The books in this guide provide simple yet effective routines elementary-aged students can use to recognize their feelings, as well as relatable characters who work towards solutions for stress.
INTRODUCTION

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported that in 2020, during the first six months of a global pandemic, the number of elementary-aged children seeking emergency services due to a mental health crisis increased 24 percent compared to the same time a year prior. Health experts had already labeled childhood anxiety a “crisis,” but the COVID-19 pandemic elevated it to emergency status. Whether this alarming increase in anxiety is caused by school stress, social media, or scary world events, it is clear that today’s children need tools to manage emotions, develop healthy identities, empathize with peers, and pursue individual goals.

The books in this text set provide simple yet effective routines elementary-aged students can use to recognize their feelings, as well as relatable characters who work towards solutions for stress. Teachers can choose one or any combination of books and strategies to use with whole-class instruction, reading circles, or independent reading as they work to build a supportive, inclusive environment where emotions matter.
ABOUT THE TITLES IN THIS COLLECTION

Listed below are brief summaries as well as questions providing purpose, context, and framing while students read.

The picture book *My Monster and Me* tells the story of one little boy and how he learns to tame the worry monster that follows him everywhere.

1. Why might the boy’s monster be drawn so much bigger than him?
2. Why does the monster “hide” when the boy’s family is around?
3. What are some of the ways the monster affects the boy’s everyday life?
4. What happens when the boy talks to his grandmother about the monster? Why?
5. How has the size of the monster changed by the story’s end? Why?

*The Rabbit Listened* uses a simple story to illustrate that a hug and an open ear can sometimes be more powerful than the best-intended words of advice.

1. What is some of the advice Taylor is given when their castle comes crashing down? Does the advice help?
2. Which animal’s advice matches something you’ve tried when you were upset? How did that work for you? Why?
3. How is the rabbit different from all the other animals?
4. In what way does the quiet make a difference for Taylor? When have you needed quiet?
5. By the end of the story, what is Taylor ready to do? Why?
*Do Your Best Every Day to Do Your Best Every Day* is a collection of short, inspirational pieces of advice that encourage children to celebrate their accomplishments and appreciate their identities.

1. What does the author mean when he says both bad times and good are “the very foundation for the future of your life?” Why does he use the word “foundation?”
2. When was a time you “used what you’ve learned to get where you want to go?”
3. Explain what the author means when he says to ask questions “to the reflection staring back at you?”
4. Talk about a time you or someone you know did the right thing, even when no one else was watching. Why does the author call this “character”?
5. “Weakness is a strength” sounds confusing at first. Why does the author say this?

*Breathe Like a Bear*, an illustrated book of mindful moments, offers young children 30 specific exercises to calm, focus, and be mindful.

1. If someone suggests you “count to five,” what exactly are they asking you to do?
2. Why does the Listen! activity help you focus? When might you use this strategy?
3. How can the Kindness exercise routine help both you and others?
4. Why might doing the Twister activity help both your mind and your body?
5. How does the Do Nothing Movement combine several other strategies from the book?
CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

The books in this set promote the power of focus, energy, and reflection, both individually and collectively. In addition to those specific suggestions found in the texts, the following classroom strategies aim to promote equity by addressing student anxiety and other social-emotional learning needs at the beginning, middle, and end of class.

WELCOMING ROUTINES

These activities help students feel welcome and allow time to transition and prepare for learning.

1. Personalized Greeting

In *Do Your Best Every Day to Do Your Best Every Day*, students are encouraged to celebrate their individualism, to “let YOU shine through!” Teachers can make each student feel unique and special with a personalized hallway greeting. Ask students to help design a high-five, handshake, or dance step to perform together as they enter the classroom. Alternatively, greet students with a word of affirmation. It might be a compliment on their appearance, a question about their well-being, or even a special nickname.

Personalized greetings help students feel recognized and affirmed, which readies them for classroom interactions and learning. Another way to use daily affirmations is to post them on the whiteboard screen and invite students to say them out loud together before class starts. Find examples of these greeting routines below:

- #TheresGoodNewsTonight: tinyurl.com/GoodNewsclip
- Making Connections with Greetings at the Door: tinyurl.com/GreetingsAtDoor
- 43 Daily Affirmations for Kids: tinyurl.com/43Affirmations

2. Morning Meeting

Both *My Monster and Me* and *The Rabbit Listened* illustrate the power of listening to enhance a child’s confidence and promote healthy and empathetic peer relationships. “Morning Meetings” are structured, daily routines that provide similar results in the classroom.

Developed as part of the Responsive Classroom model, the Morning Meeting is a class circle that consists of four parts: a greeting where all students acknowledge one another and the teacher; a sharing session where classmates listen and respond to each other; a collaborative activity that emphasizes social or academic skills; and a teacher message connected to the day’s learning. For example, students might each offer one adjective about how they have “arrived” in class before interviewing a partner, engaging in a group building game like Jenga, then discussing an inquiry scenario in small groups to prepare for a science lesson.
Regardless of the home environment children have just come from, the routine of Morning Meetings provides a structure and a space where students feel safe, welcomed, and ready to learn. For an example Morning Meeting, see edutopia.org/video/morning-meetings-creating-safe-space-learning.

3. Mindfulness Minute

In *Breathe Like a Bear*, readers are encouraged to engage in mindful breathing exercises designed to calm anxiety, promote awareness, and build student capacity for self-regulation.

Provide students the opportunity to “arrive” each day, turn on their brains, and prepare for learning by leading them in a mindfulness minute prior to starting class. Using a silence signal, such as a countdown or a chime, indicate to students it is time to be silent. Direct them to close their eyes and slow their breathing, to become aware of their bodies, of what they hear, smell, and feel. These directions allow students to focus, transition, center themselves, and prepare their brains for learning. The following video illustrates the positive classroom impact of a mindfulness minute: tinyurl.com/CalmClassroomVideo.

ENGAGEMENT ROUTINES

These engaging activities promote individual and collective student focus, understanding, and self-awareness through purposeful creativity, movement, and collaboration.

1. Mood Meter

The little kid in *The Rabbit Listened* needs their feelings to be heard, regardless of whether they are happy, silly, angry, or even destructive. Indeed, all children need their emotions to be acknowledged, regardless of what they are. The Mood Meter, developed by the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence, provides students “permission to feel” because emotions matter. The meter consists of four colored quadrants and provides children a vocabulary to recognize and express their emotions. Students use words or symbols in the red quadrant to denote anger, the blue quadrant to communicate sadness, the yellow for excitement, and the green for calm. Once students recognize their feelings, they can choose to take a meta moment and decide what thoughts and actions, if any, are where they need to go next. Teachers can provide time for the entire class to read their mood and perhaps write or talk about it, or they can suggest students use the tool individually as needed. During remote learning, the Mood Meter can serve as a check-in while waiting for students to enter class. Elementary students can access a digital version of the Mood Meter on their school tablets and older students (as well as their
teachers and parents) can add the app to their cell phones. Find more information and examples of the Mood Meter at the following links:

- The Mood Meter: tinyurl.com/TheMoodMeterPDF
- The Mood Meter App: tinyurl.com/MoodMeterApp
- “Boost Emotional Intelligence with the Mood Meter”: tinyurl.com/HeartMindOnline

2. Brain Breaks

The bear in *Breathe Like a Bear* feels “cozy and safe” when he hibernates away from the rest of the world. Elementary students, too, can take breaks from learning in order to re-energize and re-focus. Brain breaks are short timeouts where students can say a tongue twister, practice a physical skill, or simply take a deep breath. Brain breaks can, but do not have to, connect to content learning. The goal is to help students regulate their reactions to a challenging social and learning environment, re-energize, and continue learning primed for productivity. In one specific type of brain break called “rapid reset,” students engage in physical activity such as pressing against a wall or taking a walk. The idea is to use physical activity to interrupt the “fight, flight, or freeze” mechanism often triggered by stress. For more information about brain breaks and rapid resets, see the following links:

- “9 Brain Breaks for Elementary Students”: tinyurl.com/9BrainBreaks
- “With Stress in Schools Increasing, Simple Strategies to Stay Calm”: tinyurl.com/SimpleCalmStrategies

3. Draw & Write Journals

Each of the books in this text set combines words and pictures to offer children simple yet appealing pages of encouragement. Similarly, classroom “draw and write” journals offer students encouragement by providing a creative space for processing their emotions. Ask students to use a single-page template to draw and/or communicate their anxiety, feelings, peer interactions, or even content notes. Students can be given time to draw and write collectively, or children can be invited individually to utilize journals for de-escalation, after incidents such as peer confrontations or anxiety/panic attacks. In some cases, students might be invited to share their entries with classmates, parents, or counselors. Templates for draw and write journals can be found online, at free4classrooms.com/free-primary-lined-writing-paper-with-drawing-art-box.
CLOSURE ROUTINES

These end-of-class activities provide time for reflection and promote classroom community.

1. Closing Circle

For some students, the end of the day brings exhaustion and anxiety about after-school activities or home life. Closing circle routines aim to promote a calm and hopeful transition by celebrating the day’s accomplishments. At about ten minutes prior to the end of the day, ask students to sit in a large circle. Then, ask them to take turns and share a positive takeaway: one thing that went well, one classmate who helped make the day better, or one new thing learned. With this routine, students are more likely to leave with a sense of purpose and positivity about the next day. For more information on closing circles, see responsiveclassroom.org/closing-circle.

2. Clock Buddies

The Clock Buddies routine provides an opportunity for children to be heard and to build peer relationships. Give students a clock template and ask them to walk around the room and find a Clock Buddy classmate for each hour. Partners then write each other’s names on a specific time slot. At the close of class or end of the day, instruct students to “meet with your three o'clock buddy” or “find your six o'clock partner” and discuss what you learned and how you feel about it. If needed, provide students with sentence starters such as “I feel confused because…” or “I think I’m starting to get it…” Since students are constantly meeting with new classmates, they are sharing the learning process, practicing active listening, and promoting equity of voice. Alternatively, students can make cell phone appointments where each number on the phone is matched to a different classmate. Templates are linked below.

- Clock Buddies Practice Tool: tinyurl.com/ClockBuddiesTool
- Phone A Friend: tinyurl.com/PhoneAFriendHandout

3. Tic-Tac-Toe Celebration Board

In Do Your Best Every Day to Do Your Best Every Day, John Cena wants kids to celebrate themselves and each other. Challenge students to fill out a tic-tac-toe board that celebrates one positive word about themselves in the middle square and one positive word about each of their classmates in the other squares. Play music and ask students to walk around and share their celebrations with every classmate in one of the rows. Students can add the accolades they hear about themselves to the space in the center. In the coming days, students can repeat the activity with a different row on their tic-tac-toe board. Students can refer to these words of encouragement whenever they feel anxious or down.
REcroceS

The following resources provide more information and ideas for addressing student anxiety and integrating mindfulness into teaching and learning.

- “What is the CASEL Framework?”: casel.org/sel-framework/
- “CASEL SEL 3 Signature Practices Playbook”: tinyurl.com/CASEL3PracticesPlaybook
- “Helping Students Beat Test Anxiety”: tinyurl.com/OvercomingTestAnxiety
- “Self-Awareness | Social Emotional Learning” video: tinyurl.com/PBSSelfAwareness

BOOKS OF INTEREST

Visit our website, prhelementaryeducation.com, to browse additional fiction and non-fiction titles about social-emotional topics.

About the Author of This Guide

Laura Reis Mayer is a high school instructional coach and National Board Certified teacher in Asheville, North Carolina. She has taught middle school, high school, and college English, speech, drama, and literacy. As a consultant to various national organizations, she develops and facilitates professional learning on college and career-ready standards, teacher leadership, and National Board Certification. She is the author of twenty other Penguin Random House Teacher’s Guides.