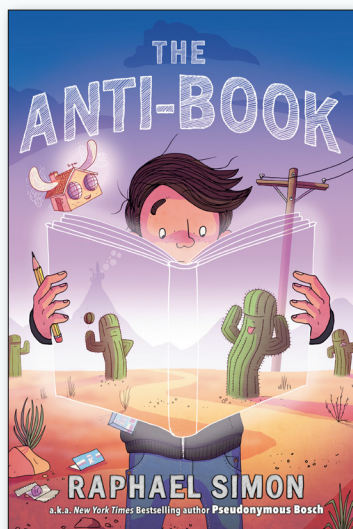
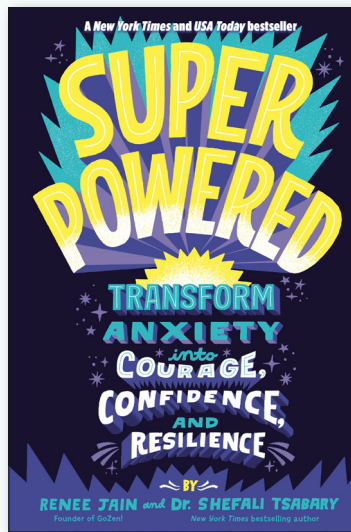


THEMATIC GUIDE

Teaching About Anxiety & Mindfulness  
MIDDLE SCHOOL



The books in this guide provide simple yet effective life skills and routines middle schoolers can use to listen to and calm their minds and bodies, as well as relatable characters who work towards solutions for stress.

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## ■ INTRODUCTION

When Simone Biles, widely regarded as one of the best athletes of our time, stepped down from competition at the 2020 Summer Games in order to tend to her mental health, the whole world reacted. While some were quick to label her a “quitter,” many now see her as a role model whose decision was a positive and public acknowledgment that mental health must be a priority, particularly in our youth.

A 2019 publication from the National Education Association calls anxiety “the mental health tsunami” of the teenage years. That same year, a Pew survey revealed over seventy percent of teens believe anxiety and depression to be a “major problem” among friends and classmates. Possible causes are numerous, including social media, standardized testing, and the pressure to perform toward future college and career success. The results of these stressors are panic attacks, headaches, stomach issues, and self-medication via drugs and alcohol. Add to this the recent COVID-19 pandemic and its catastrophic impact on students and schools, and it is clear that teens need healthy pathways for accessing tools to deal with their stress.

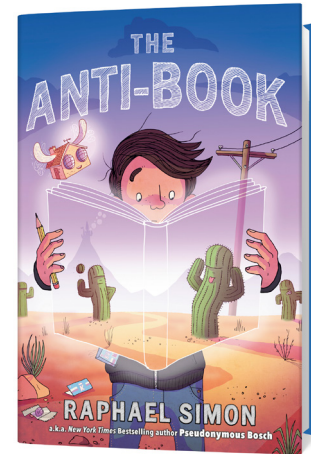
The books in this text set provide simple yet effective life skills and routines middle schoolers can use to listen to and calm their minds and bodies, as well as relatable characters who work towards solutions for stress. Teachers can choose one or any combination of books and strategies to use with whole-class instruction, literature circles, or independent reading as they work to build a supportive, inclusive environment where emotions matter.

## ■ ABOUT THE TITLES IN THIS COLLECTION

Listed below are brief summaries as well as questions providing purpose, context, and framing while students read.

In *The Anti-Book*, a fantasy by Raphael Simon, Mickey is overwhelmed with emotions and wants the world to go away. But a blank journal provides a different avenue for confronting stressors like divorce, identity, and sibling rivalry.

1. Mickey's book is blank except for one instruction: "To erase it, write it." What are some multiple meanings of this line, both literal and figurative?
2. Mickey's sister says he is mad all the time. What does his anger help him escape? What does it keep him from accomplishing?
3. Why does Shadow call himself "the invisible guy" and suggest that Mickey read his mind? What would be the benefit of Mickey seeing Shadow's thoughts? Who is Shadow?
4. Why is Mickey afraid to write his own name in the Anti-Book? Why does he write Shadow's name instead? How is this choice a lesson learned?
5. How has Mickey's writing changed by the end of the book?



**The Anti-Book**  
RAPHAEL SIMON

978-0-525-55241-3  
Hardcover | Dial Books  
320 pages | \$17.99 | Lexile: N/A

Also available: Audio Download, E-Book

In *Just Roll with It*, a graphic novel by Veronica Agarwal and Lee Durfey-Lavoie, Maggie's anxiety and OCD magnify the challenges of starting middle school. Throughout the book, Maggie learns to let herself take risks, make mistakes, and appreciate her unique identity.

1. Why does Maggie feel the need to roll the dice before making a decision? What advice might you give her or any peer who is afraid to trust themselves?
2. Maggie's favorite superhero teaches his fans they can be powerful even while facing struggles. In what way can you relate to Strong Might? How can you be a "hero in training" despite your challenges?
3. Due to negative thoughts, Maggie talks herself out of joining Clara and a group of peers after school. What self-talk might help her address these fears?
4. How does her reliance on routines support Maggie as well as hold her back? What are some routines in your life, and how do they impact you?
5. What are some specific strategies Maggie learns to apply when she is feeling anxious? Which strategy do you think would be most helpful and why?



**Just Roll with It**  
VERONICA AGARWAL and  
LEE DURFEY-LAVOIE

978-0-593-12541-0  
Hardcover | Random House Graphic  
336 pages | \$20.99 | Lexile: NP

Also available: Audio Download, E-Book

Sangu Mandanna's fantasy novel *Kiki Kallira Breaks a Kingdom* introduces readers to a young girl whose worries are getting the best of her. Armed with her sketchbook and her imagination, Kiki uses art to work through anxiety.

1. Kiki wishes she could get her brain to quiet down. What is the "noise" she hears?
2. In what way does Kiki's sketchbook help her anxiety? In what way is it keeping her from dealing with it?
3. Why does Kiki need to save both her worlds—the real and the imagined? How does each one contribute to a healthy, balanced life?
4. Ashwini compares Kiki's brain to Jojo's legs. What does she mean? How is Kiki's anxiety an illness rather than a weakness?
5. Suki says that girls have "iron and steel" as well as sugar and spice. How does Kiki fit this characterization? How does she learn to use it to her advantage?



**Kiki Kallira Breaks a Kingdom**  
SANGU MANDANNA

978-0-593-20697-3

Hardcover | Viking Books for Young Readers  
352 pages | \$17.99 | Lexile: N/A

Also available: Audio Download, E-Book

*Superpowered: Transform Anxiety into Courage, Confidence and Resilience* is a how-to manual for anxious adolescents. Authors Renee Jain and Dr. Shefali Tsabary provide tips and tools for recognizing stress and confronting it head-on like a superhero.

1. Which of the five "superpowers" (Present, Original, Whole, Energized, Resilient) resonates most with you, and why?
2. What are the reasons we might move from "whole" to "cocooned"? Have you ever felt cocooned? What is the resulting impact?
3. How do you feel "shoulded" in your life? When is a time you have "shoulded" someone else? How can you better deal with "shoulding" now?
4. How is mindfulness a "secret tool" for being present?
5. What advice might your older self give you now? Which part will you follow? Why?



**Superpowered**

Transform Anxiety into Courage,  
Confidence, and Resilience

RENEE JAIN and DR. SHEFALI TSABARY

978-0-593-12639-4

Hardcover | Random House Books for Young Readers  
336 pages | \$17.99 | Lexile: 800L

Also available: Audio Download, E-Book

## ■ CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

The following activities provide students time, space, and routines for tuning into themselves, others, and the world around them in a healthy and productive way.

### PERSONAL TOOLKIT

Kiki Kalira “breaks” her self-created, scary kingdom armed with only a pencil. Encourage students to identify and share their own tools for defeating anxiety. To prepare for discussion, ask students to read Simone Biles’ Instagram post published after she removed herself from Olympic competition. In it, Biles says, “It wasn’t an easy day or my best but I got through it. I truly do feel like I have the weight of the world on my shoulders at times. I know I brush it off and make it seem like pressure doesn’t affect me but damn sometimes it’s hard hahaha!”

Ask students what connections they see between Simone Biles and Kiki/Mickey/Maggie in the book we are reading. Next, ask students to read some of the comments posted on Biles’s account.

Discuss those as well. Based on our reading and students’ own experiences, ask which of these posts are appropriate and which are not. Why?

Then, ask students to read the CNBC article based on Biles’ post, called “Simone Biles withdrew from final ‘to focus on my mental health’—here’s how to tell if you need a break” ([tinyurl.com/CNBCBilesArticle](https://www.cnn.com/2020/08/07/sports/simone-biles-olympics/index.html)). In the article, the author suggests having a “toolkit” to draw from when anxiety strikes. Encourage students to discuss some of the suggested tools from the article as well as recall the tools they have used successfully in their own experience with anxiety. As they listen and discuss, invite students to write down tools they would like to try and ask them to create a personal toolkit they can draw on when needed. Students can keep this written toolkit handy for personal use, or the group might even create a classroom toolkit to post on the wall.

### CLASS CHARTER

In *Just Roll with It*, Maggie must learn to trust herself and the world around her. Partner with students to build a trusting classroom environment by creating a class charter. Invite each student to write down one to three adjectives describing the atmosphere they are looking for in class. Students might write “accepted,” “safe,” “fun,” or “collaborative.” After compiling the adjectives into categories and identifying the most common, create a class list. Next, discuss as a group the actions students can take to make sure classmates feel this way. These actions will become the “norms” for behavior that are posted on the class charter.

Charters can be enlarged with a poster maker, posted on the wall, and signed by every classmate. Personal copies can be kept in student notebooks. When needed, both teachers and classmates can remind each other of the charter in order to promote inclusion, acceptance, and productivity. Alternatively, the charter can be called a class “constitution.” For more on this idea, see [learningforjustice.org/professional-development/a-new-set-of-rules](https://learningforjustice.org/professional-development/a-new-set-of-rules).



### MINDFULNESS MINUTE

The authors of *Super Powered* advise students to breathe in the moment and notice what is happening right now. Provide students an opportunity to prepare for learning by leading them in a daily mindfulness minute prior to starting class. Using a silence signal, such as a countdown or a chime, indicate that it is time to be quiet. Direct them to close their eyes and slow their breathing, to become aware of their bodies, of what they hear, smell, and feel. These directions allow students to focus, transition, center themselves, and prepare their brains for learning. The following video illustrates the positive classroom impact of a mindfulness minute: [mindfulschools.org/video/arrive-2](https://mindfulschools.org/video/arrive-2).

### SKETCHNOTES AND BULLET JOURNALS

Inspire students to write and draw their thoughts and feelings like the protagonists of *The Anti-Book* and *Kiki Kallira Breaks a Kingdom*. Sketchnotes look somewhat like graphic novels in that they combine writing and drawing in order to tell a story. They offer students a personalized method for organizing their thinking in a culturally relevant format. Students can sketchnote about themselves, interactions with peers, or even instructional content. Or, they might write a letter of advice from their older self, as in *Super Powered*. Adding a corresponding illustration or image is helpful because sometimes words do not come quickly or are not enough.

The idea is to provide adolescents time and space to tune in to thoughts and feelings, whether they are content, confused, anxious, or excited. In doing so, students are in a better place to learn.

Teachers can model the basic sketchnote shapes and provide practice time, then invite students to integrate them into class journals and notes. For students uncomfortable with drawing, bullet journals serve a similar purpose. Bullet journals are creative notebooks students customize with colored pens, stickers, and notes, as well as goals, assignments, and achievements. Students can track their habits, emotions, nutrition, and exercise. Like sketchnotes, bullet journals encourage students to be mindful of their thoughts and feelings and utilize them for productive living and learning. For more information on sketchnotes and bullet journals, see the links below.

- [kqed.org/mindshift/54655/why-teachers-are-so-excited-about-the-power-of-sketchnoting](https://kqed.org/mindshift/54655/why-teachers-are-so-excited-about-the-power-of-sketchnoting)
- [bulletjournal.com](https://bulletjournal.com)

### META MOMENT

The authors of *Super Powered* suggest students match their actions to the voice they hear inside. One routine students can use to tune into this inner voice is the “meta moment.” The meta moment is a purposeful pause during emotional situations where students listen to their “best self” and act accordingly. During the meta moment, students stop, clarify what they are feeling, and ask themselves, “What would my best self do?”

To tune in to their best selves, ask students to create a list of adjectives that describe their ideal selves. Provide a word bank if needed. For instance, students might write “patient,” “sympathetic,” and “kind.” Students might also choose a personal photo, a figurine, or an inspirational quote. Encourage students to keep their list and object handy on their desk or in their backpack so they can refer to it when needed. Plan whole-class meta moments at strategic times or suggest them to individual students when emotional situations occur. Explain to students that the meta moment is a tool they can take with them everywhere they go, both at school and beyond. An animated video for introducing the meta moment can be found here: [tinyurl.com/MetaMomentVideo](https://tinyurl.com/MetaMomentVideo).

### MINDSET GRID

All of the texts in this set touch on the benefit of positive self-talk. Post a mindset grid on the classroom walls to encourage students to engage in this healthy practice. The mindset grid is a large poster or bulletin board with sentence starters adolescents can use when a fixed mindset leaves them feeling anxious or overwhelmed. For example, instead of “I don’t get it,” students are prompted to tell themselves, “I don’t get it yet, but . . .” Refer to the poster regularly with individual students or the whole class. Promote buy-in by asking students to write the sentence starters in groups or together with you. Students can also be provided their own copy of the grid to post in their notebook or on their desk. The class might even rehearse the positive mindset talk with choral reading or partner practice. An example of a mindset grid is linked here: [mindfullifetoday.com/wp-content/uploads/Growth-Mindset-grid.jpg](https://mindfullifetoday.com/wp-content/uploads/Growth-Mindset-grid.jpg).

### APPRECIATION, APOLOGY, AHA!

In *Just Roll with It*, Maggie learns the value of talking about her feelings with peers and adults. Ask students to engage in positive social-emotional discourse as a closing activity. At the end of class, ask students to stand and form a large circle. Challenge them to generate an appreciation, an apology, or an “aha!” Quickly go around the circle, asking students to share their “A” aloud. Students might appreciate a classmate’s idea, apologize for lack of preparation, or share an “aha!” around content learning or even something silly. The idea is to promote relationships and shared learning and to ensure all students are given a voice. An example of this activity can be found at [tinyurl.com/60SecondStrategy](https://tinyurl.com/60SecondStrategy).

An alternative is the snowball battle, where students jot down their thoughts and feelings on a piece of paper, crumple it into a “snowball,” and throw it into the circle. Classmates can listen to and acknowledge each other by picking up one of the snowballs and sharing its contents with the circle, which provides an anonymous sounding board and builds a collaborative classroom culture.

## ■ RESOURCES

The following resources provide more information and ideas for addressing student anxiety and integrating mindfulness into teaching and learning.

- “What is the CASEL Framework?": [casel.org/sel-framework/](https://casel.org/sel-framework/)
- “CASEL SEL 3 Signature Practices Playbook": [tinyurl.com/CASEL3PracticesPlaybook](https://tinyurl.com/CASEL3PracticesPlaybook)
- “Helping Students Beat Test Anxiety": [tinyurl.com/OvercomingTestAnxiety](https://tinyurl.com/OvercomingTestAnxiety)
- “Anxiety in Teens is Rising: What’s Going On?": [tinyurl.com/HealthyChildrenArticle](https://tinyurl.com/HealthyChildrenArticle)
- “What is RULER?": [tinyurl.com/TheRulerApproach](https://tinyurl.com/TheRulerApproach)

## ■ BOOKS OF INTEREST

Visit our website, [prhsecondaryeducation.com](https://prhsecondaryeducation.com), to browse additional fiction and non-fiction titles about social-emotional topics.

## ■ ABOUT THE AUTHOR OF THIS GUIDE

Laura Reis Mayer is a high school instructional coach and National Board Certified teacher in Asheville, North Carolina. She has taught middle school, high school, and college English, speech, drama, and literacy. As a consultant to various national organizations, she develops and facilitates professional learning on college and career-ready standards, teacher leadership, and National Board Certification. She is the author of twenty other Penguin Random House Teacher’s Guides.

