

# Social and Emotional Learning Resources: Maintaining Composure



How your actions demonstrate relative calmness, serenity, and the ability to manage emotions effectively.

## Maintaining Composure

Maintaining Composure is how your actions demonstrate relative calmness, serenity, and the ability to manage emotions effectively. When you demonstrate Maintaining Composure, you...

- Recognize when you are being affected by stress and take steps to reduce stress
- Successfully manage stress related to activities or tasks
- Use multiple coping strategies to deal with negative feelings (e.g., seeking social support, relaxation)
- Manage negative emotions when you experience them
- Reframe past mistakes or events into something positive instead of dwelling on them

Maintaining Composure is important because it...

- Helps you cope with unexpected situations and setbacks
- Is associated with a better attitude toward life and increased life satisfaction
- Is a skill that is valued by employers once you enter the workforce

Remember that social and emotional skills, like Maintaining Composure, are like muscles. You can grow them over time with regular exercise and effort. The activities that follow are intended to help you practice and grow in Maintaining Composure.

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# Mindfulness

**Objective:** To learn about mindfulness and practice being mindful.

**Background:** Being mindful means being aware of our own thought process and, more generally, being aware of what is going on around us. Often times, we are not very mindful as we go through life. We are too busy thinking about things that happened in the past or things that we think will happen in the future to be fully aware of what is happening right now.

Research has shown that being mindful has many benefits. Some of these include:

- Reduced stress
- Improved memory
- Improved focus
- Improved creativity
- Healthier relationships

Below is one technique for improving mindfulness. It only takes about 10 minutes a day. It is best to try to practice this every day if possible.

**Activity:**

## **Before getting started...**

- Find a timer that can be set for 10 minutes
- Find a quiet place in your home
- Tell other people in your home that you are going to be doing a mindfulness activity for 10 minutes and ask not to be disturbed during this time
- When you are ready to start the activity, sit down on the floor or in a chair in the quiet place in your home. Ensure you are sitting upright, but you should also be comfortable.
- Set your timer for 10 minutes and follow the steps in the table below to complete the mindfulness exercise.

Step	Description	Approximate Time
<b>1) Breathing</b>	With your eyes open, take about 5 deep breaths in through your nose and out through your mouth. After the fifth breath, slowly close your eyes. Keep your eyes closed for the remainder of the activity.	30 seconds
<b>2) Settling</b>	Focus on the weight of your body as it touches the chair or the floor.	1 minute
<b>3) Listening</b>	Listen to any sounds that might be surrounding you. Don't think too much about them. Just listen.	30 seconds
<b>4) Scanning</b>	Try to build a picture of how you are feeling right now. Start at the top of your head. How does the top of your head feel right now? Slowly scan down and notice how each part of your body is feeling until you get to your feet.	2 minutes
<b>5) Focusing</b>	Try to focus on your breathing. Notice your chest rising and falling as you breathe. Focus on this feeling. If you start thinking about anything else while you are focusing on your breathing, just try again to pay attention only to your breathing.	6 minutes
<b>6) Open your eyes</b>	This is the end. Notice how relaxed you feel!	Total time: 10 minutes

### Important points:

- You can practice this activity regularly.
- Try not to get frustrated if you can't remember all of the steps to the activity right away. If you can't remember all of the steps at first, just try to focus on your breathing for the duration of the 10 minutes.
- It is also important not to get frustrated if you feel like your mind is wandering during the activity. The most important thing is that you try to relax and consistently practice this mindfulness activity. You will get better at it with time and practice.
- After you complete the mindfulness activity, you can also do a few minutes of reflective writing after so that you can track how you're feeling each time. This can happen in a journal or a separate field notebook of self-reflective observations. You could also keep a calendar where you track number of minutes and which days you practice mindfulness. It's best to do this activity a few times each week for a few weeks in a row, and particularly when you are feeling stress or overwhelmed.

# In My Zone

**Objective:** To understand that problems can sometimes be outside of your zone of control and to learn how to stay composed when dealing with these types of problems.

**Background:** In psychology, locus of control is the degree to which we believe that we have control over the outcome of events in our lives, as opposed to external forces beyond our control. Our “locus” (Latin for “place” or “location”) is conceptualized as either internal, meaning we believe we can control our lives, or external, meaning we believe our lives are controlled by environmental factors that we cannot influence. For example, when receiving a bad grade on an exam, students with an internal locus of control tend to blame themselves, thinking they didn’t try hard enough or aren’t smart enough. Students with a strong external locus of control tend to blame external factors, thinking the exam was too difficult or the teacher is unfair.

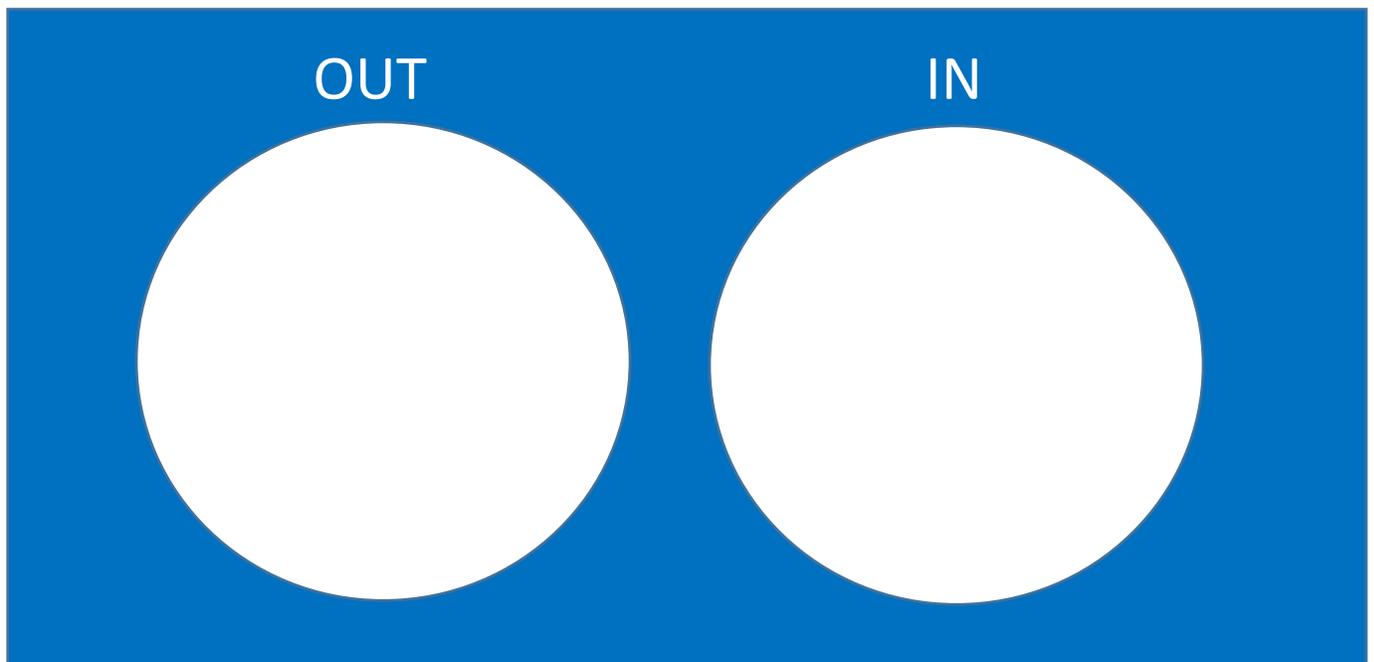
One of the best ways to manage emotions and maintain self-control is to carefully consider whether a challenge or problem that is stressing you is within your control or not, and determine your response accordingly.

## Activity:

- First, read Niebuhr’s serenity lesson below. If you don’t know what the word “serenity” means, look it up to gain a better understanding of what it means.

*Grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change,  
Courage to change the things I can,  
And wisdom to know the difference*

- The concept of locus of control is illustrated by this serenity lesson. There are some things we can change, but also some that cannot.
- Try to brainstorm some things that are in a person’s control, and also some things that are not in a person’s control. For example, a thunderstorm cancelling an outdoor event you were looking forward to is outside of your control. Your response to the situation, however, is inside of your control.
- In the diagram on the next page, first write in the OUT circle things you worry about that are out of your control. Remember that these are things that we have no control over, the things that the serenity lesson says are “the things I cannot change.”



- Then, write in the IN circle things you would like to focus upon that you can change or improve. These might include your own choices going forward, your behaviors every day, and your attitudes.
- Once you complete both circles, consider how much time you spend each day focused on or worrying about things that are not in your control. Try to think about situations in the OUT circle and consider if there are ways to move them to the IN circle to gain control over the situation.
- For example, say you fail a math test. That test is in the past, and the grade is OUT of your zone of control. IN your control is how much you can study for your next test. IN your zone is to ask your teacher for help with the concepts you had trouble understanding. IN your zone is to develop a positive mindset and believe that you can do well on your next text with hard work and effort.
- Last, plan for how to spend more time focusing on what is IN your zone of control, the things you can change. Write down 5 things that you can do to spend more time focusing on the things that are IN your zone.

# Gratitude

**Objective:** To learn how gratitude can improve your well-being and to practice gratitude regularly.

**Background:** Being grateful, or having gratitude, means being thankful for the people, events, and things in our lives. Gratitude has many benefits to our lives. There are many examples of these positive benefits. People who are grateful...

- Are more resilient
- Are more optimistic and healthy
- Sleep better
- Have higher self-esteem
- Are more helpful to others

It is very easy to practice gratitude. You can complete the following activities to practice expressing gratitude.

## Activity 1: The Gratitude Journal

To make a gratitude journal, simply write down five people, events, or things that you are grateful for. You can do this as often as every day, but make sure you do it once or twice per week at minimum. You can also keep a single journal at home and write all of your gratitude entries in it each time you complete the exercise.

*Five people, events, or things I am grateful for.....*

1)

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2)

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3)

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4)

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5)

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### Step 1: Name It

- There are many different emotions that we can feel. Some common emotions you may have felt during the situation you described are listed below:
  - Anger
  - Nervousness
  - Shame
  - Hopelessness
  - Boredom
  - Frustration
  - Disappointment
  - Happiness
  - Sadness
  - Excitement
- In the list above, circle any emotion(s) that you felt in the situation you described. It's possible that you felt more than one. It's also important to understand that many negative emotions, such as anger, are complex emotions. When you feel angry, for example, you are probably feeling many other underlying emotions as well (e.g., fearful, hurt, lonely, rejected, powerless, not good enough). In the space below, write down any other emotions you felt during this situation.

**Other emotions I felt:**

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## Step 2: Aim It

- Once you have identified the emotions you felt, you can work to identify the situation/person/object at which the emotion is aimed. Is the feeling:
  - Toward the self?
  - Toward a peer, teacher, or parent?
  - Toward a situation that may be beyond your control?
  - Toward an assignment or task?
- By asking yourself “at what or whom” each emotion is aimed, you can identify the source of each of your emotions. For each emotion you identify, write down the source or sources of each emotion below.

Emotion I felt	Aim it – at what or whom is each emotion aimed?

### Step 3: Tame It

- By this point, you have identified one or more discrete emotions, as well as the situation at which it is aimed. Some examples:
  - A student feels angry because her friend went through her cell phone without permission.
    - Name It: Anger
    - Aim It: My friend went through my phone
  - A student feels hopeless because he thinks that his science test was way too hard. He feels like he will fail no matter how much he studies.
    - Name It: Hopelessness
    - Aim It: Science test being too difficult
  - A student feels bored in math class. He attributes this to the fact that he doesn't like the subject, as well as the material being so difficult that he isn't really understanding much of what the teacher is saying.
    - Name It: Boredom; frustration
    - Aim It: Math class; self for not understanding material
  - A student feels ashamed because she did not get into the college she wanted to go to. She feels like she has let down everyone in her life.
    - Name It: Shame; disappointment
    - Aim It: Didn't get into college; self for letting others down
- In the "Tame It" stage, you can use various coping strategies to come up with ways to deal with your emotions. Coping strategies exist on two overlapping dimensions: approach/avoidance, and cognitive/behavioral. Various combinations of strategies are presented in the table below. Read over each of the strategies below and think about how you may be able to apply them to your situation.

Strategy	Description	Example
<b>Cognitive approach</b>	Reappraising an emotion by changing the way you think about it	A student feels bored in math class. He can focus on the content in his math class and how important it will be for him in the future, as opposed to how bored he is currently feeling.
<b>Cognitive avoidance</b>	Avoiding an emotion that you are feeling by thinking about something else	A student feels ashamed because she did not get into the college she wanted to go to, but tries to think about something else instead. She thinks about an upcoming event or what she will do after school instead.
<b>Behavioral approach</b>	Engaging in a behavior that helps reduce the emotion you are currently feeling	A student feels hopeless because he thinks that his science test was way too hard, so he asks his teacher for extra help so that he can feel more confident about the material.
<b>Behavioral avoidance</b>	Engaging in a behavior that removes you from the situation that is causing you to feel the emotion	A student feels angry because her friend went through her cell phone without permission, so she walks away from her friend so she doesn't have to speak to her anymore.

- Once you feel like you understand each coping strategy, brainstorm different approaches to dealing with the emotions you listed earlier. Try to come up with at least one possible approach in each category: cognitive approach, cognitive avoidance, behavioral approach, and behavioral avoidance in the table on the next page.

Emotion I felt	Coping approach I can use:
	Cognitive approach:  Cognitive avoidance:  Behavioral approach:  Behavioral avoidance:

#### Step 4: Solve It

- In this last step, select one of the possible approaches for each strong emotion you felt. Before choosing one, you should consider each of the following questions:
  - Is this the best possible solution?
  - Will the solution I choose help me to decrease negative emotions I am feeling?
  - How will the solution I choose affect others?

Emotion I felt	Best coping approach for me to use:

Now that you have done this activity, think about how you can apply what you have learned to emotions that you experience in real time. In each situation you find yourself in, think about how you can name, aim, tame, and solve each emotion you may feel.

# How You Cope with Stress

**Objective:** Learn more about how to effectively cope with stressful situations.

When we experience stress, we have to find ways to cope with it. Just as people experience stress differently, everyone tends to cope differently with the stress they experience. Sometimes our coping methods are adaptive, or good ways of coping. Other times, however, we may rely on maladaptive coping techniques. Maladaptive techniques may seem like good ways to manage stress and strain, but these methods can have negative consequences for our long-term health and relationships with others.

Below are some of the coping strategies people rely on for managing stress and strain. After reading the description for each coping technique, circle three to five techniques you rely on most.

Coping Strategy	Description
Distracting	Trying to get your mind off of what is stressing you out by doing something else
Cognitive Reframing	Reframing a stressful situation to keep it from blowing out of proportion
Downward Social Comparison	Reminding yourself that it could always be worse (and using those less fortunate than you as your reference point)
Exercise	Walking, lifting weights, or other types of physically demanding activities
Helping Others	Engaging in some sort of charitable activity to positively impact your sense of self-worth and your mood
Humor	Finding something to laugh about when you feel stressed
Problem-Focused Coping	Focusing on a problem that is producing stress for you and figuring out how to tackle the problem head on
Relaxation	Deep breathing, meditation, or other techniques designed to alleviate physiological symptoms of stress

Seeking Social Support	Leaning on others for emotional support or to assist you in reducing the impact of a stressor
Self-Reward	Giving yourself some positive experience (such as treating yourself to a massage) to make yourself feel better
Substance Abuse	Drinking, smoking, or utilizing any other substance to improve your mood or make you feel less tense
Suppression	Forcing yourself to not feel stressed out
Tension Reduction	Stretching or complex movements designed to help remove stiffness or tightness
Venting	Complaining or sharing your stress with others as a way to get it out
Withdrawal	Choosing to isolate yourself from situations that are producing stress

**Do you consider any of the above to be better coping techniques than others?**

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**Which ones do you think are the “best” ways to cope? Which do you think are the “worst?”**

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The chart below shows which coping strategies are adaptive and which are maladaptive.



Adaptive	Maladaptive
Cognitive Reframing Downward Social Comparison Exercise Helping Others Humor Problem-Focused Coping Relaxation Self-Reward Social Support Tension Reduction Venting	Distracting Downward Social Comparison Substance Use Suppression Venting Withdrawal



**How did the list below compare with how effective you expected each strategy to be?**

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Note that some coping strategies, like venting and downward social comparisons, can be both adaptive and maladaptive. It all depends on the context. Venting is a good way to release the emotions that stem from feelings of stress, but only when the individual lets go of the emotion after venting. More often, though, people vent but still keep the stress. They might vent three or four times about the same stressful experience and, when they do, they relive the stressful experience. At that point, venting becomes maladaptive.

Downward social comparison can be an adaptive way to manage stress. However, there are times when problems that cause stress should be dealt with in a more problem-focused way, as this can lead to personal and professional development. If downward social comparison is used as a way of deflecting away criticism and stress without stopping to see if there is anything we should be doing differently, then it becomes maladaptive.

# Maintaining Composure Challenges

**Objective:** To engage in behaviors that will help you improve your Maintaining Composure skills.

Research shows that challenging yourself to engage in new behaviors you may not usually engage in can help you build new skills. The list below contains behavioral challenges that, if completed, can help you develop your skills related to Maintaining Composure.

First, select four challenges that you would be willing to try over the course of a week. Circle these challenges in the table below. Then, throughout the week, keep track of which challenges you complete.

You can repeat this activity as many times as you would like. You can also choose different challenges to try each time you complete the activity.

Challenge	Completed?
Smile for a few seconds even if you don't feel like it. This can be on you own, or while performing an activity (e.g., while walking to class, while driving).	
Before you go to bed, write down a positive thing that happened to you during the day and how it made you feel.	
Spend at least 5 minutes journaling about your day. Write about what happened, and also about your feelings.	
Laugh out loud. Either do something enjoyable with friends or seek out a funny show/clip/story and laugh.	
When you wake up, spend at least five minutes mentally listing everything you are grateful for (e.g., friends, family, safe place to live, clean air).	
Identify at least three "unsaid positives" that you take for granted, and say them out loud (e.g., "I really like where I live" or "I enjoy spending time with my friends").	
When you are worried about something, tell a close friend or family member about it.	
Spend 10 minutes going on a photo hunt. Take pictures of things that make you happy (e.g., pretty flowers, friends, a comfortable bed, yourself).	
Make a list of fun things you would like to do. Actually go do one activity on your list.	

Seek social support (e.g., from friends or family members, clubs of people that share your interests, or are working towards the same goals as you).	
When you are worried about something, write it down.	
When you feel discouraged, write down a potentially positive outcome. Write down a reason why this positive outcome could happen.	
When someone gives you a compliment, say "Thank you" out loud. Mentally say to yourself, "I believe this person truly feels this way."	
Express gratitude to another person (e.g., thank a teacher for a good lecture; tell a friend why you appreciate them).	
When you feel anxious about a decision, make a pros and cons list for both options.	
Honestly discuss your life and feelings with a close friend or family member.	
When you feel a negative emotion (e.g., sad, angry, stressed), take at least 5 minutes to write about WHY you feel that emotion.	
Spend at least 5 minutes journaling about your good qualities and strengths as a person. Everyone has good qualities and strengths!	
Throughout the day, notice at least five positive things (e.g., "The sky is pretty today," "I'm grateful I got to see my friends today," "This couch is comfortable," "The river makes such wonderful sounds"). Say those things to yourself.	
When you feel stressed, take at least two minutes to reflect on similar circumstances in the past where you have succeeded (e.g., if you are nervous about taking a test, reflect on past times when you've gotten good grades on past tests).	
Exercise for at least 20 minutes.	
Before you go to bed, write down one good thing you can look forward to tomorrow.	
When you feel overwhelmed, stop and take several deep breaths.	
When you feel a positive emotion, take at least two minutes to really explore it in your mind. What did you enjoy and why? Mentally re-experience the situation and the positive feeling.	