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15-Minute Counseling Techniques that Work *What You Didn't Learn in Grad School*

By Allison Edwards

***“The counselor is not the strategy.
The counselor teaches strategies.”***

As counselors, we spend our days helping kids. Kids come to us with a variety of problems, searching for answers outside of themselves. They want us to fix situations, listen to their problems, or give them solutions for the issues they are facing. While these strategies may work temporarily, we really never help kids until we give them tools—or techniques—to manage thoughts and feelings on their own. Our job is not to do it for them. Our job is to teach them how to do it themselves. This is the greatest gift we can give.

HOW TO USE THIS MANUAL:

Each of the techniques in this manual can be used individually or in a group with children ages K–12. In some techniques, I suggest using materials such as clay, yarn, or beads with younger children, but you may be surprised how many older children like to use them as well! You can modify the techniques based on the developmental level of the child and make adjustments depending on the needs of your specific population.

I would recommend teaching only one technique during each counseling session. Then, write each technique on a blank 5x8 index card to send home with the child. This reinforces the technique and helps parents stay involved in what you are doing during sessions.

OTHER IMPORTANT THINGS TO KNOW:

1. **The Relationship is Most Important:** This book is about techniques, but the greatest techniques will not work if you don't first connect with a child. Connection happens in the first few moments of the session when you look at a child and ask, "How are you?" For many kids, this will be the only time they are ever asked that question. From there, you will want to acknowledge where the child is at that moment and create a safe space by showing a child, "I hear you. I believe you. I understand you. I accept you. I respect you." From there, you can begin teaching techniques.
2. **Talk in Numbers:** Techniques will only work if a child is calm enough to use them. In working with any child, develop a number scale to gauge the child's feelings—with 1 being the least intense and 10 being the most intense. A 10 will look very different to each child. Some kids yell at a 10, and other kids shut down and won't talk at all. Help a child determine what their 10 is, what their 5 is, and so on, so you (and they) will know what tools will be effective at which times. Techniques will only be helpful when a child is at an 8 or below. After a child reaches an 8 or above, the child is considered "flooded" and is unable to think clearly or use a technique effectively. When a child is "flooded," they need to reset the brain by changing the five senses. You can help a child identify what spaces inside the school will help them reset. Some kids may benefit from carrying a bandana with drops of lavender oil to smell during the day. Other kids may want to run cool water on their hands in the bathroom. It's important to teach kids when they should use techniques and when they need to reset. It is important to teach parents, administrators, and teachers this as well.
3. **Follow-up:** One of our most important jobs is to help kids become accountable. We can teach effective tools, but if we don't remind children to use them, we won't

prepare them for being able to manage emotions on their own. You can reinforce techniques by following up with the child at the beginning of the next session. Ask the child how the technique is working, how it has been useful, and how often they've used it. The follow-up is important because it makes the child an active participant, promotes buy-in, and helps the child take ownership of managing their feelings.

Now, let's get started!

TECHNIQUE ONE

SQUARE BREATHING

.....





TECHNIQUE ONE

SQUARE BREATHING

MATERIALS NEEDED

5x8 blank index card

WHO CAN BENEFIT

Any child needing to calm the mind and body

WHY IT WORKS

This technique engages both the mind (by counting) and the body (by breathing). When you ask a child to breathe without counting, they will remain focused on the problem. This tool takes the focus off of the problem and allows both the mind and body to relax.

HOW TO IMPLEMENT:

1. On a 5x8 blank index card, draw a square (similar to this example), with Inhale ... 2 ... 3 ... 4 on the top side, Hold ... 2 ... 3 ... 4 on the right side, Exhale ... 2 ... 3 ... 4 on the bottom side, and Rest ... 2 ... 3 ... 4 on the left side.



2. Hold up the 5x8 card and ask the child, "How many sides are there in a square?" When the child answers "four," say, "That's right. Today I am going to show you a technique called Square Breathing. We call it Square Breathing because everything we do is going to be to the count of 4."
3. Explain the activity: "In this activity we are going to relax our minds and our bodies. We're going to take in deep breaths and count on our fingers at the same time." Ask the child to lift up their fingers and count, 1, 2, 3, 4. Then say, "Now let's practice together."
4. Inhale: "Let's start by breathing in for four seconds. Let's pretend you walk into your house and smell chocolate chip cookies baking in the oven. You are going to breathe in that amazing smell for four seconds while counting on your fingers. Ready? Inhale . . . 2 . . . 3 . . . 4."
5. Hold: "Next, let's hold the smell of cookies in our nose. Stay completely relaxed and still. We're going to hold our breath for 4 seconds. Ready? Hold . . . 2 . . . 3 . . . 4." It's important that children do not puff their cheeks out or hold any tension in their body during this step. If they do, redirect them back to a relaxed face that is holding the sweet smell of chocolate chip cookies in their nose.
6. Exhale: "Now, let's slowly breathe out like we are blowing on the chocolate chip cookies to cool them. Let's count to four, using our fingers. Ready? Exhale . . . 2 . . . 3 . . . 4."
7. Rest: "Now, let's rest for four seconds, letting our bodies relax. You can count on your fingers. Ready? Rest . . . 2 . . . 3 . . . 4."
8. Repeat this four-step sequence three times in a row with the child until you feel they have mastered all four steps.
9. Wrap up the activity by saying, "This activity will help us go from feeling like uncooked spaghetti (hold your body very straight and rigid, modeling how this would look) to feeling like cooked spaghetti (move your arms and body

around loosely). If you've ever held uncooked spaghetti, you know it will break or snap under any amount of pressure, but cooked spaghetti is flexible and able to handle a lot of pressure. Use Square Breathing when you are feeling a lot of pressure, and you can become like cooked spaghetti!"

10. Create follow-through at home by giving the child the index card and saying, "Now I want you to go home and teach your parents how to do Square Breathing. I also would like you to practice three times in a row each night before bed. This will help you sleep better and learn Square Breathing well enough to use it anytime you need."