

# The "I Am" Project™

## Proyekt "Ani" / פרויקט "אני"

Integrating Meditation and Contemplative Practice into the classroom



## QUEST FOR TEACHING EXCELLENCE CONFERENCE

### Materials

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## WHAT IS THE “I AM” PROJECT?

The goal of The “I Am” Project is to foster stronger and more confident students by teaching them tools that access their strengths, talents, and abilities. This teaches them to create the realities they desire, heal wounds and past traumas, and become compassionate, productive, and self-reliant adults. “I Am” teaching takes every aspect of a student into consideration so that he or she may grow, move through any internal blocks or obstacles that may have manifested, and that may be confronted physically. Students learn valuable strategic thinking and the ability to trust in key natural instincts.

Students guide the teaching in accordance with what they need, and learn techniques to help them manage stress and experience their emotions in a healthy and safe way. They practice being supportive and respectful through tools that teach them to slow down, notice, and work with their own experience. They learn to experience how their own mind-body-heart-spirit system works, and therefore learn how to work more productively with themselves.

The “I Am” Project consists of in-class workshops for students to develop self-awareness through a combination of breathing and meditation, contemplative practice, and creative expression.

## WHAT IS PROYEKT “ANI” / פרויקט “אני”?

The goal of Proyekt “Ani” is to create safe spaces to bring students into themselves, to connect with their spiritual self, to help them become more resilient, deal with life’s ups and downs, and embrace their uniqueness. This is translated through a series of in-class workshops for students to develop self-awareness through a combination of breathing and meditation, contemplative practice, and creative expression. Along with the workshops, this curriculum offers tools, practices for in and outside the classroom, conversations, and teaching guides for incorporating contemplative practices into the Jewish Day School classroom.

*Proyekt “Ani”* aims to give Jewish students practical and relevant tools to relieve stress, manage social anxiety, and express emotions in healthy ways. The tools are built upon a foundation of positive psychology, mindfulness training, and movement methodologies as well as an in depth study of Jewish Spirituality, the Jewish Day School structure, and the spiritual themes of the Jewish year. While some of the tools are workshops in and of themselves, many of the practices are designed to integrate with *Tefilah* (prayer), and with the ongoing themes of each Jewish month.

Teaching these practices in the classroom and weaving it into their already existing studies embeds them into their way of being and enables long term, sustainable success. The goal of this guide is to offer strategies for students to appreciate time for introspection and quiet, and to become more adept at managing stress. It presents an opportunity for the teacher to bring in a scheduled time to welcome balance and harmony to the classroom. Practicing these exercises with children sends the message that their inner realities are valuable and sacred, and doing them regularly ensures that they receive the benefits they can provide.

## BENEFITS OF MEDITATION AND CONTEMPLATIVE PRACTICE FOR KIDS

Meditation is the act of quieting the mind and the body in order to connect with the heart and the spirit. Meditation helps children connect with themselves by allowing them a moment to tune in to their bodies, calm their thoughts, and quiet their minds. The powerful realization that they can connect with their body through their breath is often enough to have a remarkable difference in the way that kids handle stress. Surveys conducted by The “I Am” Project™ workshops that ran from 2012- 2016 in schools in New York City and Philadelphia, found that 85% of students cited breathing and meditation as the prevailing tool in helping them find calm and connect with their body. Teaching kids to connect to their breathing allows them to become aware of their bodily rhythms, and regulate their level of stress.

### WHAT IS STRESS?

Stress is a state of mental, emotional, or physical tension that results from adverse or very demanding circumstances. The word, “tension” is an important one in this context because many of the contemplative tools that follow work function on the basic tenet of relieving tension in one of the four bodies – physical, emotional, psychological, and spiritual. When stress is demonstrated as a tangible “tension”, tending to it becomes more accessible.

Stress affects every system in the body, from the muscles and skeleton, to the respiratory system, cardiovascular system, and digestive system. The body is an organism that relies on clear and balanced communication between all of its systems to function harmoniously. In addition, overall wellbeing is connected with mental, emotional, and spiritual wellbeing. When there is chronic stress, there is a breakdown in the organism, which can lead to physical ailments, illness, depression, and reduced ability to function, communicate, and take part in every day activities.

# פרויקט "אני" / "Proyekt Ani" Meditation in the Classroom



## What is it?

- Meditation and self-awareness practices
- Contemplative practice, emotional regulation tools into the student's existing school day.
- Encourage student's natural spiritual curiosity
- Creates a safe container for inner exploration

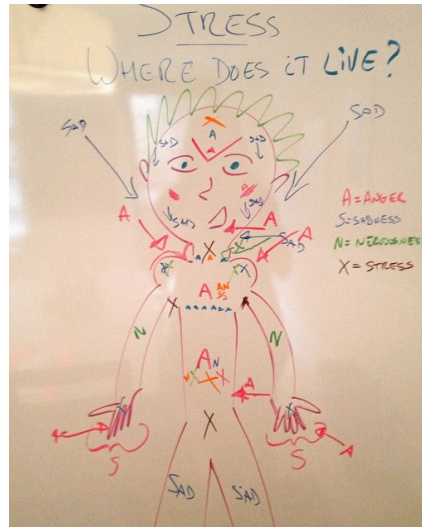
## What does it look like?

- **Daily practices:** *Neshima* (נְשִׁימָה) - breathing exercise  
*Mudaut* (מִוְדָּעוּת) - body/awareness exercises
- **Rosh Khodesh** (ראש חודש) workshops: connecting the *Hineini* (self-awareness) practices to the themes and messages of the current Jewish month
- **Pinat Shalom ve Ahava** (פינת שלום ואהבה) - a place in the school designate as a place for peace, reflection, and quiet time.

## How this benefits my student:

- Self awareness and deeper understanding of self
- Teaches students to find a "pause button"
- Improved focus and ability to concentrate in class
- Ability to manage stress
- Respond to stressful situations in productive ways
- Ability to observe and regulate emotional reactions
- Awareness of thoughts, habits, and behavior patterns
- Opportunity for deeper understanding, communication, and mutual sharing between teachers and students

## THE “I AM” PROJECT™: EMOTIONAL BODY MAPS



(“Emotional Body Maps”, The “I Am” Project™, 2015)

The ability to identify and understand how the body interprets the emotions relating to stress empowers students to manage the stress in their body, and in their life. Teaching kids to interpret stress as emotional messages from their bodies allows them to regain control over the situation, relieve the stress, and make informed decisions to resolve the issue at hand. *The “I Am” Project* focuses on the six basic emotions as identified by the research of Paul Ekman: happiness, sadness, anger, surprise, disgust, and fear. A “basic” emotion has a unique physiological expression, has an adaptive value in dealing with fundamental life tasks, and combines with other elements to create more compound and complex emotions.

Through our exploration of quiet awareness and contemplative practices in the classroom, we have determined that teaching kids to interpret stress as emotional messages from their bodies allows them to regain control over the situation, relieve the stress, and make appropriate decisions to resolve the issue.

How do the messages in your body inform your brain? Our brains are wired to response to stimulus from our bodies. When we feel something, it begins as a physical reaction and culminates as a neurological response.

## THE “I AM” PROJECT CLASS ELEMENTS:

### GUIDED BREATHING and MEDITATION

Breathing exercises aimed at teaching kids how to access inner calm and quiet the voices of stress. The exercises connect kids with their bodies and include meditation, visualization, and guided breathing exercises.

### MINDFUL MOVEMENT

Exercises adapted from fitness practices to target areas in the body that hold tension and stress. The movements, which stem from exercises in dance, diving, yoga, boxing, and team sports - allow students to connect to their body. These encourage focus, center, balance, and discipline.

### EMOTIONAL SCENES

Developed by Yali Szulanski, these scenes are active classroom skits that allow students real-life practice of the tools. The roles allow for different perspective and participation in how to resolve a stressful situation or conflict.

### CREATIVE EXPRESSION

Tools which include writing, drawing, poetry, song, and video creation. Students are encouraged to express their emotions by tapping into their innate talents and exploring new ways of allowing their voices to be heard.

### SELF-REFLECTION

Students monitor their progress through guided journaling exercises both in the classroom and at home. This provides them a safe space to reflect on their emotions and track their growth.

### CREATIVE EXPRESSION

Tools which include writing, drawing, poetry, song, and video creation. Students are encouraged to express their emotions by tapping into their innate talents and exploring new ways of allowing their voices to be heard.

### DISCUSSION

Students are encouraged to share and discuss what they've experienced with the class. Here, they are able to get peer support, and guidance.

## **Lesson 1: I Am Here – Sample In-Class Workshop**

### **1. I Am Here (Intro Workshop)**

**Tools:** Intro to Breathing, Movement, and Creative expression as stress relief.

This workshop teaches students to start thinking about the question, “What does it mean to be here?” By introducing the students to meditation and breathing as tools for presence and awareness. It also starts to play with the notion of energy moving through the body as emotion and how movement can be used to tend to stress in healthy ways. They will be encouraged to start thinking about what it means to be who they are by listening to their bodies.

#### **GOALS:**

To start thinking about the question, “what does it mean to be here?” By Introducing the students to meditation and breathing as a tools for presence and awareness, they will be encouraged to start thinking about what it means to be where they are in their lives.

### **Introducing the Tools**

#### **Grounding:**

Students are asked to sit in their seats, clear their notebooks. Ask the students to close their eyes and focus on their breath. They are asked to feel their bodies on the chairs, feel how their feet are on the ground. Where are their arms? How do their heads feel? Are they heavy? Ask them to focus on their spine and imagine it as a strong column that holds their strength and power.

#### **Breathing:**

Ask the students to pay attention to their breath

Is it deep? Is it shallow? Is it quiet? Is it loud?

Do they have to think about it or do they breathe on their own?

Ask the students to follow their breath as it enters their body.

Where does it go? Is it only in their lungs or do they feel it in their heart? Their arms, their legs, head...etc.?

Ask the students to send the breath up to the top of their head and gradually work your way down until the breath gradually reaches their toes. Tell them to send their breath down into the ground. Ask them to imagine that they are trees, growing roots into the ground. This helps in imagining presence, centeredness in the room.

To come back, ask them to watch their breath as it returns to normal, becoming steady again. When they are ready, to open their eyes.

#### **Creative Check-in:**

##### **Active Listening**

Starting clockwise, ask students to partner with the person sitting next to them in the circle. Each student will speak for 2min30sec to their partners and introduce themselves. Ask students to sit and listen actively as their partner speaks.

Questions:

What is your name?/What do you want to be called?

What is something about you that you think is special?

What is a hope/a fear you have for this year?

#### **Presence**

Students then introduce their partner to the circle, until all participants have been introduced.

## Emotional Words

### Naming Emotions

On a board, create space for two lists of words – “Hopes” and “Fears”.

Starting with the “Fears”, ask the class to repeat the fears they heard from their classmates.

List 5 fears and draw lines from them.

For each one, ask the students to name emotions that they feel around them.

Example:

-----Angry  
“I won’t make any friends” -----Sad  
-----Frustrated

Do this until all 5 fears have at least 3 emotions associated with them.

Ask the students what they see in common on the board.

Ask students to pay attention to their bodies as they name each emotion.

Ask students to take a moment to think about this “hope” and call out feelings associated with it.

Example:

--- Anxious  
“I hope to do well in class” --- Happy  
--- Excited

Pick one of the emotions and ask students to feel it in their bodies as they did in the last exercise.

## Movement: I am Emotion (Part I)

### Releasing Tension

Ask students to stand.

Ask them to move around in any way that their bodies feel they need to. Shaking, jumping, swinging their arms and legs.

Encourage them to loosen tension their necks and shoulders by telling them to imagine that they are an “Etch-a-Sketch” or a piece of paper with dust on it and they are shaking out all the dust to create a clean space.

Vary instructions on movements depending on openness of class.

### Visualization

Ask the students to pick one of the emotions

Example: “Sad”

Ask the students to close their eyes and imagine that their bodies are becoming sad.

Ask the students to feel the emotion throughout their bodies. Encourage the students to really think about what they look like when they are sad, what they feel like – what they do or don’t do, what they wear or don’t wear.

Ask the students to start moving their bodies the way they would if they were sad

- do they move fast or slow? Do they use their arms a lot or are they heavy?
- How do their feet feel on the ground? Do they feel like sitting?
- Do their backs hurt?

Ask students to follow their breath into their bodies and into the part of their body that feels “sad” the sharpest.

Ask them, in their minds to ask that part of the body what it needs.

Guide them to come back to the room with their breath and open their eyes.

**Discussion:****How do we use these tools?**

Talk about meditation as a daily tool for calm, centeredness, and awareness.

Talk about creative expression/emotional words as a tool to process and be present in every moment.

Talk about how they can dissect a thought, feeling, emotion that they have and figure out how it makes them feel.

Talk about using mediation to access how their bodies, minds, spirits feel.

Talk about mindful movements as ways to get to know how we react to situations. Getting to know body sensations as related to emotional stimuli during the day.

Talk about the combination and how they can add their own elements to make the meditations, movements, and creativity truly their own process.

**Check-out:**

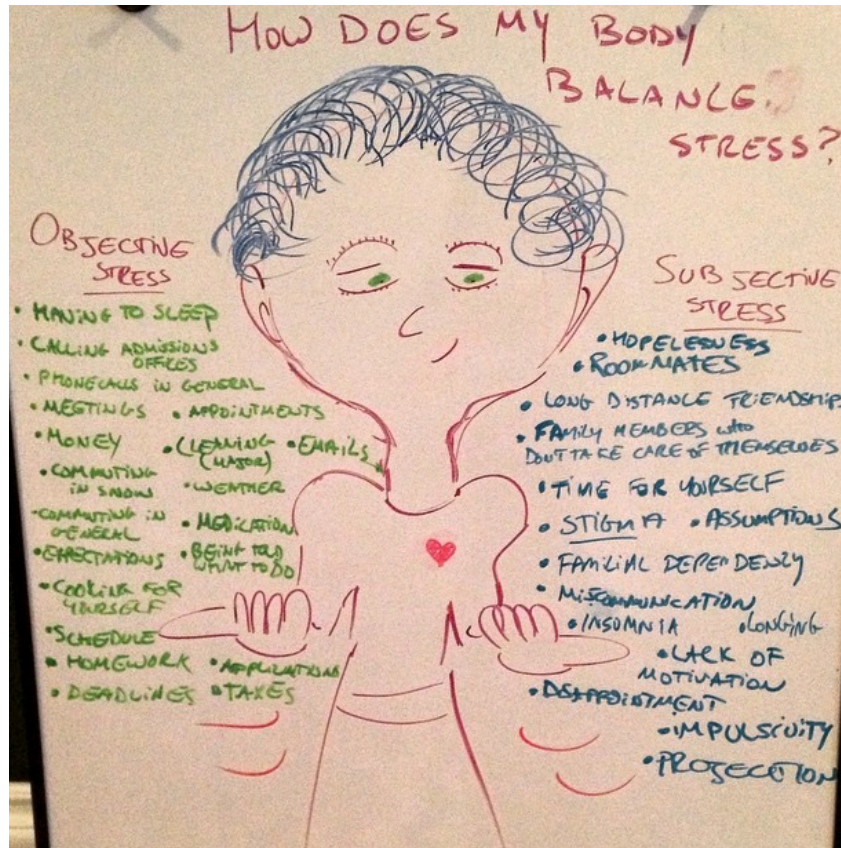
Depending on remaining time, ask students to either pick one of the observations they wrote during the workshop, or think about one of the following questions:

- How do I feel right now?
- What is something I have learned today?
- What is an emotion that I want to try and understand?

## Lesson: Bringing in Balance:

**Tools:** Meditation, Balance Movement Exercises, and Diagraming/Writing Exercises

This workshop teaches how students how to identify the need for balance in their lives, and how to incorporate it into how make decisions. Through mindful breathing, movement, and writing exercises, students explore the types of change in their lives: physical (a move, a new grade, a new team), emotional (anger, sadness, happiness), intellectual (a test, a grade). They learn the significance of approaching decisions with a harmonized/balanced state of mind and self.



NOTES ON HOW YOUR BODY INTERPRETS SOURCES OF STRESS:

**TRAINING NOTES AND OBSERVATIONS:**