Mindfulness Practices for
Big Feelings and Negative Self-Talk

Many young people struggle with big feelings and negative self-talk—thoughts that tell them they aren't good enough, that something bad is about to happen, or that they can't handle what's in front of them.

Mindfulness practices aren't about making those thoughts disappear. Instead, they help kids slow down long enough to notice what's happening in their minds and bodies, and to begin relating to their thoughts with curiosity rather than fear.
The strategies in this guide are meant to support adults in teaching kids a powerful skill: learning to recognize a thought when it shows up, and remembering that they don't have to believe or follow every thought their mind produces.

A Note on Support and Safety

Mindfulness and meditation strategies are not a replacement for medical or mental health care.
If you are concerned about a child's safety, well-being, or risk of harm to themselves or others, it's important to seek support from medical or mental health professionals right away. The strategies shared here are intended as everyday tools that can support emotional awareness and resilience—not as treatment for clinical depression or anxiety.

Practical Strategies to Help Reframe Thoughts

Name It to Tame It (Thought Labeling)

Helps With: Negative self-talk and spiraling worries

How to do it: When a child shares a negative thought, gently help them label it and decide what comes next:
- "That sounds like a worried thought..." [Pause]
- "Does that thought feel helpful right now, or would you rather let it pass?"

Why it works: Labeling creates distance. The child isn't the thought—they're the one noticing it. If they'd like to try letting it pass, you might suggest the *Thought Clouds* exercise.

Thought Clouds (Visualization)

Helps With: Kids who get stuck in negative thought loops

How to do it: Once the child has recognized that their thought is "just a thought" you might help them imagine their thoughts as moving objects such as...
- clouds passing through the sky
- trains moving through a station

You might follow up with something to the effect of: "You can notice the train without getting on it. Some trains aren't going where you want to go."

"Just a Thought" Practice

Helps With: Over-identifying with thoughts ("This is who I am")

How to do it: Teach kids to quietly say to themselves:
- "That's just a thought."
- Younger kids might prefer: "That's just my brain talking."

Note: The goal isn't to stop negative thoughts—just to help loosen their grip and help them move by.

Talking Back to Unhelpful Thoughts

Helps With: Low self-esteem/harsh inner-critics

Help kids practice responding to a thought instead of accepting it:
- "That thought isn't very kind."
- "I don't have to listen to that one."
- "I can notice that thought and realize it's not true."

Core Concept: Thoughts Are Not Facts

One of the most powerful ideas mindfulness offers kids is this: A thought is just a thought, not a fact, or a command. And it's certainly not a prediction of what the future holds. When kids learn to notice thoughts instead of automatically believing them, they gain more choice in how they respond.

IMPORTANT NOTE: This skill takes time and practice, and **works best when adults model it, too**. You probable don't realize how many times you say things like, "Ugh--how could I have been so stupid?!" **out loud** and in front of the young people in your life. When that happens, the most important thing to do is pause, take note of the spoken thought and reframe it. "Actually, that's just a thought and I don't think it's true. Do you think I'm stupid?" Once you've given the other person an opportunity to assure you that they don't think you're stupid at all, you can follow up with something like, "I was feeling frustrated, and that's the first thought that came to my head, but I know that it's not true." This is a perfect example of how to model thought reframing in the moment.