

Bloomsburg Theatre Ensemble presents...



**THEATRE IN  
THE CLASSROOM**



# **ZOMBIE THOUGHTS**

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## Why ZOMBIE THOUGHTS?

Mental health is a prominent issue in today's society. This includes GAD and other anxiety disorders, which the Anxiety and Depression Association of America estimates affects 1 in 8 children in the United States. By dispelling misunderstandings surrounding anxiety for the students, teachers and administrators experiencing ZOMBIE THOUGHTS, our hope is to help your school become a safer space for each of its students.

Recent Harvard research (Jones, Brush, Bailey, Brion-Meisels, McIntyre, Kahn, Nelson & Stickle, 2017) shows that social and emotional learning.

(SEL) is comprised of three skills areas:

### Cognitive

- managing and shifting attention
- controlling impulses
- planning and goal setting
- critical thinking

### Emotional

- recognizing and expressing emotions
- regulating emotions and behavior
- empathy

### Social

- understanding social cues
- prosocial behavior
- conflict resolution
- problem solving

SEL skills, essential for student success, work in tandem with beliefs, character, values and personality. They are malleable and sensitive to outside stimuli from infancy through adolescence. When we only focus on cognitive issues without attention to the other components of SEL, major aspects of students' social-emotional development go unsupported. Thus it is crucial to incorporate SEL into classroom activities.

## Will ZOMBIE THOUGHTS make a difference?

SEL interventions impact both social-emotional skills and academic outcomes (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011). They have short and a long-term effect on a child's academic progress, behavioral adjustment and emotional health and well-being.

ZOMBIE THOUGHTS addresses the topic of childhood anxiety and depression, two internalizing behaviors that often go unrecognized in schools.

While externalizing behaviors are more noticeable because they are more likely to lead to school and classroom disruptions, internalizing behaviors are just as serious and are easily overlooked if educators aren't primed to look for, recognize and intervene.

A school environment where SEL learning is a focus both formally (in the relationships between adults and children) and informally (in the overall climate and culture of the building) will better equip our students for dealing with life's stressors.

## Where does ZOMBIE THOUGHTS fit in my Core?

The Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL) lists self-management, which includes stress management, as one of the core competencies. The Utah State Board of Education's Health Education Core identifies SEL is an important component for grades 3-6. Below are some of the Core standards and objectives addressed by and through ZOMBIE THOUGHTS:

### **Grade 3**

Standard 1: Students will learn ways to improve mental health and manage stress.

Objective 1: Demonstrate responsibility for self and actions.

- a. Identify personal responsibilities.
- b. Predict the consequences of neglecting responsibilities, such as increased stress, grades, punishment, no sense of accomplishment, impact on other people.
- c. Report the outcomes (sense of accomplishment, feeling good, contribution to cause, less stress) of completing responsibilities.
- d. Determine how positive decision making can help complete responsibilities.

### **Grade 4**

Standard 1: Students will learn ways to improve mental health and manage stress.

Objective 4: Explore positive options for managing stress.

- a. Define stress.
- b. Identify behaviors or situations that may cause conflict or stress.
- c. Create a personal stress management plan.

### **Grade 5**

Standard 1: Students will learn ways to improve mental health and manage stress.

Objective 1: Summarize how communicating with others can help improve overall health.

- a. Compare the benefits of social interaction and time alone.
- b. Communicate the need for social interaction and time alone.
- c. Adopt behaviors to help maintain mental health, such as reading, exercise, lifelong learning, abstaining from substance abuse.

Objective 4: Demonstrate constructive ways of managing stress.

- a. Explain how both positive and negative events can cause stress.
- b. Identify physiological, emotional, cognitive, and behavioral responses to stress.
- c. Predict how neglecting personal responsibilities may increase stress.
- d. Develop and apply a personal stress management plan.

### **Grade 6**

Standard 1: The students will learn ways to improve mental health and manage stress.

Objective 1: Develop strategies for appropriately and safely expressing emotions.

- a. Recognize the range of emotions, including extremes.
- b. List situations that elicit strong emotions; e.g., winning or losing a competition, losing a friend, family changes.
- c. Predict the effect of substance use on emotions and the ability to appropriately manage them.

Objective 4: Demonstrate positive strategies for managing stress.

- a. Identify situations or circumstances that cause stress.
- b. Recognize personal reaction or response to stressful situations.
- c. Design a personal plan that includes options for managing stress and stressful situations.

## **ZOMBIE THOUGHTS Classroom Activities**

### **Vocabulary**

Define anxiety. List synonyms and antonyms for anxiety. Create a concept web with anxiety in the center. Repeat the process with the word stress.

### **Drawing**

Have students draw a picture of something that makes them anxious, then share those drawings in partnerships and possibly the entire class.



## Writing & Family Engagement

Write about a time you felt anxious. What did you do? How did it feel?

Extension: Have students interview someone (a classmate, a friend, a community or family member) about an anxious experience or event and record it in writing. SEL work is strengthened through out-of-school partnerships such as family engagement.

## Book/Story

Read one of these books aloud and discuss it.

- What To Do When You Worry Too Much: A Kid's Guide to Overcoming Anxiety by Dawn Huebner
- Don't Think About Elephants by Susanne Merritt
- Wilma Jean the Worry Machine by Julia Cook

## Discussion & Role Play

Pose a scenario and ask students to think about how they would react to the stressor. Then invite them to discuss or act out a response with a partner. Finally, invite them to share their ideas or perform their role play for the class.

Suggested scenarios:

- You forgot to do a homework assignment and it is due today.
- You have the end-of-year test coming up and your stomach hurts every time you think about it.
- Your brother or sister keeps getting into your things. You are nervous about leaving your room unattended because you are afraid things will be missing or misplaced.
- You wake up with an anxious, worried feeling nearly every day and feel like you don't want to go to school.

## Do's & Don'ts

- **Do** understand there is a difference between feeling stressed and/or anxious and an anxiety disorder.
- **Do** understand these children want to fit in, have friends and meet classroom expectations but their disorder may prevent them from doing so.
- **Do** see a child with an anxiety disorder as more than their disability or mistakes.
- **Do** understand that anxious children want you to like them; they become paralyzed by fear that you won't.
- **Do** take a moment to see and recognize strengths, not just weaknesses.
- **Do** provide accommodations that will help a child with an anxiety disorder succeed: give them a safe place to go or a cue to remember to breathe when they start to become irritable, frustrated, or upset.
- **Do** understand that a child with an anxiety disorder is a child without the executive function to overcome or cure their disorder.
- **Do** understand that a child with an anxiety disorder is not trying to challenge your authority out of spite.
- **Do** understand that if a child is anxious and you get upset or anxious in response, they will mirror your emotions and melt down.
- **Don't** tell anxious children their fears are stupid or irrational. Their brain tells them otherwise.



## Post-Show Discussion

Following the play, have a discussion about what happens to Sam and Pig and how this relates to students in the class:

- What were some of Sam's characteristics? What were some of Pig's characteristics? How were they similar? How were they different?
- What are some of your characteristics? How are you like Sam or Pig?
- How did Sam deal with his anxiety? What did he learn from going through all of the game's levels?
- Is there something that worked for Sam, that he learned, that you could also use to help when you feel anxious?
- What are zombie thoughts? Connect this to the topic of metaphors: Zombie Thoughts are irrational thoughts and worries that are scary, but (like Zombies) not real.

## Problem Box

Set up a problem box to collect class problems for future discussion. Tie some of the problems to ZOMBIE THOUGHTS and discuss how we can manage our thinking about certain situations to reduce the associated anxiety.

## Stress Management Plan

Have students create a personal stress management plan and report back on their successes and struggles. We recommend this [healthychildren.org](https://planbtheatre.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/BR3_My_Personal_Stress_Plan.pdf) template - [https://planbtheatre.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/BR3\\_My\\_Personal\\_Stress\\_Plan.pdf](https://planbtheatre.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/BR3_My_Personal_Stress_Plan.pdf).

## Breathing Exercises

Sam uses breathing to help him deal with the effects of anxiety. Try one of the following breathing exercises with your class (see Mindful Schools, following page):

- Close your eyes and take three breaths. Feel your feet on the floor.
- Feel the anchor of your breath. Now open your eyes and scan the room without speaking. What did you notice after doing this?  
How did your body react? How did things look after you re-opened your eyes?
- Have students use their hands as an object of focus. Each student should stretch out their hand and then trace each outstretched finger with the index finger of the other hand, breathing as they do so. This is great for a transition during class time.
- Sphere breathing allows children to pretend they are holding a balloon in their hands. As they breathe in, their fingers slowly move apart to indicate the blowing up of a balloon. As they exhale, the fingers gradually and slowly come back together.

## REFERENCES

- Durlak, J.A., Weissberg, R.P., Dymnicki, A.B., Taylor, R.D., & Schellinger, K.B. (2011). The impact of enhancing students' social and emotional learning: A meta-analysis of school-based universal interventions. *Child Development*, 82(1), 405-432.
- Jones, S., Brush, K., Bailey, R., Brion-Meisels, G., McIntyre, J., Kahn, J., Nelson, B., & Stickle, L. (2017). Navigating SEL from the inside out. Harvard Graduate School of Education.



## ZOMBIE THOUGHTS Online Resources

### **Anxiety and Depression Association of America**

<https://adaa.org>

An international nonprofit membership organization and leader in education, training, and research for anxiety, depression and related disorders.

- Understand the difference between anxiety and an anxiety disorder

<https://adaa.org/living-with-anxiety/ask-and-learn/faqs/generalized-anxiety-disorder-same-general-anxiety>

- A booklet on anxiety disorders and treatment options for children

<https://planbtheatre.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Anxiety-Disorders-in-Children.pdf>

### **KQED.org | 20 Tips to Help De-escalate Interactions with Anxious or Defiant Students**

Classroom strategies from Jessica Minahan, a certified behavior analyst and special educator.

<https://ww2.kqed.org/mindshift/2016/04/21/20-tips-to-help-de-escalate-interactions-with-anxious-or-defiant-students/>

### **Child Mind Institute**

<https://childmind.org/>

An independent, national nonprofit dedicated to transforming the lives of children and families living with mental health and learning disorders.

- “Anxiety in the Classroom: What It Looks Like, And Why It’s Often Mistaken for Something Else”

<https://childmind.org/article/classroom-anxiety-in-children/>

- “Tips for Beating Test Anxiety”

<https://childmind.org/article/tips-for-beating-test-anxiety/>

- “How to Help Kids Who Are Too Hard on Themselves”

<https://childmind.org/article/how-to-help-kids-who-are-too-hard-on-themselves/>

### **The Calm Schools Initiative**

<https://www.calm.com/schools>

Offering educators free subscriptions to guided meditations and mindfulness exercises.

### **Pure Edge**

<https://pureedgeinc.org>

Education resources, curricula, and training options supporting the philosophy that all educators and students deserve to be taught strategies to help combat stress to support the development of social, emotional, and academic learning competencies with an open heart and an open mind.

### **Mindful Schools**

<http://www.mindfulschools.org/>

Courses and curricula designed for under-resourced public schools facing high turnover rates and toxic stress; offering educators practical skills for self-care, facilitation, and connecting with youth, providing simple, effective mindfulness practices easily integrated into the school day and adaptable for diverse environments. (requires paid subscription)