

A guide of meaningful
exercises to help your child
cope, calm & thrive.



National Institutes of Health
Turning Discovery Into Health

Table of Contents

Introduction.....	3
Mindfulness and Meditation.....	4
Do-It-Yourself Activities.....	7
Breathing Exercises.....	9
Yoga Games.....	15
Additional Resources.....	16

How to get started:

1

Read
through each
section
together

2

Ask your
child to help
you try an
activity

3

Use at home
or in the
hospital

Introduction

Children and teens who have serious health conditions may be dealing with fear, uncertainty, and vulnerability on top of typical developmental growth. You and your family are not alone, and this guide offers you tools to help your child cope and thrive.

This guide provides a range of easy-to-follow wellness activities that can be used for children of all ages, backgrounds, and health statuses. Inside, you will find:

- Guided breathing exercises,
- Mindfulness exercises,
- Games, and
- Expressive activities.

There are several activities that can be done anytime, anywhere, without materials needed. Other activities need materials you may have around your home, like pencils, markers, or paper. You may start by choosing a few activities to try together with your child and any siblings. Over time, this guide can then serve as a toolkit of activities that your child can return to on their own in moments when they may seek comfort or grounding.

Mindfulness and Meditation

AGES 3 AND UP

Finger Labyrinth/"Treasure Garden"

Print or draw labyrinth template before beginning



Today we're on a mission to find a treasure in the center of a garden. This garden is a long, circular path called a labyrinth, and we will keep going until we reach the center.

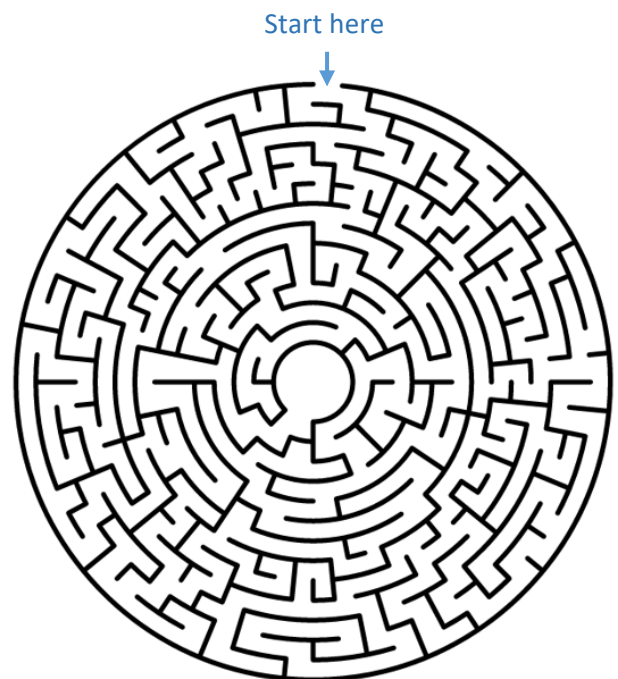
To begin, we'll point to the entrance of the "garden" on the outer layer with our right finger.

Then, we'll slowly trace our finger down the pathway, taking deep breaths to smell the flowers along the way until we reach the center. We've found the treasure!

To carry it back home, let's switch to the left finger and trace from the center back to the entrance.

Applications: You can make your own finger labyrinth by using leaves, paper clips, or legos. You can also create your own walking labyrinth outside in a real garden using jump ropes, bricks, rocks, etc and slowly walk down the path instead of tracing with your finger.

Purpose: Helps to focus thoughts, feel less overwhelmed, and improve concentration



*Extra templates at the end of this guide

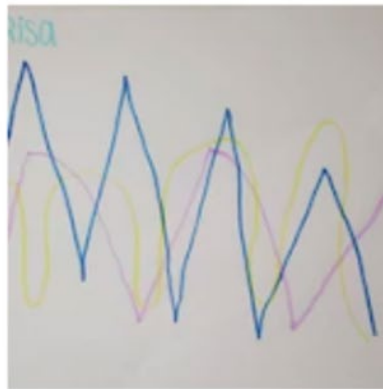
Mindfulness and Meditation

AGES 3 AND UP

WaterCoaster

Video Demo

- We'll start with thick paper, watercolor, a paint brush, and water.
- Let's pretend we're on a rollercoaster together. As we breathe in, we'll slowly move the brush up for 4 seconds and feel like we're riding higher and higher.
- Now, we've reached the top of the hill, so let's pause our brushes. To ride down the track, we'll breathe out for 4 more seconds, slowly bringing the paintbrush down.
- Let's keep going! We can use another color and start again to compare the waves or join more papers together to create more waves. At the end, we have a beautiful drawing of our rollercoaster ride to keep.



Purpose: visualize breathing pattern and focus on making the waves consistent

Mindfulness and Meditation

AGES 3 AND UP

5-4-3-2-1 Countdown

Video Demo

Whenever we catch ourselves worrying about the future or thinking of everything bad that could happen, we can imagine we're slowly getting sucked into a *mental tornado*. It's hard to pause and control our thoughts, but by focusing on the sensation of things around us, we can escape the tornado!



Look around. What are 5 things you see? Think about whether you've noticed them there before, and what value they bring in your life.



What are 4 things you feel? If needed, get up and walk around the space to find different textures to feel.



What are 3 things you hear? Which sounds did you not notice before? Do any sounds make you feel a certain way?



What are 2 things you smell? Take note of places with smells that cheer you up. Do any smells bring out memories?



What is 1 thing you taste*?

***Note to caregiver:** Another way to instill mindful tasting is by encouraging your child to savor their meals. Allow them to concentrate their senses on a food item, guiding them to focus intently on each flavor and each sensation. Savoring the taste or flavor of a food can shift the mind to the present.

Purpose: re-center anxious thinking, focus on the present, appreciate what one can control

DIY CRAFTS

AGES 5 AND UP

Tree of Strength



We will need a large sheet of paper, pencil, markers

- Spread your hand wide on a piece of paper, and trace the hand and arm. Leave the tips of your fingers open
- Now, extend the open region of the fingertips to draw longer tree branches. At the ends of branches, draw in large leaves
- In each leaf, write down a coping strategy, personal strength, friend/family member, or fun activity that improves your mood during a negative situation
- Color and decorate the “Tree of Strength” as you like!

Purpose: boost self-esteem and mental health

What Can I Control?



- Trace one hand on paper
- In the inside of the hand, write “In My Control” and write things that are in your control (for example, thoughts, attitude, the words you use, breaths, posture)
- Outside the hand, write “Out of My Control” and write things that are not in your control (for example where you live, the weather, the day of week, classmates, relocation, other people’s reactions...)

Purpose: The hand symbolizes control, a reminder that some things shouldn’t be held on to if they can’t be changed.

DIY CRAFTS

AGES 5 AND UP

Worry Box

We will need a small box, pencil, sticky notes, scale (1-10), decorative items (optional)

- Start by decorating and labelling your worry box however you like (with sequins, tissue, glitter, stickers, etc.)
- Using sticky notes, write down all your worries
- Place each sticky note along a scale of 1-10 (1 being a little worry and 10 being a lot of worried)
- Let's have a conversation together about each note and how we can work on a solution. While we go through each note, you can place them one-by-one in the worry box
- Once all notes are in the box, I can safely keep the box for you
- Finally, let's decide on a date to revisit the box. On that date, reorder each sticky note on the scale: have any changed to be more or less worrisome? Any new stickies to add?

Purpose: to reduce the mental burden of constantly “carrying around” worries by providing a physical location for them; to allow some time to move away from worrying thoughts and address specific worries when the child is ready

“Happiness Jar” Gift

- Take any empty jar/container (for example pickle, candy, cashew jars work great!)
- Write a label and decorate the surface (for example, you could use colored tissue paper, glitter, marker art)
- Using even strips of paper, write down compliment or gratitude statements. Continue until jar is filled
- Gift it to someone special (parent, friend, healthcare worker, sibling, counselor...)



Purpose: beneficial for those who may have trouble sharing feelings verbally

FOCUSED BREATHING

AGES 5 AND UP

Purpose: calm down strategy when angry, overwhelmed or upset

Animals

Have children use controlled breathing with the following imaginary scenarios:



Bunny Breath

“Let’s pretend we’re bunnies! We’ll make ‘bunny’ hands in front of our chest and make 3 short, quick sniffs like we’re trying to find some yummy carrots underground. Then, we’ll take one long exhale out.”

“sniff sniff sniff in, and blowwww out”



Smell Flower + Bee Breath

“Did you know bees recognize human faces? Why don’t we try transforming into bees!”

“Sit up straight, close your eyes, and put your fingers gently in your ears. Breathe in deeply, and pretend you’re sniffing a sweet flower in front of you.”

“While breathing out, make the buzzing sound of a humming bee--using long, short, high and low sounds: sniffffff and buzzzzzz”



Snake Breath

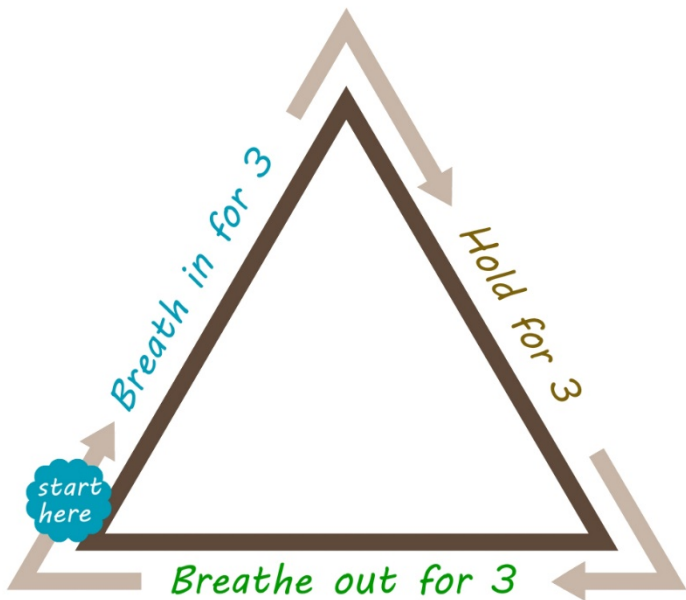
We’ll start by sitting up straight and closing our eyes. Breathe in slowly, pause briefly, and then breathe out, making a slow hissing sound for as long as possible

FOCUSED BREATHING

AGES 5 AND UP

Purpose: calm down strategy when angry, overwhelmed or upset

Shape Breaths

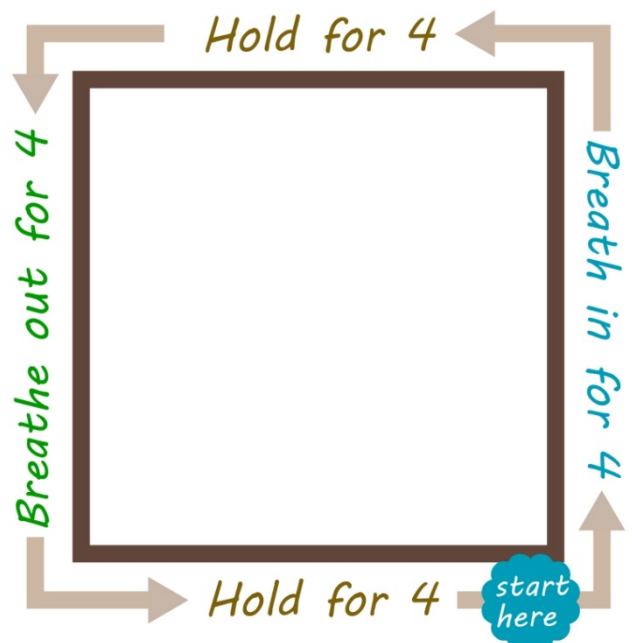


Triangle Breath

- Breathe in for 3
- Hold for 3
- Breathe out for 3

Square Breath

- Breathe in for 4
- Hold for 4
- Breathe out for 4
- Hold for 4



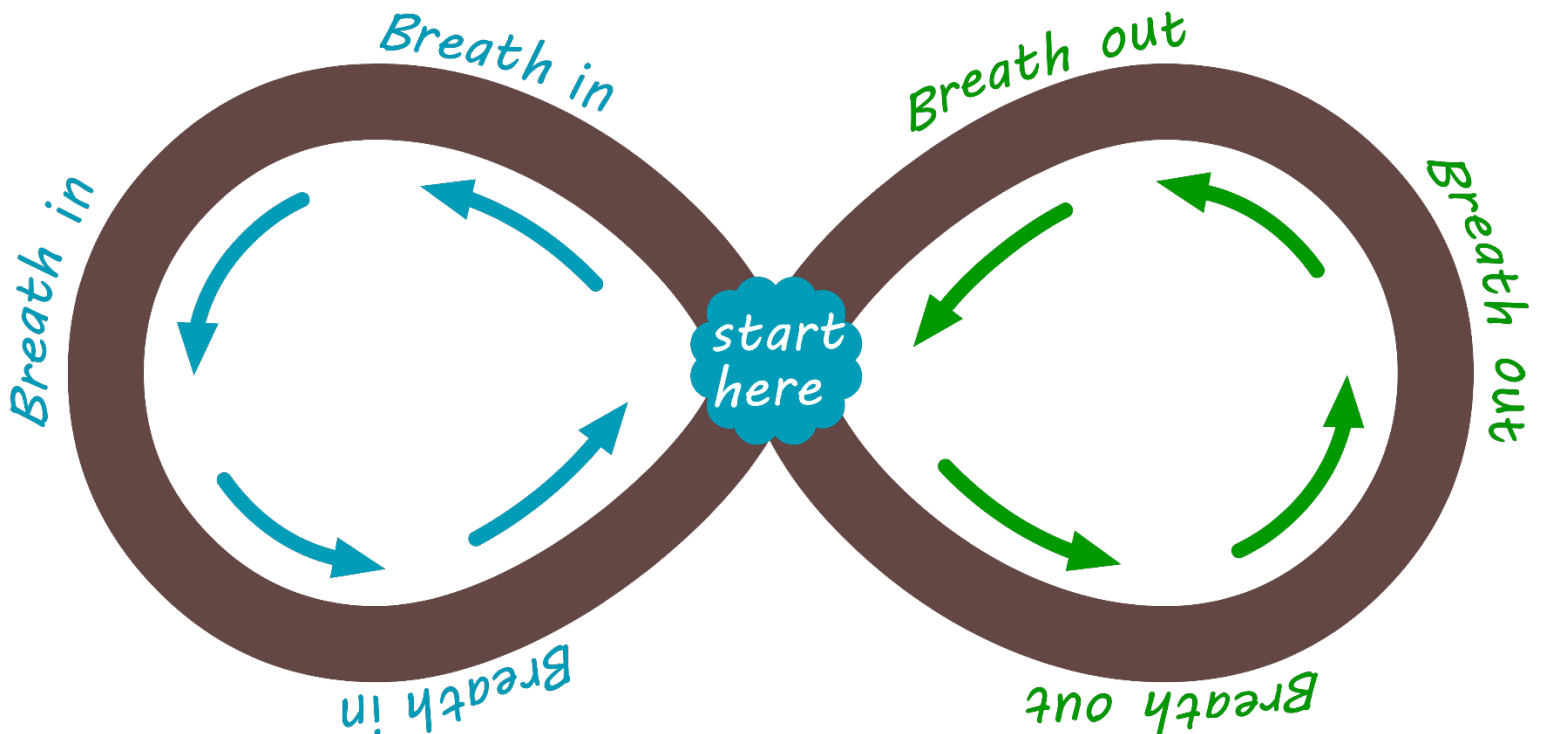
FOCUSED BREATHING

AGES 5 AND UP

Purpose: calm down strategy when angry, overwhelmed or upset

Infinity/"Sleeping 8" Breathing

- Start from the middle of a sideways 8
- Go to the top left and trace the path with your finger while breathing in
- Once past the middle, breathe out and trace the right side of the 8 to complete the infinity loop. Continue with multiple rounds.



FOCUSED BREATHING

AGES 5 AND UP

Purpose: calm down strategy when angry, overwhelmed or upset

Numbers

7-11 Breathing

- Breathe in for 7 seconds, breathe out for 11 seconds

5-5-10 Breathing

- Breathe in for 5 seconds, hold for 5 seconds, breathe out for 10 seconds

Finger Breathing

- Stretch one hand out in front, leaving gaps between your fingers. Then, using your other hand's pointer finger, begin tracing your hand from the bottom of your thumb. Pretend your pointer finger is a car traveling through a hilly region
- Slowly breathe in through your nose as you move up the thumb
- The traffic light turns red at the top of the thumb. Pause the finger and hold your breath for a few seconds. The light turns green as you slide your finger down the other side of your hand and exhale. Continue this for your other four fingers, breathing in as you slide up, and breathing out as you slide down the other side.



FOCUSED BREATHING

AGES 5 AND UP

Purpose: calm down strategy when angry, overwhelmed or upset

Calming Cocoa

Materials: paper mug cut-out, adhesive paper marshmallows



- We're going to relax and enjoy a nice cup of hot chocolate. Ouch! It's so hot that it's burning my tongue. We're going to have to cool it down first.
- Let's hold our mug close to our mouth and breathe in through the nose at a slow count of 5. At each count, feel the delicious smell of hot chocolate get deeper and deeper and your hands get warmer and warmer. Hold that smell and enjoy it for a few seconds.
- Make an O shape with your mouth, puff your cheeks, and slowly blow on the hot cocoa for 5 seconds to cool it down.
- After each round of breathing, stick on a paper marshmallow to the top of the mug; continue breathing and adding marshmallows until you feel calmer and your hot chocolate is full!

Blowing Bubbles (you can choose to practice this with real bubbles)

- We're going to try blowing some bubbles today!
- Pretend you have a bubble blower in front of your mouth. Take a deep breath and blow out soft and long to create a big bubble. Imagine the bubble growing bigger and bigger the longer you blow. Try to see how big you can make it!

Belly Breath

- Place one hand on your belly and the other hand on chest
- As you slowly breathe in, notice how the chest and belly rises like a balloon growing
- As you slowly breathe out, notice how the chest and belly falls like a balloon deflating

Smell Flower + Blow Candle

- It's your birthday today! You've got flowers in one hand and a birthday candle in the other.
- Let's first take a deep breath through the nose and smell the flower. Hold that smell for as long as you can
- Make a wish and then blow out the candle strongly, forming an O shape with your mouth

FOCUSED BREATHING

AGES 5 AND UP

Purpose: calm down strategy when angry, overwhelmed or upset

Washing Machine Breath

“sniffffff and swishhh swishhh swishhh”

- Sit cross-legged, and point your pointer fingers toward each other in front of your mouth. Breathe in deeply through the nose.
- As you exhale out through the mouth, pretend your breath is starting up a washing machine--swirl the fingers around in circles (like a washing machine) and make swishing noises

Hot Air Balloon Breath

- We're going to pretend we're a hot air balloon. Let's cup our hands around our mouths and breathe deeply into the palms. Do you feel them getting warm? Our hot air balloon is heating up
- As we breathe out through our mouth, we'll expand our hands outward, as if the hot air balloon is growing bigger. Then, we can press our palms together and let them, and the hot air, float away

Color Breathing

- As we gently breathe in, let's imagine a happy, calm color going inside us--like the golden color of the sun or a bright color of your favorite fruit juice. Imagine it spreading to every corner inside us and taking over any sad feelings. Hello happiness!
- Now we'll get rid of the sad feelings. As we breathe out, imagine a color that represents stress or sadness for you--a color you don't like--slowly leaving your body like watercolor. Goodbye, sadness.

YOGA GAMES

AGES 5 AND UP

Purpose: focus on creativity and balance

Build-a-Pose Yoga Game

- I'll call out an object (for example: banana, table, chair) and you have to come up with a unique pose that represents the object!

Red-Yellow-Green Light Yoga Game

- I (the parent) will be the "traffic light" in this game and you (the child) will start at one corner of the room
- When the traffic light says "GREEN", use yoga poses* to travel as far as possible to the other side of the room
- When the traffic light says "YELLOW", perform yoga poses on the same spot without travelling forward
- When the traffic light says "RED", freeze into a yoga pose
- Let's switch roles now: this time, you can be the traffic light

Freeze Glance

- I'll be the "grandmother"; I will face the wall, turned away from you
- You (and other participants) will quietly tip toe around the room
- When I (the "grandmother") turns around, however, you must freeze into a yoga pose that resembles an object (ex. tree, boat, downward dog, cobra, table, lotus...) so that I feel like I'm just looking around at scenery
- After a few rounds, let's switch roles--you can be the grandmother

Yogi Says (Spin-off of "Simon Says")

- I'll start first as the "yogi" and instruct you to do a certain yoga pose, starting the sentence with "Yogi says..."
- If I don't start with "Yogi says," you have to stay in place
- Once the first mistake is made, we'll switch roles. You become the yogi

* You may find visuals of yoga poses in [books](#) or [online resources](#). Please note that these are intended to be examples, and not resources we are specifically endorsing.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

RESOURCES BY SOURCES OF STRENGTH (SOS)*

*We provide a hyperlink to an online version of each of these resources.

COLORING ACTIVITIES: (6+ years)

- [Tangled Ball of Emotions](#)
- [Strength Check-In](#)

WELLNESS GAMES (8+ years)

- [Quingo \(Quarantine-Bingo!\)](#)
- [Strengths Board Game](#)

JOURNAL OF JOY (10+ years)

- Use a physical or online journal and set a date and time to write
 - your strengths, a positive event, something you're grateful for, something you're working towards improving, and/or something you're looking forward to
- If struggling for ideas to free-write, check out the Blob Tree
 - Which blob are you today? Why?
- [Mental Wellbeing Guide by SOS for Elementary School Students \(Holiday Edition\)](#)
- [Self-Care Reflection](#)
- [Wellness Checklist \(includes wellness apps and videos\)](#)
- [Child Life On Call \(www.childlifepodcast.com\)](http://www.childlifepodcast.com)

FEEL-GOOD SPOTIFY PLAYLISTS (Click to access online)

- [CALMING PLAYLIST](#)
- [COPING PLAYLIST](#)
- [CONNECTING PLAYLIST](#)
- [CREATIVITY PLAYLIST](#)

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

STORYBOOKS TO READ ALOUD

Friendship

- *Baby Blue*
- *Friends Always*
- *Peanut Butter and Jellyous*

Loneliness:

- *The Hugging Tree*
- *The Very Lonely Bathtub*

Worry/Nervousness/Sadness:

- *Too Shy to Say Hi*
- *The Not-So-Scary Dog*
- *What to Do When You Worry Too Much*
- *A Feel Better Book for Little Tears*
- *Mindful Bea and the Worry Tree*
- *The Tallest Bridge in the World*

Feelings:

- *Today I Feel Silly: And Other Moods That Make My Day*
- *Box of Butterflies*

Belonging:

- *Home For A While*
- *The Missing Feeling*
- *Sophie's Shell*

Mindfulness:

- *Green Green: A Community Gardening*
- *I am Peace: A Book of Mindfulness*
- *A World of Pauseabilities: An Exercise in Mindfulness*

* Please note that this is meant to be a sample list of storybooks. It is not an exhaustive list, nor a list of books that we are specifically endorsing. We provide a hyperlink to one location you may find each book online, though we are not endorsing any specific retailer.

Therapeutic Activity for Kids!

5 Senses Preparation

WHAT YOU NEED:

- Something that smells good (essential oil, lotion, etc.)
- Something that you can rub (something smooth, bumpy, etc.)
- Your favorite candy
- Headphones
- Something that makes you smile
- A bag

WHAT YOU DO:

1. **Introduce the activity.** You can ask your child if they've ever heard about the 5 senses before (touch, taste, smell, hear, and see). You can tell them that they will be putting a favorite item for each sense in a bag.
2. **Pick something for touch.** This could be anything from a squishy ball, some slime, or even a smooth stone.
3. **Pick something for taste.** This should be small enough that the child can fit this in the bag. Perhaps a favorite lollipop, hard candy, or some gum.
4. **Pick something for hear.** We recommend headphones so you can listen to your favorite jam!
5. **Pick something for sight.** Grab something that makes you smile. Perhaps it's a favorite stuffed animal, a small toy, a note from a friend, etc.
6. **Design the bag.** Let your child know that the bag is for them to design any way they like.

ACTIVITY GOALS:

1. Provides the child with a chance to be creative.
2. Allows for effective coping skills to use that are picked out by the child themselves.

More resources at

<https://www.childlifepodcast.com/>



"Children
see magic
because
they look for
it."

- Christopher
Moore



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Therapeutic Activity for Kids!

5 Nature Scavenger Hunt!

WHAT YOU NEED:

- Park, beach, backyard, or hiking trail as a setting for your hunt
- List of items to find
- Bag to put items in

WHAT YOU DO:

1. **Choose a setting for your hunt.** This can be a beach, a hiking trail, your backyard, or a park – anywhere you can get out of the house and see the natural world
2. **Make a list.** Depending on the setting of your hunt, you can customize a list of items for your child or children to find. You can include items to collect and items for them to point out (like a bird!)
3. **Start the hunt.** Ready, set, go! It's time for your kids to use their senses to find the items on their list. These items could include sticks, rocks, and seashells (if you are at a beach!). For younger kids, you can verbally give them items to find as you go along.
4. **Ask your child or children what their favorite finds were.** This gives them a chance to show you what they especially loved about getting out in nature
5. **Ask them how getting out in nature makes them feel.** If you want to talk to your kids specifically about mindfulness and the healing power of nature, this is a great way to start!

ACTIVITY GOALS:

1. Teach children mindfulness
2. Engage children's senses
3. Offer refreshment through a change of scenery

More resources at

<https://www.childlifepodcast.com/>



"In every walk with nature, one receives far more than he seeks."

- John Muir



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Therapeutic Activity *for teens!*

Journaling Prompts

WHAT YOU NEED:

- Journal / paper
- Pen / pencil
- Open mind!

WHAT YOU DO:

1. **Journaling can look different for everyone** - Some prefer on the bus on the way to school, others have a designated time in bed. It's up to you.
2. Utilize one of these prompts and simply respond on paper in whatever way feels right.
3. **Prompts:**
 - When you look at yourself in the mirror, what are your thoughts on your reflection? How does looking at yourself make you feel?
 - Describe your hobbies and interests, why are those important to you?
 - Write ten positive affirmations and read them out loud to yourself, how does it make you feel to hear these?
 - If you could swap lives with another person, who would you choose and why?
 - Describe your day-to-day life, what are your favorite parts about your day? What would you like to change?
4. Some of these are going to feel silly. The whole idea is to just **take time in reflection mode**. Once you do this more often and take value from it, you can even try journaling without a prompt.

ACTIVITY GOALS:

1. Learn and utilize reflection skills
2. Build self-esteem / awareness
3. Develop language surrounding complex emotions

More resources at

<https://www.childlifepodcast.com/>



"You can't
use up
creativity.
The more
you use, the
more you
have."

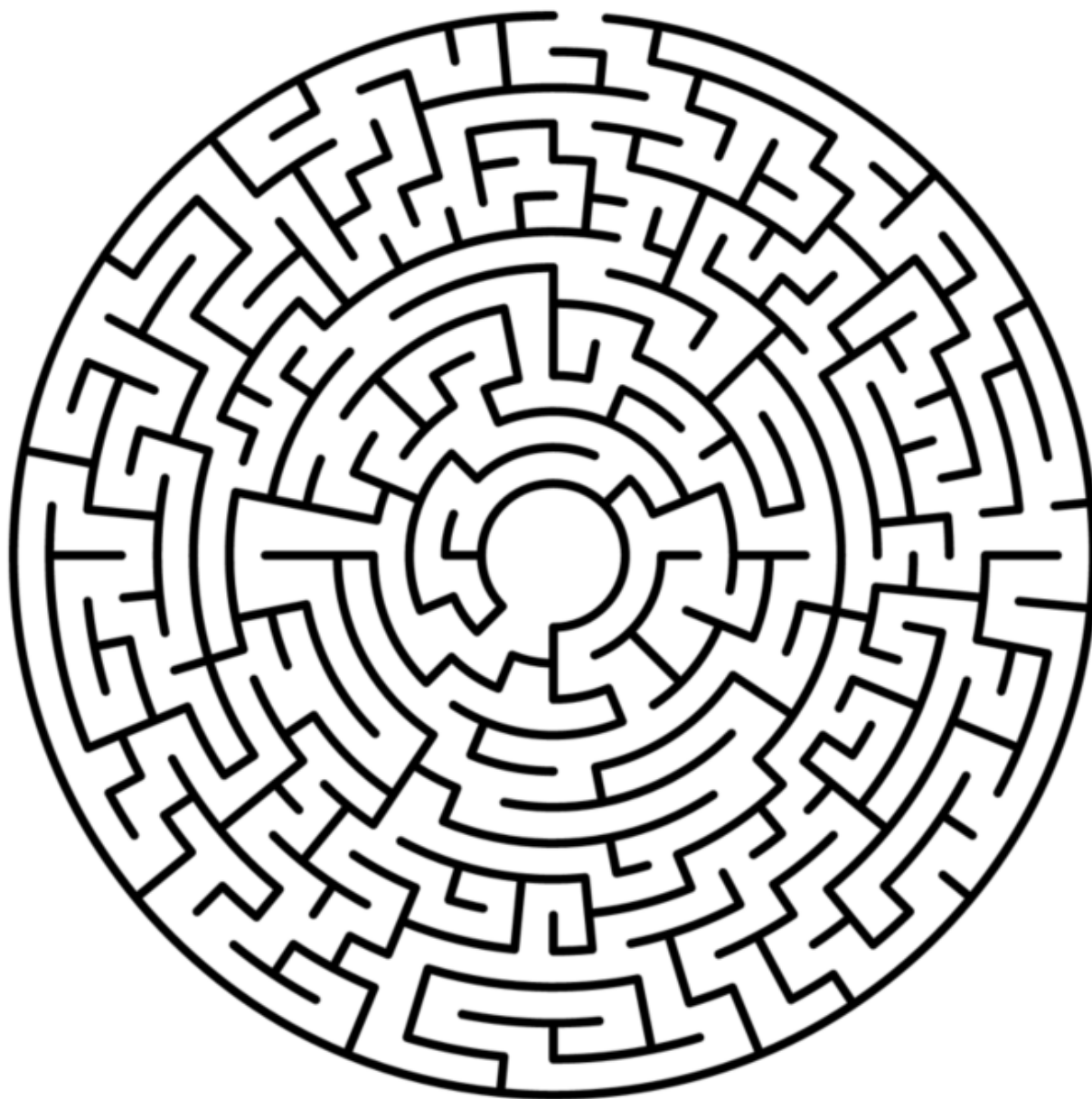
- Maya
Angelou



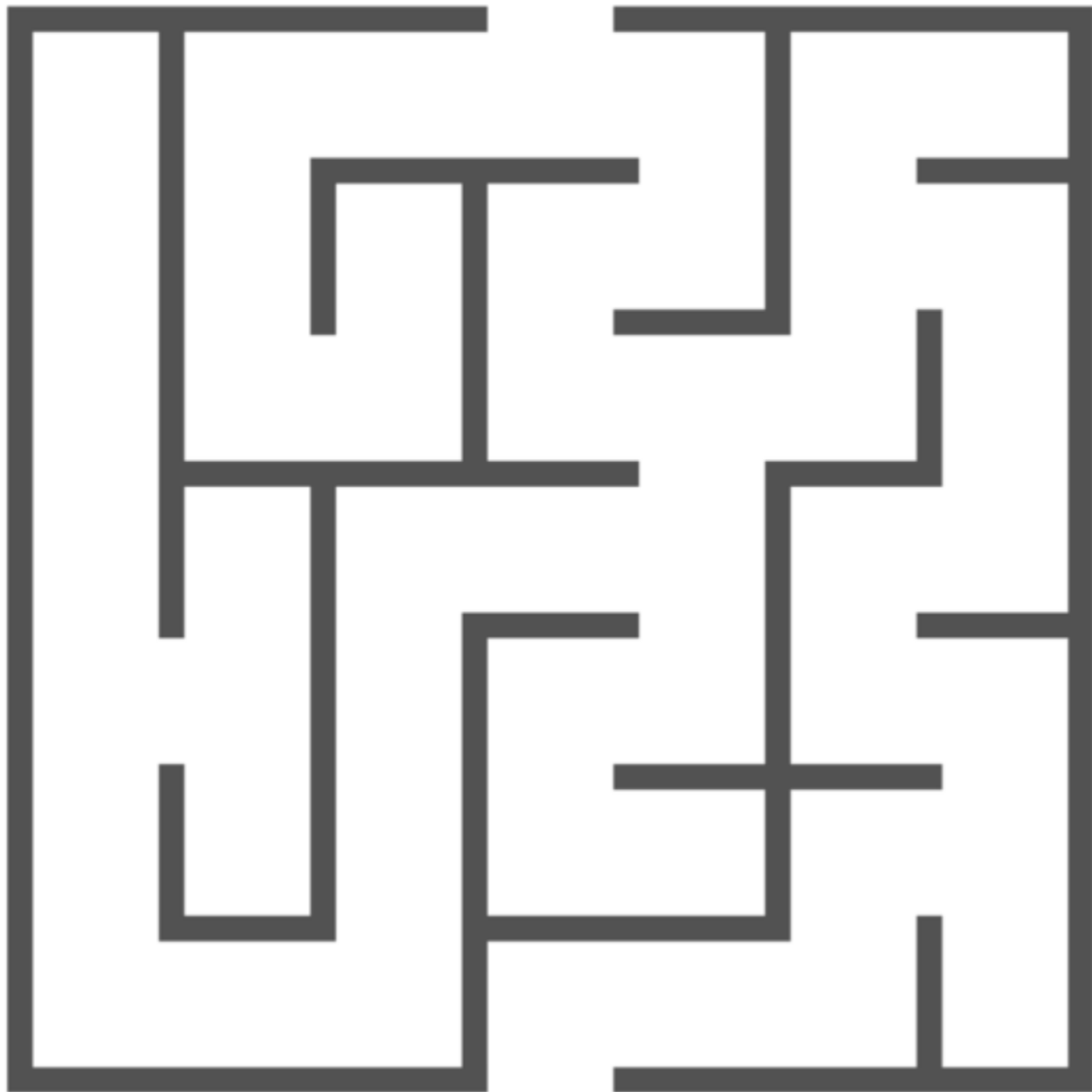
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EXTRAS



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