

Readers Guide for *Better Days:* 180 Creative Practices and Daily Connections for Teachers and Students

This Guide is designed to enhance your understanding and application of the information contained in *Better Days: 180 Creative Practices and Daily Connections for Teachers and Students*, an ASCD book written by Lisa J. Lucas and published in January 2025.

You can use the guide after you have read the book or as you finish each chapter. The study questions provided are not meant to cover all aspects of the book but, rather, to address specific ideas that might warrant further reflection and prompt you to make connections with your own classroom practice.

Although you can think about many of this guide's questions on your own, we recommend forming a study group with colleagues who have read (or are reading) *Better Days*.

24 Minutes a Month of *Personal Learning Communities*

We know that effective teaching and learning depend on strong relationships, yet professional development rarely allocates time for fostering collegial relationships. Teachers often receive new resources without having time with colleagues to explore, reflect on, and plan how to use them.

This guide is designed to help you engage in transformative conversations about the teacher practices and student connections in *Better Days*. Together, you and your colleagues can foster a learning community in which you discuss both the personal *and* the professional aspects of teaching. Just as we aim to teach the whole child, we need to meet the needs of the whole teacher.

The 10 themed chapters of *Better Days* offer an ideal opportunity for teachers to meet each month of the school year for personal and professional development, but don't feel obligated to strictly adhere to a monthly, chapter-by-chapter format—develop a schedule and explore the themes that make sense for you. Likewise, feel free to use the following 24-minute protocol as a guide, modifying as needed to suit your setting and team. The overarching guideline is to be present in the moment and remain open to what shows up.

Guided Restorative Practice (four minutes). This opening practice is meant to provide a clear transition from the frenetic pace of teaching to discussing *Better Days*, helping everyone be more focused and present for the discussion. The restorative practices offered are primarily mindfulness meditations. The ability to calm, stabilize, and direct the mind can be helpful in moments when we feel stressed, distracted, or overwhelmed. Through this practice, you are training your body and mind to arrive at a state of inner awareness and ease.

The text in italics should be read aloud by one group member. Consider rotating this role at each meeting so everyone can experience reading these scripts.

The beginning instruction for mindfulness meditation is to sit quietly, spine straight, and close your eyes. Next, bring your full attention to the feeling of your breath coming in and going out. Now, as soon as you start trying to notice your breath, your mind will start generating random thoughts, and you'll realize how distractible you are. Many people believe this means they have an attention problem that precludes them from being able to meditate, but that's a misconception. The goal of meditation is not to stop all thoughts, but to change your relationship to those thoughts. Whenever you get a random thought, urge, or emotion, just notice that it's happened and begin again. Every time you notice you've wandered off and restart, it's like a bicep curl for your brain. You are training your brain to be more self-aware.

Restorative Reflection (four minutes). This step includes a two-minute stop-and-jot and two minutes of sharing. When you share aloud your experience of attempting restorative practices, you will realize that you are not alone in your struggle to sit quietly and will be less judgmental of your attempts to calm your body and mind. Just as physical exercise builds strength and endurance in your body, restorative mindfulness practices build cognitive and emotional awareness that cultivate inner strength and resilience. Like any skill, it takes practice.

Teacher Practice Reflection (eight minutes). This section selects teacher practices in *Better Days* to discuss with colleagues. You can discuss any or all of those listed here, or you can pick another practice from the chapter to discuss. During this part of the meeting, it is important to listen respectfully and without interruption, to avoid making limiting assumptions, and to appreciate one another's different perspectives and insights. Because participants might feel vulnerable sharing personal experiences and insights, it's important to ensure that they feel safe in the professional setting.

Student Connection Sharing or Planning Notes (eight minutes). The final segment is an opportunity to either plan how to implement some of the student connections or discuss how you applied a connection in your classroom and share the result and any modifications you might make in the future. The more you use these student connections, the more you will fine-tune them.

Chapter 1: Attention and Intention

Guided Restorative Practice

Take a moment to allow your body to settle. Find a comfortable position that allows your spine to be long. See if you might sit in a way that's upright but not rigid, relaxing into your body and breathing normally. Gently close your eyes if you'd like, or simply direct your gaze downward, softening the visual field. Notice your body, your feet on the ground, the sensations of your body sitting, your legs and torso as they make contact with your seat.

Begin now to notice your breath. Direct your attention to the experience of breathing, the sensations of the in-breath, and the sensations of the out-breath. Notice where you detect the air coming in and out of your body. Perhaps you notice air at the nostril area, possibly you detect the rise and fall of your chest, or maybe you feel your belly expanding and contracting. Firmly but gently direct your full, undivided attention to this experience of breathing, whatever that means to you.

Now, bring your full attention to just one complete cycle of breath. First, notice when the inhale begins, how it continues, and when it ends. Next, notice when the exhale begins, how it continues, when it ends, and whether there is a brief pause before the inhale begins again.

As we bring this practice to a close, finish with a full deep breath in and a long breath out. Noticing your feet on the floor, slowly open your eyes, and come back into the space, refreshed and renewed.

Restorative Reflection

How did it feel to put your full attention on one breath? What did you notice about your mind?

Teacher Practice Reflection

Discuss any or all of the following.

1. **Where Attention Goes, Energy Flows.** Take one minute to list anything good that you've witnessed today. Have everyone share one good thing they've noticed.

2. **Attentive Listening.** When you are conversing with a colleague, notice the pauses between their words, the sighs, and the rate of their speech. Can you slow down your speech and see if it affects them? Slow down during this session and notice how it affects your nervous system. Discuss your observations.

3. **Flow.** What is something you love to do that's also a bit of a challenge? Discuss the concept of *flow* and explore what brings about this state for you. Whether it's dancing, gardening, writing, painting, sewing, or playing an instrument, commit to doing it. Achieving the flow state is good for your brain and is linked to increased levels of satisfaction and self-actualization.

Student Connection Sharing or Planning Notes

Chapter 2: Authenticity

Guided Restorative Practice

Sit comfortably and gently close your eyes. Take a few moments to scan for any areas of tension in the body and, wherever possible, soften and release these areas. Feel the muscles of your body relax. Begin to focus on your breath as you breathe in and out. As you breathe, become aware of that quiet, still place within where you are most yourself. Let go of thoughts; you are not your thoughts. Allow yourself to become more present, keeping your attention on the breath. Feel yourself fully present in your body, feeling grounded and centered. Feel aware of your body, your breathing, your chest rising and falling with each breath.

The opportunity to explore bodily experience can be very helpful. You can begin to notice what feels good, what you withdraw from, when you tense up, and when you can give yourself space. This is a time for being just as you are without criticizing, judging, wishing, or trying to change the experience in any way. Just settle in, be right here, right now, and tune in to how your body feels.

Now, bring yourself back into the space, moving in any way that feels good to you. Gently open your eyes. You can now continue the rest of the day with greater presence, authenticity, wisdom, compassion, peace, and gratitude for all of life.

Restorative Reflection

Were you able to tune in to your body? Would you feel comfortable facilitating this guided mindfulness practice with students?

Teacher Practice Reflection

Discuss any or all of the following.

1. **Be Who You Are.** What theme song sums up who you are? Share a song or even a playlist that reflects you with your colleagues.
2. **Inner Freedom.** List five words that describe who you are.
3. **Try Softer.** In what part of your life are you trying too hard?
4. **Wiser or Weaker?** What gifts have you cultivated as a result of a difficult situation?

Student Connection Sharing or Planning Notes

Chapter 3: Change

Guided Restorative Practice

Come into a comfortable posture, sitting upright in a way that’s not too relaxed or too tight. Gently place your hands in your lap. Close your eyes or cast them downward. Soften your whole body. Let go of any thoughts or concerns that you’re holding. Now gently come to the breath. Focus on the natural breath as an anchor. Establish your awareness here. Enjoy each new breath, allowing it to guide you into a relaxed, present state. Each breath provides a focus, something to keep coming back to.

Today we’re talking about how to ride the waves of change. Life often changes quickly. You might awaken to a world much different than yesterday. A relationship ends, your teaching assignment changes, you experience an illness or a loss, and quickly the rhythm of your days shifts. Without warning, the path you had so carefully chosen can take you in a new and uncertain direction. Although a common instinct is to resist change and instability, this resistance is futile; change is unavoidable. So rather than struggling for control, consider loosening your grip and accepting what is. What if you let go of any agenda and learned to get comfortable with uncertainty? Allow yourself to flow with the current rather than fighting it. Notice if you feel a bit more at ease. Set an intention to practice letting go in moments of uncertainty. See if you can experience life with more grace and ease. Now gently notice the areas of the body that make contact with the floor or the chair. Bring your attention back to the room and open your eyes. Bring this quality of nonresistance with you throughout your day.

Restorative Reflection

How quickly were you able to transition from what you were doing before this to the restorative practice? What situations came to mind when you heard the word *change*?

Teacher Practice Reflection

Discuss any or all of the following.

1. **Let All Things Be Exactly as They Are.** What in your life are you having trouble accepting? Is there something that is ending that you don’t want to let go of?

2. **There's Always a Choice.** Identify a situation that you are feeling stuck about. With your colleagues, brainstorm possible solutions. Make sure you accept all ideas, not discussing the “how” or rejecting any ideas, just documenting the possibilities.

3. **Questions That Could Alter Your Life.** Discuss the following questions: What is it you want more of in your life? What would you like less of in your life? When do you feel most valued?

Student Connection Sharing or Planning Notes

Chapter 4: Common Humanity

Guided Restorative Practice

In this loving-kindness practice, we generate a wish of well-being for ourselves and others. First, take a full breath in and a long, slow breath out. Feel yourself seated and present in this moment.

Let's begin by offering wishes of well-being to ourselves. Slowly repeat the following phrases silently to yourself: May I be happy. May I be well. May I live with ease.

Now, think of someone close to you whom you care deeply about, possibly a friend or family member. Imagine that person sitting in front of you now. Repeat these same phrases while thinking of this person: May you be happy. May you be well. May you live with ease.

Now, envision someone who is having a difficult time. Imagine that person sitting in front of you. Silently direct these same words to this person: May you be happy. May you be well. May you live with ease.

Next, envision someone you see often, but don't know very well. Direct the phrases to this person: May you be happy. May you be well. May you live with ease.

And now let's extend loving-kindness outward to all students and teachers, without boundaries or limits: May you be happy. May you be well. May you live with ease.

Finally, think of everyone who is a part of your life, and then think beyond them to all people, all animals, all life. Repeat the phrases one last time: May you all be happy. May you all be well. May you all live with ease. Notice how it feels to open the heart, how it feels to generate these feelings toward yourself and others.

Now, letting the words go, return to an awareness of the body, settling on the breath, noticing how you feel right now. Wiggle your fingers and toes. Slowly bring your attention back to the room. I invite you to bring this state of loving-kindness with you for the rest of your day.

Restorative Reflection

Did it feel awkward to say these phrases to yourself? Share whom you envisioned when you thought of someone you don't know very well. How did it feel to send those thoughts of well-being to a semi-stranger?

Teacher Practice Reflection

Discuss any or all of the following.

1. **We Have No Idea.** With a partner or as a small group, take turns sharing a hardship you have experienced. Everyone should refrain from interruptions or comments; there is no need to offer advice or discuss the stories shared. This exercise is an opportunity to simply listen and hold space for one another.

2. **Collaboration Versus Competition.** Ask yourself in what ways you are competitive. Whom in your life do you feel competitive with? What do you think is behind that competitiveness? Could you collaborate more and compete less? As a group, brainstorm or share some engaging, effective collaborative strategies that have worked well with your students.

3. **If You Really Knew Me, You'd Know That. . . .** Take turns completing the prompt "If you really knew me, you'd know that. . . ." You'll be amazed by what you learn about those you thought you knew so well.

Student Connection Sharing or Planning Notes

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Chapter 5: Feelings and Emotions

Guided Restorative Practice

Sit quietly for a few moments, settling into your seat. Gently close your eyes. Notice the feeling of your breath entering and leaving your body. Pick one spot where it's most prominent: your belly expanding and contracting, your chest rising and falling, air entering and exiting your nostrils. Notice the sounds around you, the sensations on your skin. Now, notice any thoughts that might be floating to the surface. Imagine these thoughts as icebergs. The thoughts are what we see above the surface of the water; beneath the surface, the much larger part consists of emotions. For example, if you are thinking about your endless to-do list, the emotion below the surface might be anxiety or guilt.

What emotions are beneath your thoughts right now? Silently name them. Now, bring your mind back to your breath. When you notice the temptation to get lost in a story (i.e., a thought run amok), just name the emotion(s) beneath it and let go of the story. Every time a thought arises, name the emotion beneath it.

Can you feel where that emotion lives in the body? Be curious and compassionate. Take a few more breaths, naming any emotions that arise.

And now, letting go of this practice, notice how your body feels right now. Allow any sensations to be just as they are. Let yourself just be.

Slowly bring yourself back to the present moment. Open your eyes. As you continue through the day, see if you can tune in to your emotions and where you feel them in your body.

Restorative Reflection

What emotions did you identify in the guided practice? Where did you feel the emotions in your body?

Teacher Practice Reflection

Discuss any or all of the following.

1. **Take Stock of Your Inner Weather.** On a scale of 1–10, where are you on the happiness meter? Share your number and some reasons why this might be.
2. **Write Yourself into Well-Being.** Write down your worries. Next, put a checkmark next to those that are absolutely true. Notice how many of your thoughts are reactions to or feelings about events but not necessarily the truth. Discuss.
3. **Wishing.** Ask yourself how you want to feel. Next, think about what you could do to reach that state. Choose a word that captures what you're wishing for. What would you see, feel, and hear when you have achieved what you're wishing for? It helps to write it down. Now wish for the support and guidance to lead the way.
4. **Heart Versus Head.** Think of a topic in which you need guidance. Write down the question and then listen for a response that comes from the heart, not the head. Read your question aloud and see if your colleagues have an alternative solution.

Student Connection Sharing or Planning Notes

Chapter 6: Kindness and Gratitude

Guided Restorative Practice

Today we will be expressing gratitude for the little things in life—the day-to-day gifts that often go unnoticed. Start by getting as comfortable as possible. Gently close your eyes. Begin to focus on your breathing. Breathe a bit more deeply than you usually do.

Think of your home and all the things in it that you use to help your life run more smoothly: clocks, refrigerator, coffee maker, shower. Envision yourself going through a normal day, but moving more slowly, noticing more. Imagine taking the time each day to express gratitude for all these modern conveniences. Next, think about the world outside; envision the sky above. Can you promise yourself to look up more each day?

Now, can you also be grateful for the things that haven't gone as planned, the minor annoyances that arise during the day—the broken photocopier, the late students, the constant interruptions? Every mishap offers you a chance to slow down. Imagine navigating these bumps in the road with ease and acceptance.

You can choose to take things for granted or to notice them with gratitude. Commit today to appreciating the ordinary things in your life. Now begin to wiggle your toes, give your shoulders a roll, and slowly bring your awareness back into the space, opening your eyes.

Restorative Reflection

What bumps in the road did you think about? How did it feel to try and be grateful for that inconvenience? When was the last time you looked up and really noticed the sky? What did you notice?

Teacher Practice Reflection

Discuss any or all of the following.

1. **Photograph What Matters Most.** With colleagues, share photos that make you smile. Taking turns, everyone can choose a photo and share the backstory.

2. **Giving Gratitude.** Write down some occasions when you've acted in a way that was kind, patient, or generous toward another. As you look at this list, think about how it feels to own this part of you. Where in your body do you feel it? What does it feel like? Discuss with colleagues.

3. **Anonymous Acts of Kindness.** As a group, share ways you might extend unexpected generosity to various people. Commit to one small random act of kindness each day for a week.

4. **Right Speech.** Notice the conversations in the faculty lounge and school hallways. Enter with the intent only to contribute honest, kind words to any conversation. Discuss what you noticed.

Student Connection Sharing or Planning Notes

Chapter 7: Mind Management

Guided Restorative Practice

This practice provides the opportunity to condition your mind to slow down when it becomes overactive. Although you cannot always control your mind, you can encourage it to be more at ease. Start by taking a few deep breaths, inhaling and filling the lungs completely. Hold your breath for just a second, and completely exhale.

Repeat these two simple phrases to yourself: May my mind be at ease. May I be at ease with my mind. Synchronize these phrases with your exhalation, repeating a phrase every time you exhale. When your thinking mind interferes, come back to your breath and the phrases.

Continue to breathe in this way, slowly repeating the phrases. You are practicing harnessing your busy mind.

Now gently bring your awareness back into the room, allowing your eyes to slowly open. As you continue your day, notice when your mind becomes overactive or agitated and remind yourself to repeat these phrases and take a breath to calm your mind. This is a practice you can repeat throughout your day.

Restorative Reflection

Where and when would you use these phrases in an ordinary day? Are there different phrases that would be more meaningful to you? If so, share.

Teacher Practice Reflection

Discuss any or all of the following.

1. **Mental Time Travel.** Try this brief experiment: Set a timer for a minute and sit without doing anything. Afterward, think about where your mind was in that minute. Was it present, or did your mind take you forward to the day ahead, or back to events that happened earlier today, last week, or even years ago? If you experienced any of these mind wanderings, you've just engaged in mental time travel.

2. **Analysis Paralysis.** Bring your planner and complete the Sunday Meeting Self-Care Plan. Share your mini-retreat ideas with your colleagues and list future mini-retreats that you can add to throughout the year.

3. **No Complaining/No Gossiping.** Plan a No Complaining or No Gossiping Challenge for your grade level or the entire school. Discuss the duration, plan for accountability, and decide what the prizes will be.

4. **Possibilities, Not Limitations.** Come to the meeting with one new thing you'd like to learn. Everyone can take turns sharing their plans as well as ideas for resources to support this new learning.

Student Connection Sharing or Planning Notes

Chapter 8: Presence

Guided Restorative Practice

Take time to sit down in a comfortable position, feet flat on the floor, palms down on your lap. Gently close your eyes or cast them downward. Roll your shoulders. Gently move your head from side to side. Relax your jaw. Notice if you feel any release.

Now imagine standing outside your classroom with two heavy bags. One bag is full of worries about the future, and the other bag is full of regrets about the past. Take a moment to reflect on each bag. Consider that the future will come of its own accord and that most of what you worry about will never happen. Then reflect on how the past cannot be changed; all you can do is learn from it. Feel the weight of each bag in your hand and consciously decide to drop both bags. Take a deep breath and notice you are resting in the present, just breathing, with no worries or regret. Allow yourself to simply be, feeling a sense of freedom, peace, and well-being. Gently open your eyes, wiggle your fingers and toes, and bring yourself back into the present moment.

Restorative Reflection

Which bag was heavier, the one full of future worries or the one full of past regrets? Describe how it felt when you dropped your bags.

Teacher Practice Reflection

Discuss any or all of the following.

1. **Forgive Freely.** Write down the name of a person you wish to forgive or a situation you wish to move on from. Take a moment to reflect on the perceived wrong and remember how it made you feel. Consider what you might have learned from that event. Then draw a circle with a trash can in the middle. You can opt to share your reflection with colleagues if you choose.

When done, everyone crumples their paper and tosses it into the trash can.

2. **What's Important Now?** Dedicate eight minutes to answering email. Open only your email—no browsers or other programs. Notice if you're more productive when you focus on a single task. Discuss with colleagues how the experiment went.

3. **Cherish the Ordinary.** Spend eight minutes taking photographs of your classroom. Share the photos with your colleagues and see if they have any suggestions of “makeovers” that you could consider.

Student Connection Sharing or Planning Notes

Chapter 9: Routines and Rituals

Guided Restorative Practice

We have all experienced having to wait when we're in a rush, whether we're in line at the store, stalled at a red light, or sitting in the doctor's waiting room. Waiting is a part of life that often leads to impatience and frustration. But what if you considered these times of waiting as opportunities to practice presence and relieve tension?

Let's practice. Gently close your eyes. Envision that you're late for work and stuck in traffic. Feel your feet flat on the floor. Start to scan your body, noticing any areas of tension and breathing intentionally, as if your breath could release this tension. Notice whether the focus on your body soothes your feelings of impatience. Tune in to your lower back, roll your shoulders, and bring your chin down to your chest. Then slowly raise your chin and turn your head to the left, back to center, and to the right. Give your jaw a wiggle. Notice any tension spots and focus on moving in a way that relieves that tension, breathing into any areas that need extra care.

Slowly bring your awareness back into the room and gently open your eyes. Notice how your body feels after this brief practice.

Restorative Reflection

Name some places or situations where you find yourself becoming impatient. In these situations, where in your body do you usually notice the most tension? What do you do to relieve it? Could you try the preceding practice?

Teacher Practice Reflection

Discuss any or all of the following.

1. **Fuels and Drains.** Spend a few minutes listing the drains in your life. Choose one to eliminate and replace with a fuel. Take turns sharing your fuels and drains with colleagues.
2. **Seamless Rituals.** Discuss some of the rituals you use in your classrooms. Which ones might you modify or incorporate into your practice?
3. **Decluttering.** Spend eight minutes decluttering. Share with your colleagues any duplicates of things you find.
4. **Habit Stacking.** Identify a new habit you'd like to adopt. Brainstorm habits you already have in place, decide which ones make the most sense to connect, and stack the new habit. Decide when and where would be best to implement the habit. Discuss progress you're your colleagues.

Student Connection Sharing or Planning Notes

Chapter 10: Self-Care

Guided Restorative Practice

Take a moment to allow your body to settle. Find a comfortable position that allows your spine to be long. Gently close your eyes or cast them downward. Let your belly and shoulders relax. Take a full breath in and a long breath out. Throughout this practice, let your body and mind feel loose and open to possibilities.

Now envision a positive future. Ask yourself, "What kind of future do I want for myself?" Notice the thoughts, feelings, and images that come to mind. How can you show up in a way that will allow this positive future to unfold? What are the skills or capabilities that you'll need to get there? What might get in the way, and how will you move beyond it?

See yourself in this positive future and reflect on the things you did that helped you reach it. See yourself doing those things in your mind's eye and notice what it feels like. Take this feeling with you as you head back to your day. Let's finish this practice by taking a full breath in and a long breath out.

Restorative Reflection

What did you notice during the restorative practice? Was there anything that surprised you when you envisioned a positive future?

Teacher Practice Reflection

Discuss any or all of the following.

1. **What Makes You Happy?** As you go through the day, notice the things that make you feel content. You don't have to plan it; just try to experience and savor the small, precious moments. When do you find you feel most happy? Notice the people around you; when do they look happy? Share what you noticed.

2. **What the Books We Read Reveal.** Think of your life as a book and complete the following prompts:

- If my life were a book, the title would be _____.
- The chapters in the book of my life are _____.
- The current chapter of my life is called _____.
- The next chapter of my life is called _____.

Discuss with the group.

3. **What's Next.** Discuss this question: If you could have had complete control of your life, would you have learned as much as you have?

Student Connection Sharing or Planning Notes

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