



## Transformative Life Skills (TLS) Curriculum

# Unit 1 Section: The Stress Response



## Niroga Institute

Founded in 2005, Niroga is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization that brings:

### **Transformative Life Skills (TLS)**

to individuals, families, and communities through the integrative practice of dynamic mindfulness, including Mindful Movement, Breathing Techniques, and Meditation. The Sanskrit word, Niroga, means “freedom from disease” or integral health—health of body, mind, and spirit.

Niroga programs are widely viewed as evidence-based and trauma-informed, and a cost-effective front-line prevention and intervention strategy for education and mental health, positive child and youth development, and violence reduction. Independent research with students in urban schools has demonstrated that TLS can reduce stress and increase emotional awareness and regulation, enhance school engagement and distress tolerance, and alter attitude towards violence.

### **Transformative Life Skills—Curriculum Scope and Sequence**

The full TLS curriculum is four units comprised of eleven lessons, plus one lesson dedicated to reteaching concepts. TLS can be implemented in 15-minute, 30-minute, or 60-minute sessions. In most typical implementation scenarios, three lessons per week are delivered, and a unit is completed in a month. Each lesson focuses on a particular theme and introduces a new posture.





# Transformative Life Skills (TLS) Curriculum

## Unit 1: The Stress Response

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## Unit 1: The Stress Response

### Unit Overview

Recent studies show that students experience high levels of stress that often impede their ability to do well in school. Stress touches all aspects of life, and can stem from instability at home, poverty, lack of funding for support systems, traumatic events, high pressures for success, or peer pressure. In this Unit, we will bring awareness to the body's reactions to stress, and then learn and practice ways to manage stress within the body.

We all know what stress feels like, but why do we get it? What is it useful for? The stress response is the body's way of getting you to safety when it senses you are in danger. It creates the conditions in your body for you to run to safety, fight, or freeze until danger passes. This has been very useful for our survival as a species, but nowadays the stress response often turns on when we're not really in danger. This can cause all kinds of problems.

When the stress response is activated, it deactivates the parts of your brain that handle memory, thinking, making choices, impulse control, and listening. For this reason, stress can affect how well you do in school and the choices you make. In addition, feeling stressed out all the time can cause long-term, damaging effects on your health. Learning ways to manage stress and activate the relaxation response in your body can help to mitigate the damaging affects of stress.

Stress management involves knowing what causes you stress, noticing the signs of stress in the body, and using tools to deactivate the stress response when you don't need it. Developing stress management skills now can help you think clearly and make healthy choices in the near-term, and keep you healthier throughout your life.

### Unit Objectives

- Define Stress Management
- Learn how stress affects body and mind (long- and short-term effects)
- Learn foundational skills for stress management
- Understand the relaxation response
- Build strength and flexibility

### State Content Standards

- 5.2.A Explain healthy alternatives to alcohol, tobacco, and other drug use.
- 5.1.M Monitor personal stressors and assess techniques for managing them.
- 5.2.M Compare various coping mechanisms for managing stress.
- 7.1.M Assess personal patterns of response to stress and use of resources.
- 7.2.M Practice effective coping mechanisms and strategies for managing stress.

## Curriculum Lesson Plans Key

Text for Units 1 lesson plans include:

1. Overview and lesson plan information
2. Narrative text—scripts for each lesson’s section and mindful movement, breathing, or meditation instruction
3. Commentary for instructors reference

## Narrative Scripts

Instructor narratives to students are shown in shaded boxes, per the example shown below.

The bolded “**Say:**” text introduces this formatting, and the following shaded boxes indicate when text is “live script” for student instruction. When text is parenthesized, this indicates a brief lesson plan comment, and is not read to students—per the “(Pause.)” shown in the example, below.

Text blocks outside the shaded boxes are instructor reference and lesson plan commentary—not script that is read to students.

EXAMPLE:

**Say:** Begin to notice the rhythm of your own breath. Is it fast or slow? Deep or shallow?  
Take a few moments to notice the rhythm of your own breath. (Pause.)

Now take a moment to find your pulse by pressing your fingers against the inside of your wrist, or under your jawbone, or on the left side of your chest.

Text shown between the script shade-boxes is intended for instructor reference, and contains lesson plan or topics commentary. This text will not be read to students.



## Unit 1. Lesson 1.1

### Understanding What Stress Is About

#### Lesson Overview

In this lesson students will be introduced to the TLS yoga program. This lesson uses **Mountain Pose** as the introductory pose. Experiencing oneself in stillness in Mountain Pose helps build clarity, strength, and stability. Physically, this pose:

- Improves posture
- Strengthens thighs, knees, and ankles
- Firms abdomen and buttocks

#### Lesson Objectives

##### Main Activities

- Students will learn what the stress response is, and why it is important.
- Students will practice tools to deactivate the stress response when it is not helpful.

##### Optional Activities

- Students will discuss how standing strong can positively impact their life
- Students will creatively reflect on their own foundation

#### Materials Needed

##### Main Activities

- Singing bowl or bell
- TLS Curriculum

#### Lesson Topics and Timeline

##### 1. Student Overview

- Review Expectations ..... 2 Minutes
- Activate Background Knowledge ..... 3 Minutes

##### 2. Acting, Breathing, Centering

- Opening Bell and Focused Breathing..... 2 Minutes
- Mindful Movement and Pose of the Day ..... 6 Minutes

##### 3. Mindful Breathing ..... 3 Minutes

##### 4. Wrap Up

- Silent Sitting and Closing Bell ..... 1 Minute
- Connection Questions ..... 3 Minutes

## Student Overview

### *Review Expectations (2 minutes)*

Review the expectations for TLS sessions, including:

- **Students clear desks**  
of all distractions including books, papers, food, cell phones, and music.
- **“One mic” rule:** one person talks at a time.  
If students have questions they can raise a hand or ask at the end of class. Assure students that there will be a few minutes dedicated to questions at the end of each session.
- **Students focus on their own body and breath.**  
That means not making comments about self or others, not touching others, not distracting others from their experience.
- **Students try their best to participate at all times.**  
They won’t know what works for them and what doesn’t unless they try it, and every day is a different experience. Standing aside and watching others is not allowed, as it makes students who are participating feel uncomfortable.

### *Activate Background Knowledge (3 minutes)*

In response to the class environment each day, you may wish provide this information to students when you feel it would be best received — that may be at the beginning of class, weaved in to the poses, or before the silent sitting.

**Say:** The stress response is our body’s way of warning us when there is danger and getting us to safety. When we feel emotions like anger, fear, and anxiety, those are signs that the stress response is activated. You can feel stress even when you’re not really in danger, like when you have a big test or project for school, or when you have problems with your friends or parents. It can be harmful to us if we feel stress all the time. We need to know how to “deactivate” the stress response when we don’t need it.

### **Activation Question 1.1**

**Say:** Think of a recent time when you felt stressed. If you had to rate the level of stress you felt on a scale from 1–10 what would it be? Can anyone share an example?

Give students a chance to reflect, and choose a few students to share their responses with the class.

**Say:** In this lesson we will learn some tools for deactivating the stress response to calm the body and mind.



## Acting, Breathing, Centering

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### *Opening Bell and Focused Breathing (2 minutes)*

**Say:** We will start our time together today by trying to focus our attention on a sound. I would like to ask you all to listen to the sound of the bell I am going to ring. Try to keep your attention on the sound of the bell for as long as you can, and when you can't hear it anymore, please raise your hand.

**Ring bell or singing bowl.**

- Allow to vibrate to completion and until all students have raised their hands.
- Then ask students to do the same thing, this time closing their eyes or looking down at their desks to focus just on their hearing, and ring the bell again.
- Wait until all students have raised their hands.

**Say:** That was very good. Now I'll lead you in a breathing exercise:

- You can keep your eyes closed, or just look down.
- Let all the air out of your lungs.
- Now breathe in, breathe out.

Lead class in simple breathing, encouraging them to breathe deeply and smoothly. Continue for 3–4 rounds.

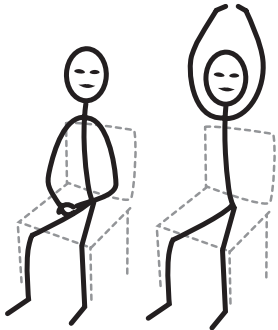
Then tell students that you are going to do the **bell exercise** one more time.

**Ring the bell again,** and students raise their hands when they can no longer hear it.

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## Mindful Movement and Pose of the Day (6 minutes)

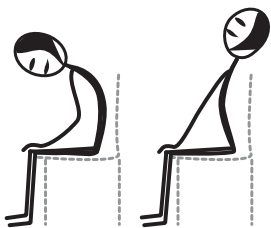
### Arm Movement with Hands Clapsed (Seated)



**Say:** If it feels comfortable, sit up a little bit straighter. Clasp your hands together in front of you. As you breathe in, reach your palms up toward the ceiling as high as feels comfortable. As you breathe out, watch your hands as they come back down to your lap. As we do this, we'll breathe in for 4 counts and out for 8 counts. Breathe in 1, 2, 3, 4, breathe out 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8.

Lead students in 4–5 rounds of rhythmic 4:8 breathing while demonstrating the movement. Then invite them to let relax their arms and go back to breathing normally, letting their hands just rest on their lap or desk.

### Robin



**Say:** For the next movement, feel free to start really small, and experiment with making the movement bigger as you feel comfortable. When you breathe in, draw the shoulders back. When you breathe out, bring the shoulders forward and the chin down.

Guide students while they try a few rounds.

**Say:** If you want to get more of a stretch in your back, you can make the movement bigger. When you breathe in, take the shoulders back and lift the center of your chest. And when you breathe out: round the back, pulling the belly in and letting the head drop forward. Try a few more rounds, noticing what this movement feels like in your body.

### Mountain — Pose of the Day



**Say:** **The pose of the day today is Mountain Pose.** When we feel stressed, we often feel “swept away” by our feelings and cannot think clearly. Mountain helps us feel our feet firmly on the ground so that we can clear our mind and remember our own strength. To do Mountain Pose, we stand up.

Pause as students stand up.

— Mountain Pose notes and variations, continued next page —

## Mountain, Continued



**Say:** Experiment with pointing your feet straight forward, parallel to each other. Does that feel different from how you usually stand?

Show students the difference between casually standing with toes pointed out, and standing with feet parallel and pointed forward.

**Say:** As you breathe in, imagine there is a quarter sitting on top of your head, and lift it up toward the ceiling. As you breathe out, let your shoulders and arms relax. Notice your feet flat on the floor. Breathe in stand tall, breathe out relax, still standing tall.

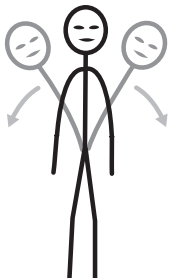
Guide the students in a few breaths.

## Mountain Variations



**Say:** Now close your eyes if it feels okay, or just look down. If you lean forward slightly, you might feel how your weight shifts into your toes. When you lean back, feel your weight shift to your heels.

Pause, experiment with leaning forward and back.



**Say:** Now lean to the right side and notice how the weight shifts in the feet. Do the same to the left. (Pause, leaning side to side.)

Now let your body sway in a slow circle, noticing how the weight shifts in the feet as you do that. (Pause.)

Allow your circles to get smaller and smaller until you settle and find stillness right in the center. That's your center of gravity, where you are strongest. Take a few breaths here, noticing your feet on the floor and the top of your head reaching high.

If you'd like, press your hands together at your chest, and either close your eyes or look down at the place where your hands meet. Can someone lead us in 3 breaths, saying: "Breathe in, Breathe out"?

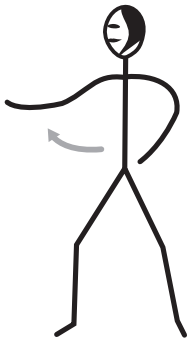


Choose a student to lead the breaths, making sure the student leads them slowly to allow for deep breathing.

Good, thank you (student name). Now, let's match the breath to movement. Still standing up straight, let's breathe in and raise our arms overhead. Breathe out, and bring your hands to your chest.

Repeat 2 times.

## Trunk Twists



**Say:** Now you can shake out your arms and bring your feet a little farther apart. Make sure you have space between yourself and others so you can swing your arms without hitting each other. Let your arms be loose and swing as you twist from side to side. Notice the feeling of the air as it brushes past your hands.

Pause.

**Say:** To keep your knees safe, lift the opposite heel as you twist to the side.

Pause.

**Say:** If you want to twist more, you can breathe out each time you turn to the side.

Demonstrate twisting and breathing out in short, audible spurts each time you twist to the side. Allow students to continue twisting for about 30 more seconds.

**Say:** Let your twists get smaller and smaller until you are still. Come back to **Mountain Pose** with your palms together at your chest and take a few breaths, noticing how your body feels.

Have another student lead 3 breaths.

Have the students sit down at their desks with backs straight and feet resting on the floor. Proceed to the “Mindful Breathing” section.

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## Mindful Breathing — Heartbeat Experiment (3 minutes)

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Lead class in simple breathing, encouraging them to breathe deeply and smoothly.

**Say:** Begin to notice the rhythm of your own breath. Is it fast or slow? Deep or shallow? Take a few moments to notice the rhythm of your own breath. (Pause.)

Now take a moment to find your pulse by pressing your fingers against the inside of your wrist, or under your jawbone, or on the left side of your chest.

Pause, give students a chance to find their pulse.

Now notice the rhythm of your heartbeat as you breathe. Take a moment to notice if your heartbeat gets faster on the inhale or faster on the exhale. If you have a hard time feeling your heartbeat, don't worry. It's beating in there somewhere, but sometimes it's hard to quiet the mind enough to feel it. Just try focus on your breathing and see what happens.

Allow students to find answer for themselves. Ask them to share what they find by raising a hand. In most people, the heartbeat gets faster on the inhale and slower on the exhale.

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## Mindful Breathing — Heartbeat Experiment, Continued

**Say:**

Yes, in most people, the heart beats faster on the inhale! If that's not what you found, don't worry, because every body is different. But you might try this experiment again later in the semester, and see if things change.

When we inhale—we give the body more energy, and the heart beats faster.

When we exhale—the body relaxes more, and the heartbeat slows.

That's why the relaxation breath we did in the beginning, where we: inhaled for 4 and exhaled for 8—is good for calming down our body.

Let's try the 4-to-8 breath again. If I count too slow or too fast for you, feel free to go with your own rhythm. When you're ready, let all the air out of your lungs, breathing out.

Pause.

Breathe in 1, 2, 3, 4.

Breathe out 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8. (Repeat 2 times)

Now count silently to yourself, breathing in for 4 (pause), and out for 8.

Pause.

In deep, out slow.

Pause.

Try to breathe this way for 3 more rounds without losing count.

Pause, allow students to breathe on their own for a few rounds.

Good! You can go back to breathing normally. Notice how your body feels.

## **Wrap-Up (5 minutes)**

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### ***Silent Sitting (1 minute)***

**Say:** We're going to end class by sitting silently for one minute, just noticing your breathing and how your body feels.

Feel free to close your eyes or look down to help you concentrate only on yourself.

If you like, you can even put your head down and rest it on your arms.

Pause.

Notice your feet resting on the floor, your legs relaxed on the seat.

Notice where your arms and hands are; maybe you can allow your arms and shoulders to relax a bit more.

Notice how you're breathing.

You might even allow the muscles of your face relax as you breathe.

Long pause, allow students to sit silently for remainder of the minute.

### ***Closing Bell***

**Say:** I will now ring the bell one last time. Listen to the bell and when you can't hear it anymore, please look up at me.

Ring bell and allow it to vibrate to completion.

### ***Connection Questions (3 minutes)***

**Say:** How do you feel?

If you had to rate the level of stress you feel now from 1–10 what would it be?

Why?

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Ask students if they have any questions about what we did today or about yoga in general. Let the students know when they will see you next and thank them for their participation.