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Summary: "Teens with autism are natural observers--able to study, imitate, and learn social behavior. The Autism Playbook for Teens is designed to empower these strengths with mindfulness strategies and scripts, while also helping teens reduce anxiety, manage emotions, be more aware in the present moment, and connect with others. This book offers a unique, strengths-based approach to help teens with autism and Asperger's develop social skills, strengthen communication, and thrive"-- Provided by publisher.

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foreword

The teenage years are difficult to navigate, and mine were no exception. Back then I could have used some help, but if someone had given me a book about mindfulness I probably would have rolled my eyes. Life was hard enough, and I likely would have bridled against any well-meaning adult who I thought was trying to fix something “wrong” with me. Looking back, I wish I had known a couple of things about mindfulness when I was a teenager, because it has made my adult life much easier.

The authors of this book describe mindfulness as “a way to become more aware of what you’re thinking and feeling so that you can calm yourself, focus, and connect better with yourself and others.” That’s a good description of how mindfulness initially helped me. But, as the years have passed, mindfulness has come to mean much more. Mindfulness has become a way of life. I don’t want to give you the impression that I’m mindful all the time, because I’m not. But mindfulness-based calming strategies allow me to see what’s happening in and around me more clearly, and a mindful worldview reminds me that I can choose to look at life differently than many of my peers. This shift in perspective has made an enormous difference in how I feel and how I respond to challenging situations.

Let me share three aspects of a mindful worldview that have helped me and the children and teens that I’ve taught for over a decade. The first is that actions have consequences. When I was a teenager, plenty of adults told me this, and I thought I knew what they meant. But it turns out that I only understood half of the equation. I was a perfectionist, so it made sense that I interpreted the phrase “actions have consequences” to mean that if things didn’t go right I had done something wrong. I was already pretty hard on myself, so this sage piece of advice turned out to be just another way to beat myself up. I wish I had understood earlier that what’s happening now is the result of causes and conditions that have happened before. Some of what has already happened was in our control, but here’s the point: much of what has already

happened was completely outside of our control. There's absolutely nothing we can do about what's outside of our control, but there's a whole lot we can do about what's in our control. As a teenager, I knew intuitively that my actions were my own. For instance, I understood that if I didn't study for a test and I bombed it, my bad grade was on me. What I didn't understand was that other people's actions were also their own. In other words, I didn't realize that if other kids talked behind my back or treated me badly, it would ultimately have a bigger negative impact on their lives than it would have on mine.

Thoughts have consequences too, and they tend to come before actions. That's the second aspect of a mindful worldview that I wish I had learned earlier on. All too often we believe that we're stuck with our thoughts. We see that they're getting in our way, but we don't believe that there's anything we can do about it. The good news is that's not the case. We can develop a different relationship to thoughts, and when we do, our lives tend to get a whole lot easier.

We know that thoughts lead to actions, and both have consequences. But there's more. The third aspect of a mindful worldview that I'd like to share has to do with what comes before thoughts. Often it's an idea or a worldview that has consequences too. Sometimes we're not aware of it, but the reason we do or say something is motivated by a specific idea. About a decade ago, I was teaching mindfulness to young children and there was a boy in the class who had a medical diagnosis and came to school with a shadow aide. He was uncomfortable sitting in the circle with the other children, so we encouraged him to sit with his shadow aide on a couch nearby. He was welcome to participate, but for the most part he didn't seem interested. Imagine our surprise when the school administrator got a call from the boy's doctor saying that, unbeknownst to us, she had been encouraging him to practice mindfulness-based calming strategies for quite a while but the boy had refused. Something had changed—at his recent appointment the boy taught the doctor a mindfulness activity he had learned in school. When the doctor asked why he had changed his mind, the boy said that he hadn't wanted to do the exercises before because he thought they were only for kids with problems. Now that everyone in his class was practicing mindfulness, he had decided to give it a try. For me, this is a

profound example of how ideas have consequences. The consequence of my student's idea that mindfulness was only for kids with problems got in the way of his learning something new. When he realized his idea was incomplete—that mindfulness was for everybody—he was able to shift his perspective and take advantage of what mindfulness had to offer.

I hope you enjoy this book. It's the culmination of the authors' significant body of work sharing mindfulness with teens. I've been waiting a long time for a practical, wise book on the subject and am delighted that it's here. May it serve children, teens, and families everywhere.

—SUSAN KAISER GREENLAND, JD

*Writer, innovator, parent, mindfulness educator, co-founder of
The Inner Kids Foundation, and author of The Mindful Child*

acknowledgments

We wish to acknowledge our collegial writing partnership and great friendship that embodies the skills and values this book is designed to develop. Our hope is that readers will share the fun, experimentation, focused attention, and playful spirit that went into its creation.

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Dear Teen Reader,

We know that as a teenager, you have to deal with many stressful situations every day. You probably feel overwhelmed and stressed much of the time—sometimes you feel up, sometimes you feel down, and sometimes you just feel stuck in a place you can't get out of. This book will show you how you can reduce stress, calm your nerves, work with frustration, and become better at relating to other people through *mindfulness*. Mindfulness has to do with becoming more aware of what you are thinking and feeling. Learning to use the tools of mindfulness will give you creative ways to calm yourself, focus, and connect better with yourself and others. It can help you recover after you suffer a meltdown or even prevent you from having one in the first place.

We have designed this book for you to use on your own, without needing to be part of a group or a class, to help you learn mindfulness skills by means of imaginative exercises. You can do most of these exercises in the safety and privacy of your own space, such as your bedroom. They are yours to use and customize as you wish; you can practice and play with them to explore different feelings and ways to act in various situations. Even though you can do them on your own, you can also choose to do some or all of them with someone else, such as a friend, a family member, or someone who knows about mindfulness. Most of the exercises probably involve trying something you have never done before, and that might be challenging. We encourage you to just take a deep breath, feel the challenge, and try these new things anyway. By practicing each exercise, you will gain confidence, increase your flexibility, and be able to have more fun with yourself and others.

You may notice that many of the exercises are drawn from the world of acting and theater. Acting exercises can help people with autism learn and practice using knowledge of how people's bodies and faces show their feelings, how people's tones of voice change in different roles, and how different scripts work in different situations to sharpen their relationship skills.

Part I of this book is about calming your body and mind. Part II teaches you to use your thoughts and feelings in ways that will help you become more independent. Part III is about reaching out

to connect with others. If you work through the parts and chapters in order, and build your skills by practicing the exercises, by the end of this book you will be able to go out and start creating the kinds of relationships you want to have.

We wish to assure you, however, that you don't have to change who you are to use this book. Being a teen on the autism spectrum, you are a unique, creative, energetic person. As you try out the exercises, just be yourself and see how they work. They are meant to build on the strengths of your creativity and imagination, and, when you put them into practice, you may discover you have even more strengths than you thought. We invite you to bring your curiosity, courage, and imagination as you experiment with being mindful.

Enjoy!

CAROL AND IRENE

Dear Parents, Teachers, Counselors, and Other Professionals,

We are two licensed psychologists with over forty years of experience between us in the fields of autism and mindfulness. Given our many years of connection and our mutual respect for each other's work, we decided to team up to offer mindfulness tools with imagination-based exercises specifically for teens with autism.

The need for such a book has never been greater. The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) estimates that one in every sixty-eight children in the United States has been diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), the highest prevalence since the CDC started tracking it in 2000, at which time the estimate was one in one hundred fifty. Parents and professionals are concerned with this dramatic increase.

This book uses mindfulness to develop skills that will help teens with autism live a fuller and more engaged life. It does so through appealingly playful exercises tailored to help teenagers reduce stress and anxiety, recover from meltdowns, constructively channel their emotional energies, and reach out to connect with others in positive ways. The exercises, designed to be practiced in various ways in a variety of settings, take into account the unique perspectives, sensory issues, neurological strengths, and challenges that teens with autism bring to their

encounters with the social world. We seek to facilitate authentic engagement and awareness, leading to social interactions that are rewarding, interesting, and fun. Each exercise encourages a creative, playful approach but is grounded in well-documented clinical observations and recent empirical studies. Their design takes into account the real neurological differences of this special population and the unique approach needed to connect with and inspire these exceptional and fabulous teenagers.

This book is intended especially for teens on the autism spectrum who have some verbal language capacity (expressive and receptive language skills) and will be of value for parents, teachers, and other professionals who work with children, teenagers, and young adults on the autism spectrum.

Although this book is designed for teens to be able to use by themselves, parents and caregivers of teens on level 1 of the autism spectrum (*DSM-5*) may want to partner with teens to use this book as a resource. They can easily help teens practice the mindfulness exercises at home and adapt them to their own family context. Teachers, therapists, coaches, and counselors can use this book to work with teens individually or in groups, in educational and/or therapeutic contexts.

This book is structured so that readers will build skills sequentially, so please advise your teen to go through the chapters in order. The exercises are designed for teenagers to do on their own, and we recommend that you give your teen the freedom to practice in the comfort of his or her own private space, at his or her own pace.

The book is organized in three parts. Part I is about calming the body and mind. The exercises in these chapters build an essential foundation for the mindfulness skills that will be taught in the remainder of the book. Part II contains specific exercises related to noticing thoughts and feelings and using thoughts and feelings in positive ways. This is important for building independence and preparing for the work in part III, which is about reaching out to connect with others.

We hope you enjoy this book. Feel free to make creative adaptations as you wish.

Warmly,

Chapter 1

just breathe: focus and calm yourself

Usually, as soon as he gets up to go to school, Daniel starts to become nervous. Even if he has slept well, didn't have any nightmares, has finished all his homework, and doesn't have any tests that day, he starts to feel panicky and a little bit sick. He can hardly catch his breath. He can't understand why he feels this way. It just seems to be something he is stuck with. He hates feeling like this, which makes it even worse. His mother tells him to relax, but he can't.

Most days, Daniel stays in bed until his mother has given him several warnings and then starts yelling at him to get up. This makes him feel even more nervous. By the time he comes out of his room, he doesn't even feel like eating breakfast. This makes his mother even more upset.

Daniel just can't figure out how to start the school day without this terrible feeling. He wishes he had a way to calm himself when he wakes up feeling nervous.

Like Daniel, you may find that you have a lot of difficulty calming down when you feel nervous or stressed out. You might not know where this feeling is coming from or why it is happening. You might feel anxious or nervous often, even when there is nothing going on that is bothering you. If so, you aren't alone. Many teens with autism (and many teens without autism) are sometimes unexplainably nervous. But you can do something about it: you can learn how to calm yourself.

The amazing thing about calming yourself is that it only takes less than a minute. And you don't need anything special. All you have to do is use something that you have with you at all times: your breath!

That's right—you can develop a simple skill for calming

yourself during times of stress by using your breath. The exercises in this chapter will help you develop your relaxation skills so that you can calm down when you need or want to, by just breathing naturally and focusing your attention on your breathing.

At first, it may feel odd to practice breathing, since you have been breathing your whole life. What is different in this case is that you are using your breathing on purpose, as a way to calm yourself.

The first exercise is a simple way to get to know your breath, get comfortable with your breathing, notice changes in your breathing, and feel at ease with your breathing from one moment to the next.

You can practice this exercise while sitting down or standing up. As with most of the exercises in this book, we recommend you try it first in a quiet place, without distractions. Once you get into the rhythm of your breathing, you can try doing this exercise while you are walking around.

Noticing is one of the most powerful tools you have for gathering information and learning about what's going on inside you as well as around you. You will have the opportunity to practice “noticing” in nearly all the exercises in this book. When you “notice” something, you just observe it—just become aware that it is there.

Exercise 1.1: Breathing In and Out with Ease

(Note: If it is comfortable for you, try this and the other breathing exercises in this book with your eyes closed. You can also choose to keep your eyes open, if that works better for you.)

Notice how your body is breathing right now. Don't try to change the way you are breathing right now in any way; just breathe naturally. You probably don't normally think of your body (and not you) as doing the breathing, but try noticing—observing—

how your whole body is breathing in this moment. You might not realize it right now, but each breath is different from the breath that came before it. Try to notice this too. Again, as you do this exercise, don't try to change the way you are breathing right now in any way. What you will be changing in this exercise is where you focus your attention. Using the steps below, first, you will practice focusing your attention on your nose. Then, you will focus on your chest. Take your time doing each step. Each step is a useful and important part of calming yourself. **Focus on the sensations of breathing at the tip of your nose.** Breathing in and out through your nose, focus your attention on the physical sensations of the air moving in and out of your nostrils at the tip of your nose. Close your eyes, if you wish to. As you breathe in, notice the sensation of air moving into your nose. How does it feel? Notice the temperature of the air. Listen to any sound that the air makes as it comes into your nose. As you breathe out, notice the sensation of air moving out of your nose. Don't try to force more air out than usual; just let the out-breath take as long as it takes. You might notice a slight change in the temperature of the air as you breathe out, because the inside of your body has warmed the air. You might also notice a soft sound as your breath moves out through your nose. Continue breathing, focusing on the sensations at the tip of your nose. Are you surprised that there is so much to experience and learn simply as you breathe? While you are doing this exercise, you will find that you naturally become more relaxed on each out-breath. You are practicing your ability to calm yourself every time you move your attention to the sensations of your breath moving in and out. **Focus on the sensations of breathing in your chest.** Keep breathing naturally, then shift your attention so that you start noticing sensations in your chest area. Focus your attention on the physical sensations of breathing that you can notice in this part of your body. As you breathe in, notice how your chest rises. Notice how your shoulders seem to float upward. As you breathe out, notice how your chest falls back down. Feel your shoulders moving downward. Notice any sensations of relaxation in your body that are present as you breathe out. Breathing out brings a natural sense of calm and relaxation to the body, which you will probably notice.

You can focus on your breathing for as long as you wish.

You can do it many times each day. In doing so, you are learning and practicing the skills of paying attention and relaxing through breathing.

Now that you have practiced calming yourself by *focusing on your breath* without changing it in any way, here are some exercises for you to do using your imagination to play with your breath. In each exercise, you will imagine a different situation. Notice the different sensations in your body with each experience, and use your breath to help you stay calm while you are doing this.

Exercise 1.2: "Snow Breathing"

Focus your attention on the air moving in and out of your nose. Close your eyes if you wish to, and imagine that snow is falling lightly all around you.

Concentrate on your in-breaths. Every time you breathe in, imagine crisp, frozen air entering your nose and filling spaces in your head with an exciting sensation of being "wide awake." Let yourself fully experience this "wide awake" sensation as you breathe in and out three times, noticing the feeling of "awake" each time you breathe in and the feeling of calm each time you breathe out.

If you want to play more with this, imagine big crunchy snowflakes coating parts of your body, shining in the sunlight as more flakes swirl beautifully around you, while you breathe in crisp, cold air. Does this imagery make you feel like smiling?

When some people get nervous, they feel hot and sweaty, even on a cold day. If this happens to you when you are about to go somewhere, such as to the movies with a friend, you might

choose to play with “snow breathing.” Imagining the coolness of the snow while focusing on your breathing will help you calm down.

Exercise 1.3: “Breeze Breathing”

Begin by breathing the way you did when you focused on your chest in exercise 1.1, feeling the sensation of your chest rising and falling as your breath flows in and out of your body. Now, focus your attention on the sound of your breathing. Does it sound somewhat like a soft breeze? Close your eyes if you wish to, and imagine that the air you are breathing in is a soft breeze. Can you feel the softness in your chest?

Notice the different sounds the air makes as it goes in and out. Notice the sensations of softness filling your chest as it expands on every in-breath. Imagine that you are standing or sitting in a comfortable spot while a light breeze is blowing. Breathe in and out naturally. Listen for the sounds of your breathing. Feel the softness of the breeze.

Let the sounds and sensations of your breathing calm your mind and body.

Any time that you feel too crowded or “closed in,” “breeze breathing” can help you relax and open to feel the soft breeze flowing through you. For example, if you suddenly start to feel nervous while trying to get to your locker in a crowded hallway at school, focusing on the sounds of your breathing while imagining feeling a soft, gentle breeze might help you become calm and relaxed as you find your way.

You can now use the sounds and sensations of your body—what happens naturally—to help you relax. Any time that you want to calm down, remember that you can just focus your mind