particular way:

on purpose, in the present moment and nonjudgmentally;

the repetitive act of directing one's attention to only one thing in this one moment.



### FOR YOUR INFORMATION!

- Research on mindfulness indicates that it increases working memory capacity, relieves depressive symptoms, reduces stress, increases focus, and creates more cognitive flexibility (Davis & Hayes, 2012).



### HIGH-PERFORMANCE ACTION!

We miss much of the juice of life because we focus on distant thoughts. You cannot be stressed and be present. Try this exercise: Go outside for a walk, and notice everything you've been missing: the color of leaves, the smell of flowers, the sounds of birds, the dampness of the air. Force yourself to be mindful of your surroundings and also of your body's reaction to them. Invest in conversation this way. Your partner will be grateful. Invest in eating this way. Your palette will be grateful. In these moments you will find peace. Mindfulness is generally thought of as a time when we need to be quiet and meditative. But when I think about mindfulness, it is about being present instead of going through life barely noticing because we are focused on something that has already happened or on something that might happen. Mindfulness in the form of being present and paying attention is a great gift that brings peace.

## JUST BREATHE

When faced with a stressful situation, the first thing to leave us is often that which heals us: breath. I prove this to my students by having them stand and look intently at me. To the audience I identify myself as "A." I then instruct them to hold their bodies and heads still but shift their "eyes only" to another point across the room to which I assign the letter "B." When I say "A," they look at me. When I say "B," they are once again to



only shift their eyes to the second spot. I start slowly A . . . B, A . . . B, then I begin to speed it up to the point that it is almost impossible to keep up with me. Suddenly I stop and ask, “What did you just stop doing?” Eventually someone gets the correct answer, but most don’t even realize that they stopped breathing. I purposefully put them in a stressful situation to the point where either their breathing got very shallow, or they are holding their breath altogether. Yet, breathing is your body’s first line of defense against stress. This activity is an adaptation of “Breath-less” from *Structured Exercises in Stress Management, Volume 1* (Tubesing & Tubesing, 1983).

The next time you notice your stress levels rise, *stop*, and breathe, of the long variety—in through the nose for four counts, hold for four counts, out through the mouth in four counts.

Do this several times, and your heart rate will slow. If it seems like common sense, it is, but we take the power of breath for granted.

You can also combine breathing with a bit of progressive muscle relaxation when sensing rising stress levels. Along with the breathing described above, simultaneously tense your shoulders, arms, and clenched fists during the inhale and hold while releasing the tension in your shoulders, arms, and clenched fists during the exhale. I would generally recommend doing this up to five times in a row to relieve stress.

*A healthy mind has an easy breath.*

*Author Unknown*

## THE POWERHOUSE

The power of breath, mindfulness, deep relaxation, and effective stress management beautifully converge during the practice of meditation. Greg Schweitzer, founder of Stress Reduction Resources, taught me how to meditate more than two decades ago. In fact, it is what pulled me out of my stress-induced funk related to the parent that challenged my teaching ability. One of the kindest men I have ever met, I credit Greg with changing my life. His technique of Effortless Meditation has afforded me years of peaceful practice; quiet, personal moments that seemingly transcend time. I often describe them as “magical.” Daily meditation has the power to change your mind and your perspective without being consciously aware of the process. Inner peace is one of its profound gifts.

*Meditation is the tongue of the soul and the language of our spirit.*

*Jeremy Taylor*

An age-old practice, there is no one “right” way to meditate. It can be practiced anywhere. You can begin by employing these two simple strategies:

*Sit comfortably in a chair with both feet firmly planted on the floor. Close your eyes for up to one minute. At the same time, relax and center yourself. Open your eyes for a moment, then close them again for another minute while again focusing on your relaxation and centering. Open your eyes again for just a moment. Finally, close your eyes and breathe deeply, slowly, and rhythmically, focusing and concentrating on your breath. Try this for five minutes and continue to extend your time as you become more practiced.*

*When you become comfortable with focused breathing, you might try adding a repeated word or phrase to your meditation. Known as a mantra, it is a fundamental aspect of transcendental meditation. I often suggest the use of the word “peace.” To begin, use the same directions as noted above:*

*Sit comfortably in a chair with both feet firmly planted on the floor. Close your eyes for up to a minute. At the same time, relax and center yourself. Open your eyes for a moment, then close them again for another minute while again focusing on your relaxation and centering. Open your eyes again for just a moment. Finally, close your eyes and breathe deeply, slowly, and rhythmically, focusing and concentrating on your breath. Silently add the word “peace” in a repetitive manner, repeating this word over and over again. When your mind wanders gently bring your focus back to the repetition of “peace.” Try this for five minutes. Extend your time as you become more practiced. Continue for up to twenty minutes.*

Greg taught me that meditation is not unlike the ocean. The waves on top of the ocean are like the thoughts that are always near the front of our mind. As we do a deep dive into a single meditation practice, our mind goes below the surface to where the ocean is calm and thoughts are not as disruptive. As our thoughts return, and they will, our brain returns to the top of the ocean where the waves and activity are much greater and more turbulent. As we return the focus to the mantra, in the case above to the repeated use of the word “peace,” the calm recovers as we dive below the surface once again. It is not unusual, especially in the beginning, to fall asleep. Don’t be surprised if your head droops at times or if you need to take a big breath every so often. Breathing slows dramatically during the meditative process. I still can recall how I felt after my first full session of meditation on my own. I could barely pick up the pen I needed to fill out a questionnaire. My writing slowed to a snail’s pace, and the feeling of peace and relaxation overwhelmed me. I recommend that you start with five minutes and build in five-minute increments until you’ve reached twenty minutes in total. On a very good day, I will meditate twice.

Meditation is mind calming and body relaxing, which induces a deep state of rest where heart and breath rate decrease significantly. In the most stressful of times, it can be leaned on like an old friend. In all its simplicity, meditation has proven itself time and again to change minds; bringing an inner glow and vitality that is rarely seen.



### FOR YOUR INFORMATION!

- Research on meditation indicates that it reduces stress and other stress-related conditions such as posttraumatic stress disorder, lessens both anxiety and depression, can lead to a more positive outlook on life, raises self-awareness and helps individuals to better recognize destructive thought patterns, lengthens attention span, can reduce age-related memory loss, may help fight addictions, improves sleep, and decreases blood pressure (Thorpe & Link, 2020).
- If you are interested in Greg’s work, visit [www.StressReductionResources.com](http://www.StressReductionResources.com). Classes are provided in-person and online using live video conferencing.

Research is being conducted on meditation and its benefits for the brain such as preserving the aging brain by adding more gray matter volume. Meditation also seems to

increase the volume of the hippocampus, a brain region critical to learning and memory, and to decrease brain cell volume in the amygdala, a region responsible for fear, anxiety, and stress (Walton, 2015).

The greatest gift that meditation can bring to your life is a change in perspective. How you actually view others and events has the possibility of changing. Where short-term stress management activities such as focused breathing or exercise can bring momentary relief, meditation can bring a long-term change in how we view the world. In my view, it is the powerhouse of stress relief.

## A QUICK REVISIT TO THE BRAIN/BODY CONNECTION

In Chapter 1, I introduced you to the brain/body connection. The recognition of the relationship between the brain and body is just as important when managing stress. Consider this: A study from Johns Hopkins University demonstrated that emotional trauma can cause cardiomyopathy; it is commonly referred to as “broken heart syndrome.” Many illnesses are caused or worsened by stress. Every thought has a corresponding physical reaction that can defend or attack our immune system. Is it any wonder that chronic stress can make us sick? Your thoughts matter. Your perspective matters.

*The most powerful pharmacy in the world is right between your ears.*

Mark Hyman, MD

## ONE MAN'S INSIGHT

The following excerpt is a powerful example of both the brain/body connection and stress reduction. Norman Cousins, editor of the Saturday Review for more than thirty years, was dying. Diagnosed with ankylosing spondylitis, a degenerative form of arthritis that causes the degradation of connective tissue in the spine, Cousins was given only a slim chance of recovery. With paralysis taking hold of his frail body, he checked himself out of the hospital and into a hotel. With the support of his physician, Dr. Cousins prescribed himself both high doses of vitamin C and laughter. Classic *Candid Camera* television episodes, Marx Brothers films, and humorous books became Cousins's antidote. “I made the joyous discovery that ten minutes of genuine belly laughter had an anesthetic effect and would give me at least two hours of pain-free sleep,” he wrote in his 1979 bestselling book, *Anatomy of an Illness: As Perceived by the Patient*. “When the pain-killing effect of the laughter wore off, we would switch on the motion picture projector again, and not infrequently, it would lead to another pain-free interval.” After each period of extended laughter, Cousins's sedimentation rate decreased, a sign of the body's increased ability to fight inflammation. “I was greatly elated by the discovery that there is a physiological basis for the ancient theory that laughter is good medicine,” he noted.

*Hearty laughter is a good way to jog internally without having to go outdoors.*

Dr. Norman Cousins

Not only did Cousins go on to live twenty-six more years after his first diagnosis with this life-threatening disease, but he also created the Humor Research Task Force while an adjunct professor of psychiatry and biobehavioral science at the UCLA School of Medicine. His hunch was correct: The brain and body not only pay attention to each other, but also their special relationship absolutely depends on it.

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*Laughter is a tranquilizer with no side effects.*

*Arnold Glasgow*

*The modern physician should know as much about emotions and thoughts as about disease symptoms and drugs. This approach would appear to hold more promise of cure than anything medicine has given us to date.*

*Hans Selye, MD (Known as the “Father of Stress”)*

*1907–1982*



## FOR YOUR INFORMATION!

- Research on laughter indicates both short- and long-term benefits, such as producing a relaxed feeling, enhancing intake of oxygen-rich air, increasing endorphins, improving the immune response, relieving pain, and improving mood.

The challenges of life are ever-present and unyielding. By controlling your reaction to these events, you retain your power. Chronic stress demands your attention. Managing it accordingly brings ease and grace to your step. There are many effective tools to keep anxiety levels in check, but you must purposefully employ them. With so many tools at our fingertips, it is very possible to minimize our stress response with daily effort. I strongly encourage you to explore what fits your lifestyle and preference. Understanding that managing stress is not only a daily challenge but also a moment-to-moment one will yield a more fulfilled life.

*If we had no winter, the spring would not be so pleasant; if we did not sometimes taste adversity, prosperity, would not be so welcome.*

*Anne Broadstreet*



## REFLECTION

You might be a regular meditator, someone who used to meditate more frequently, or someone who has never meditated at all. It doesn't matter! Act now to better manage your stress and be better for your students. Become a Peak Performing Teacher. What are you committed to doing today, or if not today, then tomorrow? What form of stress management will you commit to? Can you commit to daily meditation, even if only fifteen minutes? What time of day? Can you commit to moments of purposeful mindfulness where you specifically focus on the moment during any number of activities? Can you take a few moments a day to breathe in a more focused and purposeful way? Are you willing to examine your thought processes and perspective and reframe them if need be? Planning to meditate or be mindful is one thing, but scheduling it makes it real! Please be detailed in your response.

Write your response here:

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## STRESS IN THE CLASSROOM

If you are reading this book, you are all too familiar with the fact that students experience stress in school. According to [www.mindfulschools.org](http://www.mindfulschools.org):

- Nearly one in three adolescents will meet criteria for an anxiety disorder by the age of eighteen.
- In the United States, 46 percent of children have experienced at least one adverse childhood experience (ACE).
- On average, U.S. teens spend nine hours a day on digital entertainment.
- Nearly 40 percent of high school seniors report that they often feel lonely and left out.

The causes are many and often mirror life outside the classroom: stress at home, stress in social relationships, academic demands of school, bullying; there is no limit to what causes student stress. Often the brain is on full alert, which makes it difficult if not impossible to learn. According to Sousa (2017), the brain prioritizes incoming data on three levels: (1) survival, (2) emotion, and (3) the cognitive. The place where we need the brain to be to fully function and succeed in school is the last place it prioritizes. It's therefore imperative to recognize stress in students and help them manage it. You can safely assume some level of stress in your students every time you see them. It makes sense to help manage it. Here are some ideas:

- Keep your students moving. Physical activity is a stress and anxiety reducer. Many classroom-based physical activities force attention on the activity to perform it well. In other words, it forces you to pay attention to the moment and subsequently becomes a mindful activity. When you are forced to pay attention, especially to something that invigorates or causes laughter, stress momentarily vanishes providing some level of relief.
- Breathwork is a great stress reducer. It is mindful and can be meditative. Breath exercises can be used on their own or in combination with some progressive muscle relaxation, as I've previously described. When using breathing activities, have students try to keep their shoulders and chest as still as possible while focusing on belly breathing (making their stomachs rise and fall). As a former wind musician, I can tell you there is technique to this, but for our purposes here, having students focus on their bellies while breathing will be effective enough. It might help them to put a hand on their belly to make sure it is the part of the breathing apparatus that is rising and falling. If you are going to use the tensing of shoulders, arms, and fists along with the breath activity make sure students still use good breath form. I like for students to breathe in to a slow count of four, hold the breath for four counts, and finally exhale for four counts. Repeat up to five times. This can be done while being seated or standing.
- Use music. Music can be a very effective emotional state manager. It can excite, it can slow down, it can create joy and happiness, and it can also elicit a somber experience. It can touch on almost every emotion we can possibly experience, and it can also help reduce stress. Music can be part of a pleasant classroom environment and can be used as a background for many classroom experiences. Light classical music (think Mozart or Bach) can be used for background during academic work or cooperative activities. More upbeat music can be used with

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some physical activities. Calming and soothing new-age type of music can be used during stress reduction activities such as breath and progressive muscle relaxation activities.

Creating a classroom environment that helps students deal with their own stress is essential for every teacher. The more you manage it in your own life, the more you can help students manage theirs.

## REFLECTION

How can you be more of a role model for your students regarding changing your mind and managing stress? What can you do to create a more stress-free classroom?

Write your response here:

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