

MENTAL HEALTH CARE INIATIVE HANDBOOK

Created For Rural School Children

In Madhya Pradesh

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Group Therapy & Buddy-Mentor Program

India's rural residents lead hard lives and struggle to make ends meet. The adults in the household are under constant stress, which percolates to the children. Without even realising it, children frequently experience bouts of depression and anxiety, which interferes with their ability to concentrate on their studies. These children could benefit greatly from counselling and therapy, but they don't have access to mental health professionals and institutions and they can't afford it either.

The 'Group Therapy and Buddy-Mentor Program' was implemented in rural schools to bridge this gap. The program has been formulated in conjunction with renowned psychologist, Ashika Mehta, after interacting with the children, their parents and the school teachers and understanding their difficulties.

Scientific research shows that 'group psychotherapy', often known as 'group therapy' is one of the most effective forms of therapy for children, as it provides them with a safe space to express themselves and gives them an opportunity to connect with other children who might be experiencing similar challenges. It also helps them build their confidence and learn ways to cope with negative thoughts and feelings. According to a meta-analysis of 56 studies, children and adolescents (ages 4-18) who participated in group therapy fared 73% better than those who did not.

Group therapy offers plenty of benefits, including:

- Teaching children how to process their emotions and express themselves without fear.
- Enhancing communication skills and building social confidence.



- Making children feel heard, accepted and understood.
- Providing a healthy and strong support system.
- Forging a healthy bond and friendship with peers.
- Improving their emotional intelligence, focus and productivity.
- Providing coping skills to deal with bullying, depression and other mental health conditions.

Process:

- Ashika Mehta, an expert psychologist, conducts 3 workshops with the teachers and introduces them to the fundamentals of group psychotherapy and the associated protocols. The teachers then identify senior students to serve as mentors and facilitate the group therapy sessions.
- The psychologist trains these senior students and teaches them different methods like talk therapy, role-playing, board games, and other fun structured activities.
- After that, the mentors conduct weekly group therapy sessions with children from junior classes, incorporating different methods as necessary.
- Once a month, the mentors continue to receive training from the psychologist. She is also available to them for any guidance or assistance that they may need.

Guidelines:

- Confidentiality
The mentors ensure that nothing said in a session is shared with anybody outside the group.
- Non-judgemental feedback
All the children are invited to share and express themselves, but there is a strict no-tolerance policy towards judgement. No child or mentor is allowed to be judgemental, even if they don't agree with what is being said.
- Buddy-mentor relationship
Each child is encouraged to have an accountability partner who checks up on them and motivates them to attend therapy regularly.
- Respect
It is important to create an environment of mutual respect for the sessions to remain a safe space for all involved.
- Commitment
For the therapy to be effective, it is recommended that the entire group shows up for every session.



Art Therapy

Coming from the lower strata of the socio-economic structure comes with its own challenges, especially for children. The school children I worked with in the three schools of Betul, Madhya Pradesh presented a host of mental health issues such as anxiety, stress, self-esteem issues, to more serious ones such as depression, suicidal tendencies, etc. [1] All kinds of mental health issues go undetected, because the state has a serious lack of facilities for mental health. The state of Madhya Pradesh performs dismally when it comes to mental health infrastructure. According to the study, out of 51 districts, 13.7% of the districts of the state have been covered under District Mental Health Program (DMHP) in 2015-16. Around 11.8% of district/general hospitals were involved in providing mental health services. The availability of psychiatrists was 0.05 per Lakh population. Around 0.2% of the total health budget was allocated by the state for the last financial year for mental health. The overall average score of Madhya Pradesh in the assessment of qualitative indicators was 31 out of 100 in the year 2015-16.

Keeping these points in mind, I set forth to create a mental health programme involving art therapy. Art therapy has proven to help in improving a child's mental, cognitive, and emotional well-being [2].



Art Therapy Programmes

Starting with the most simplest versions of art therapies, we introduced colour therapy first. Drawing and colouring helps with a number of mental issues such as releasing of suppressed emotions, stress, anxiety, releasing of trauma and grief, boosts self-esteem, and expressing oneself in a creative way.

I started with a free-flowing session of 'art without agenda', wherein there were no instructions on what and how to create. The kids were simply given paper and colours, and left to create freely. This was one of our best workshops, as the children wholeheartedly participated and gave an overwhelming response. I worked closely with the teachers and caregivers to formulate a plan to conduct such workshops on a regular basis. Developmentally, young children lack the means for effective communication. To tackle this mental health issue block such as lack of self-esteem, and confidence, I introduced performance based workshops. Artistic ways of expressions such as plays, solo acting, or even just being on the stage gives a major confidence boost to children, and serves as a channel of self-expression [3].

Neurobiology provides a lot of helpful markers on how art-based therapies help children. It is proven that certain sensory activities such as craft with paper, clay, modeling mud, slime, sensory sand, etc. are effective in improving mood, sensory integration, and calming the body and mind, especially with children who have experienced traumatic events [4]. I helped in integrating all these sensory activities in the day-to-day school, to provide children a safe space for self-expression.

To ensure that this becomes a continued activity, I worked with various art therapists to train teachers and senior students towards encouraging younger students to take up arts and crafts, and also equipped them towards hosting more such activities on a regular basis.

References:

1. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6627290/>
2. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC9221561/>
3. <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/arts-and-health/201601/child-art-therapy-how-it-works>
4. <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/arts-and-health/201601/child-art-therapy-how-it-works>



Nutrition

For years, Madhya Pradesh as a state has ranked very high on the scale of malnutrition and stunted in children under the age of 15. According to a Swastha India report [1], Madhya Pradesh reports 42% children under the age of 5 with stunted growth, while another 42% who are underweight.

Inadequate nourishment and lack of access to nutritious food can be credited to lack of awareness, poverty, and disregard towards children's health. This is where creating awareness amongst school children by the way of educating on what nutrition they require, and meeting it with mid-day meals comes into play.

The mid-day meals initiative in schools was created with the idea of convincing more parents to send their children to school with an idea that they do not need to worry about their meals. I wanted to take this a step further and help in solving another social issue - malnutrition.

As the first phase of my work towards creating awareness, I started dialogue with school authorities - principals, teachers, caregivers, etc., to understand where the gap was and how best to fill it. It was understood that very little, to no planning goes into creating a menu plan for the school children's mid-day meals. Meals are not prepared with an idea of meeting the nutritional requirement of the children. Snacking on fruits was an alien concept, and it was increasingly becoming clear as to how I needed to forge ahead with this mission.

Introducing Holistic Meals

The idea of meals is to satisfy hunger - this was the only understanding of food for caregivers and the children. We started with first introducing them to the nutritional value of vegetables, grains, millets, milk, fruits, and other food groups. Through systematic presentations, and pictorial charts, we explained how various food groups nourish the mind and body, and complement each other to create a holistic meal plan.

We also explained how to create a healthy meal, with proper proportions of carbohydrates, protein, vitamins, and other micronutrients. Madhya Pradesh is blessed with a plethora of Kharif and Rabi crops [2], that are more than enough to meet the nutritional requirements of children and adults. Summer is abundant with various gourds such as bottle gourd, snake gourd, pumpkins, cowpeas, white onion, etc. While winter sees a rich produce of carrots, cucumber, peas, cauliflower, capsicum, etc.

In consultation with a nutritionist, I created seasonal vegetarian meal plans, showing the caregivers on how to balance each nutrient to meet the calorie and nutrient needs of the children. The wholesome meal plans included a portion of roti (Indian bread) for fiber made with locally sourced grains such as wheat, bajra, maize, etc., a portion of rice for carbohydrates, two portions of seasonal vegetables, accompanied with any lentil soup.

For snacks, I encourage that the children be given any fresh seasonal fruit.

Educating for long-term effects

In addition to working with schools for implementing a more nutritious and beneficial mid-day meal, I also conducted workshops with the school children to help them understand what nutrition means. I taught them to identify different fresh produce for its nutritional value, and how to ensure that the meals that they have are appropriately nutrition-balanced. This will help in creating a long-term awareness, as the children will in turn educate their parents for creating meal plans with local produce that is easily available.

References

1. <https://swachhindia.ndtv.com/national-nutrition-week-2019-the-crisis-of-malnutrition-in-india-37531/>
2. <http://www.slbcmadhyapradesh.in/docs/CropSeason%20in%20M.P..pdf>



Meditation, Breathwork & Mindfulness

Meditation is a simple, cost-effective technique that children of all ages can easily practice in their daily lives. It doesn't require any financial investment and is one of the most economical methods that children and adults can adopt to improve their mood, emotional health and well-being. According to studies, meditation and breathwork are also particularly effective at treating mental health conditions including depression, anxiety and ADHD.

The National Institute of Mental Health and Neurosciences (NIMHANS) conducted a National Mental Health Survey of India 2015-16 and reported that almost 10% of the Indian population is suffering from mental disorders including anxiety, depression and substance use. Around 150 million Indians need mental health care services, though less than 30 million are seeking care. The reason for this, especially in rural India, is lack of access to mental health professionals, and also the stigmatization of mental disorders. The World Health Organization (WHO) states that per 1,00,000 Indians there are only 0.3 psychiatrists, 0.07 psychologists and 0.07 social workers available. This gap only gets wider when it comes to rural India.

Most people in rural India strongly believe in religious practices and superstitions and regularly perform religious rituals. However, these beliefs and religious rituals don't help to improve their mental health and alleviate their stress and anxiety. This is where meditation and mindfulness come in.

Scientific studies have shown that cultivating a regular practice of meditation, breathwork and mindfulness has the potential to:

- 1) Alter the structure of the brain, thereby improving the child's mental, emotional and social skills.
- 2) Help the child focus better and be more productive.
- 3) Boost immunity.
- 4) Alleviate anxiety and depression.
- 5) Improve memory, learning power and cognition.
- 6) Help children with learning disabilities such as autism, ADHD, etc
- 7) Release past traumas and phobias.
- 8) Build resilience and promote overall well-being.

Meditation

Meditation is a simple technique of observing the breath and shifting the awareness inwards. It is about consciously relaxing the body while keeping the mind awake.

'Anapanasati' is the meditation that was originally taught by Gautam Buddha. 'Anapana' means inhalation and exhalation and 'Sati' means to be with. This technique is a mindfulness practice that focuses on the breath and is advisable to do every morning at the

Meditation protocol:

- Sit in a comfortable position with the back straight, legs folded, hands clasped, and eyes closed.
- Bring the awareness to the tip of the nose and feel the air going in and out of the nostrils.
- Slowly bring one hand and place it on the stomach and notice how it rises during the inhalation and comes into a normal position as you exhale.
- Keep the focus on your breath and do this meditation for 15 minutes or increase the duration of the meditation as per your comfort.
- If intrusive thoughts arise during meditation, don't fight them – just observe them, let them pass and bring the attention back to your breath.

Breathwork

Breathwork is a breathing technique in which the breath is consciously manipulated over a period of time for a desired outcome. It is a form of active meditation and is practiced in various parts of the world by children and adults alike.

Breathwork techniques and protocol:

Calming Breathwork

- Sit in a comfortable position or lay down, whichever is preferred.
- Close your eyes, relax your body and slowly shift your awareness to the breath.
- Inhale for 4 seconds and exhale for 8 seconds. During inhalation imagine the abundance of the Universe entering your body and with the exhalation, imagine letting go of all the stress and anxiety.

Energizing Breathwork

- Sit in a comfortable position with the back straight, legs folded, hands clasped, and eyes closed.
- Gently shift your awareness inwards and pay attention to the rhythm of the breath.
- Focus on your inhalation and take a full breath till your stomach and as you exhale, let go and relax.

Continue to take rapid breaths and ensure that each breath is connected and there are no gaps. Don't hold your breath.

These breathing techniques are to be practiced once a week for a duration of 45 minutes, preferably on an empty/light stomach.

Meditation, Breathwork & Mindfulness

Mindfulness

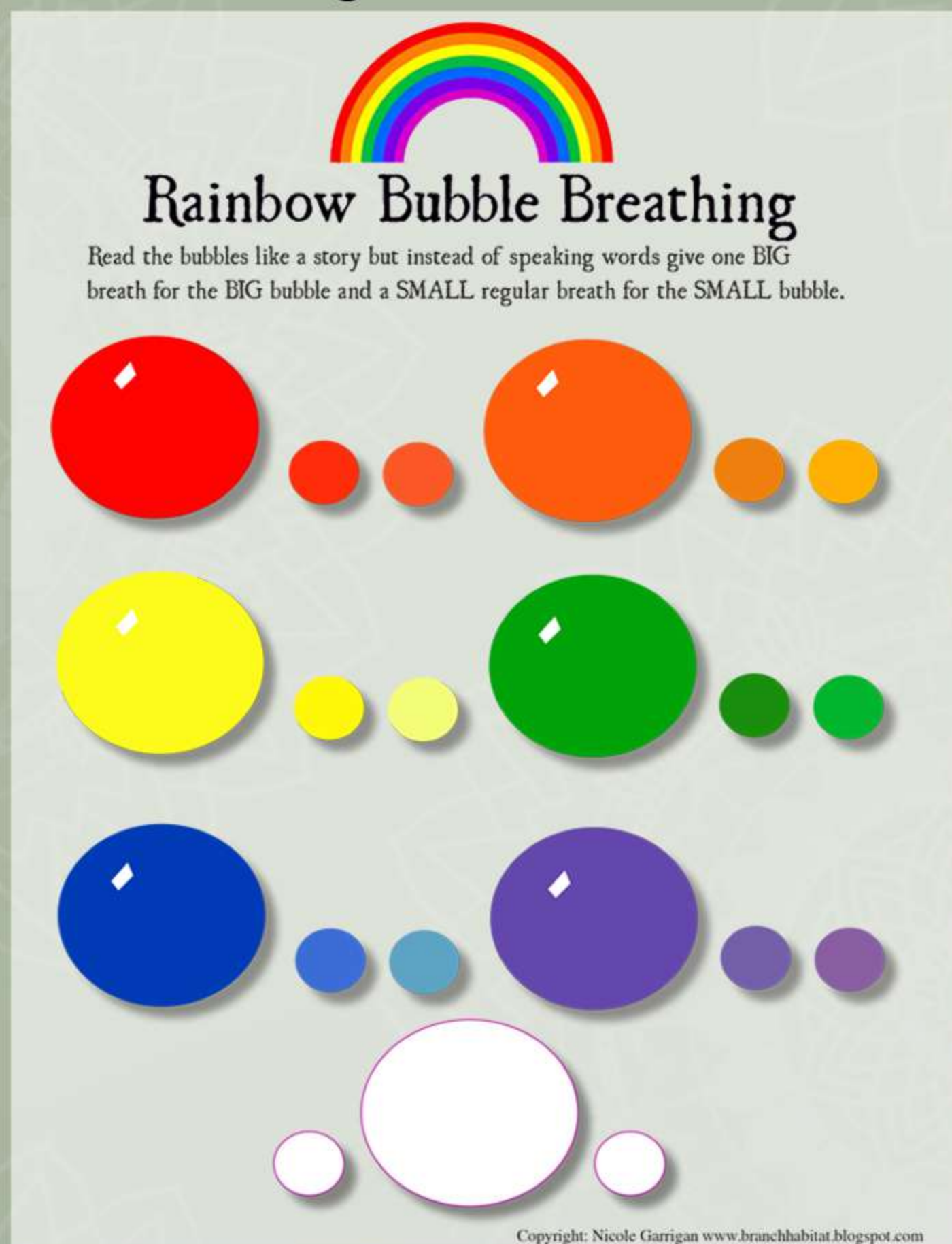
Mindfulness is a practice where the aim is to fully focus on the present moment, and not get bogged down by the fear of the future or worries of the past. It is a form of meditation that can be practiced on the go, and it doesn't require a silent corner to sit in and meditate.

Mindfulness techniques and protocol:

The Five Senses Mindfulness Technique

- 1) Take a deep breath and relax.
- 2) Gently close your eyes for five seconds and take another deep breath.
- 3) Open your eyes and notice –
 - Five things that you can see
 - Four things that you can hear
 - Three things that you can feel
 - Two things that you can smell
 - One thing that you can taste
- 4) Close your eyes for five seconds and express gratitude for everything that you saw, heard, felt, smelt and tasted.
- 5) Take a deep breath, open your eyes and smile.

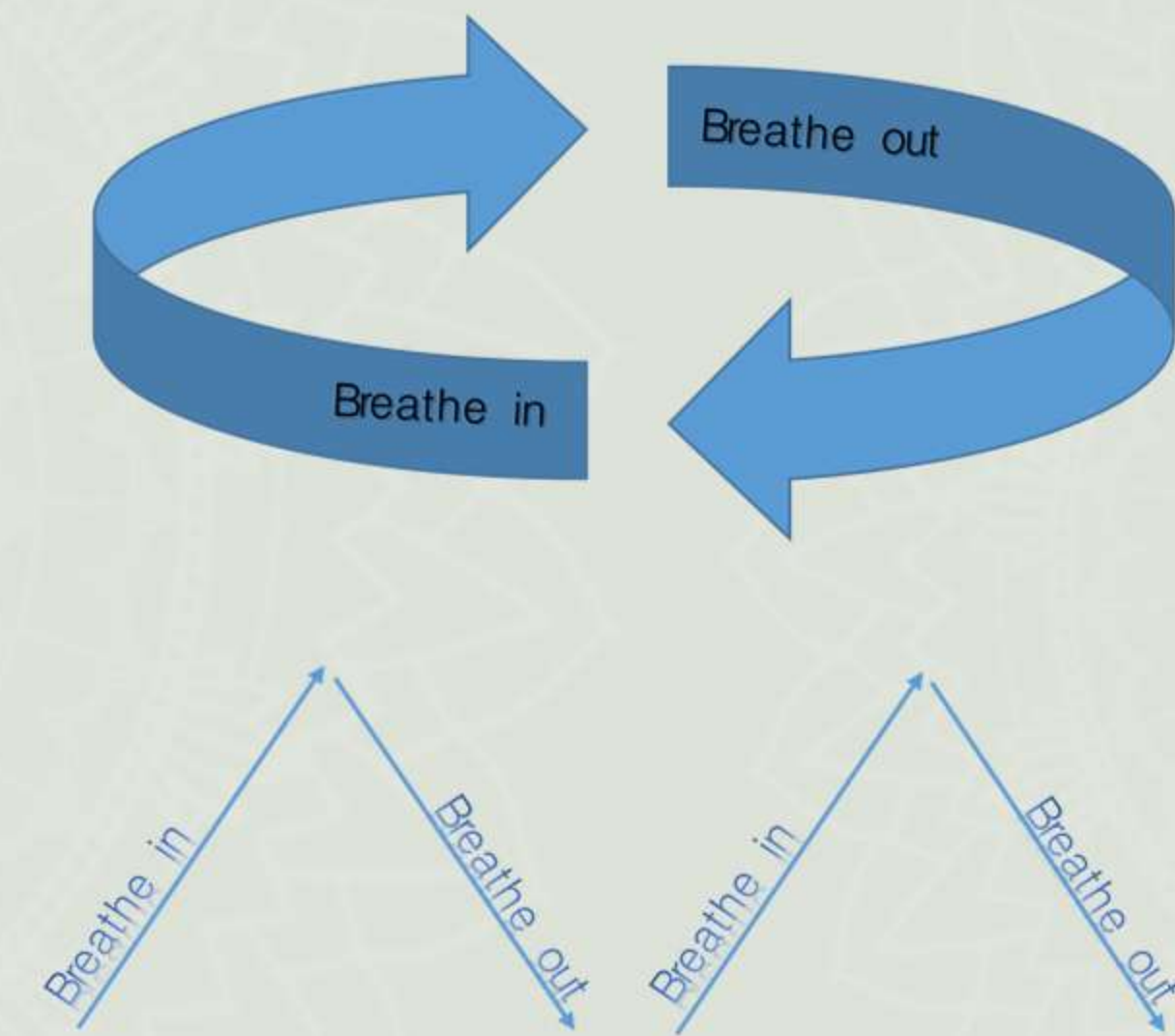
Rainbow Bubble Breathing Mindfulness Exercise



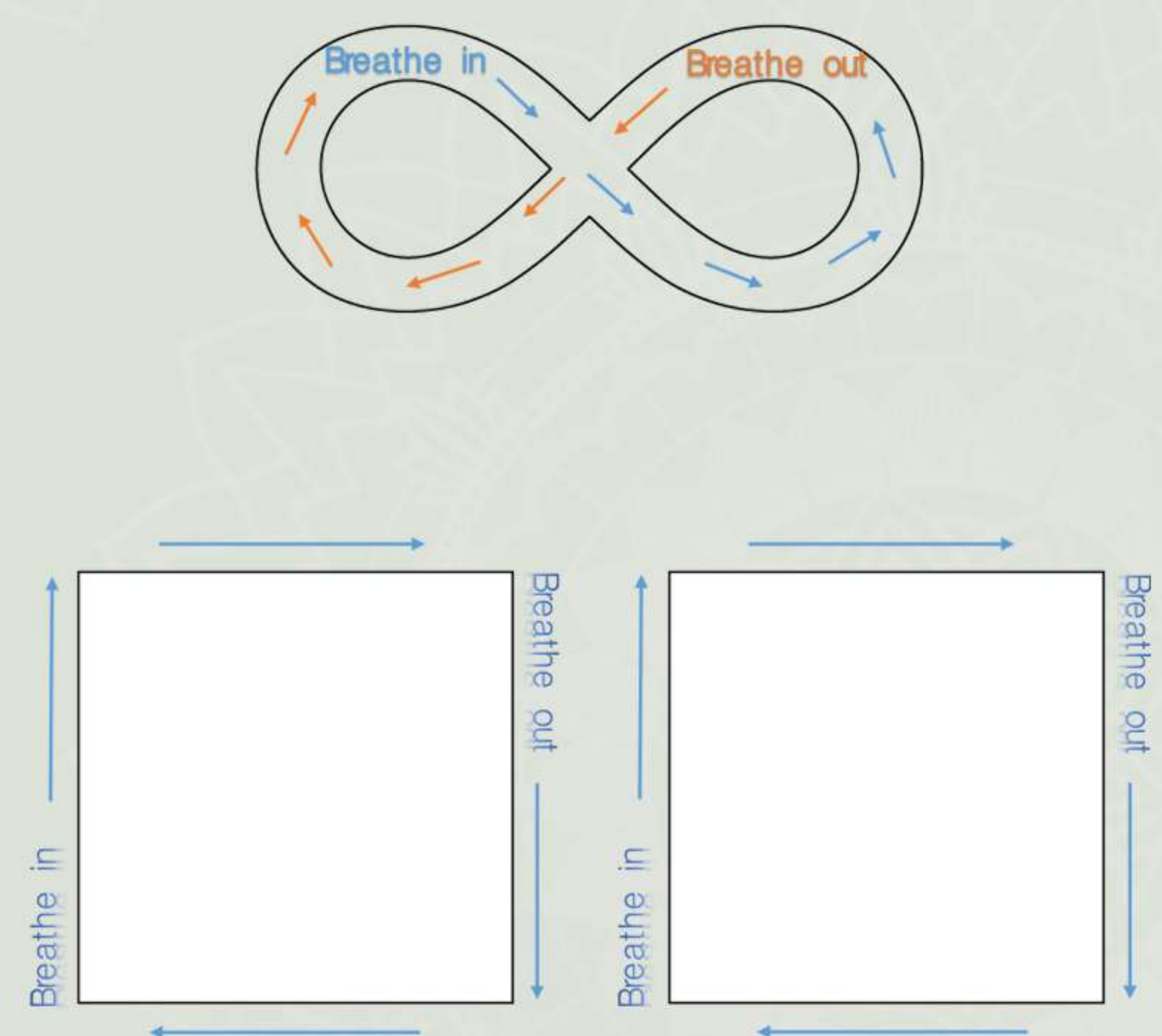
- Take a deep, slow breath and relax.
- Observe the colours and shapes of the bubbles.
- Take a big deep breath on seeing the big bubbles and take a shorter breath on seeing the smaller bubbles.
- Continue this exercise until all the bubbles are accounted for.
- Close your eyes for five seconds and express gratitude for successfully completing this exercise.

Breathing Patterns Mindfulness Exercise

Practice each breathe board by following the lines with your finger as you breathe in and out.



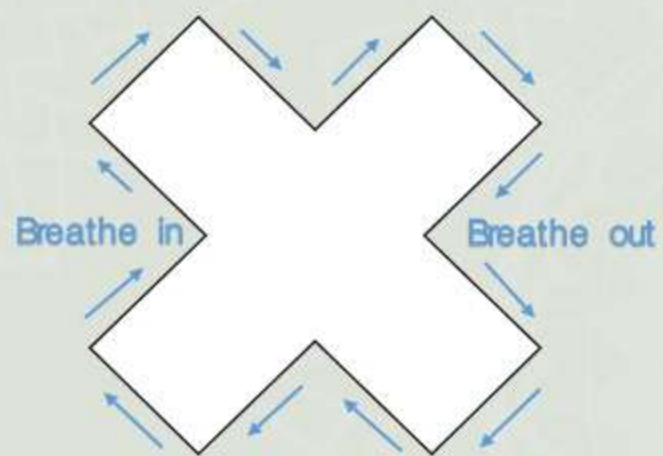
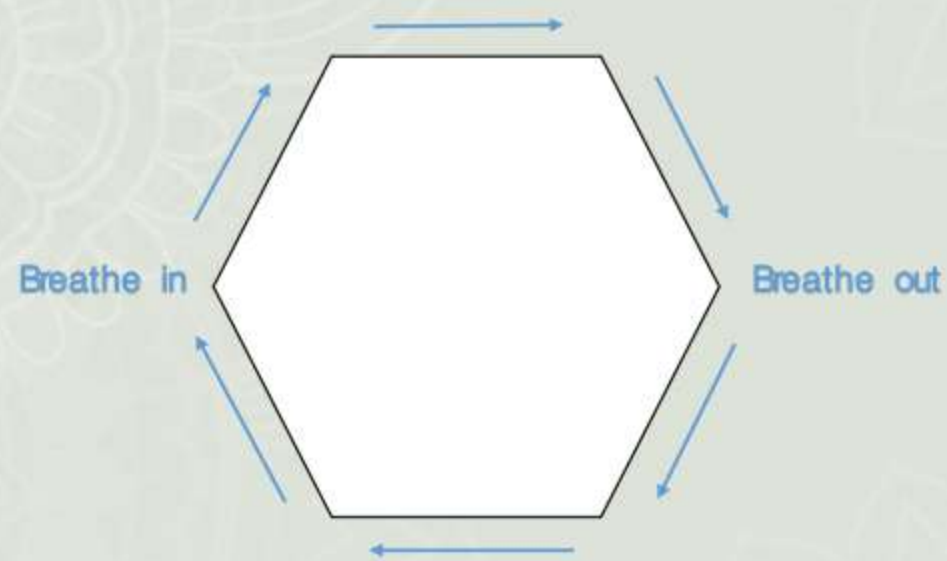
Practice each breathe board by following the lines with your finger as you breathe in and out.





Meditation, Breathwork & Mindfulness

Practice each breathe board by following the lines with your finger as you breathe in and out.



- Take a deep breath and relax the mind and body.
- Take your finger to the first diagram and follow the arrows with your fingers, simultaneously inhaling and exhaling as per the diagram.
- Do this exercise and complete all the shapes and diagrams.
- Once completed, close your eyes and take a few deep breaths.
- Open your eyes, smile and express gratitude to the Universe.