

FEBRUARY 2026

BREAK FREE

Made for your mind to move.

Issue Three:
Mind Over Matter

Quick Hits



RESILIENCE BINGO

How many can you
check off this list today?

You don't need to fill
every square for this to
count. Every box you
check is proof that you
showed up, tried, or took
care of yourself. Even
one moment matters.

Took a deep breath when I was stressed	Stayed focused even when it was hard	Asked a question or spoke up in class	Stayed respectful even when I felt frustrated	Encouraged myself or someone else
Helped a classmate or staff member	Tried a new strategy to stay calm	Took a break instead of shutting down	Finished a task I wanted to give up on	Followed directions even when I didn't feel like it
Used positive self-talk	Asked for help when I needed it	Got through a challenging moment at school	Listened instead of reacting right away	Noticed one good moment during the day

Art by Jakel P, a student in FL



Losses to Change

by AR from Watkins Mills, MO

Losses and pain I put myself through the blame

Feeling guilty in shame I left my family to fight alone with the pain

Time went on and I got older

Mamma went off and found her some happiness

Missing my daddy badly I turned my back on the family

That left me looking for love in all the wrong places

Now my heart that was so filled with love is filled with hate

Sneaking out my mom begged and told me to come and that it was time to eat

But I never wanted to listen so now Watkins Mill is feeding me

Sitting in dys missing my mom and crying out I'm sorry

Embracing the change I gave my mom an apology

Changing myself the change feeling better than ever

So I will give this as a letter

And thank Watkins mill for helping me get better

So to all the young out there don't be afraid

Everybody has room to work on themselves

Grow and get better.



Art by a student in NJ

MIND RESET QUICK CHECK-IN

CHECK-IN



Check one box from each section:

Right now, my mind feels:

- ☐ calm ☐ busy ☐ tired
☐ heavy ☐ hopeful

My body feels:

- ☐ relaxed ☐ tense
☐ restless ☐ grounded

One thing I need more of today:

- ☐ quiet ☐ movement
☐ music ☐ connection ☐ rest

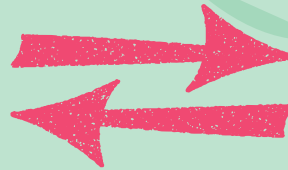
FINISH THIS SENTENCE



Even though things aren't perfect, I'm

proud of myself for:

THOUGHT SWAP



Sometimes your mind tells stories that aren't the full truth. Try this:

Thought I've had:

A more helpful way to think about it:

Example:

"I always mess things up." →

"I'm learning, even when I make mistakes."



BIO Poems



Davion

Is funny, responsible, loving

Loves basketball, his family, and going to my
aunt's house with my cousin on the weekend

Is good at making three pointers, football,
being a running back

Feels ecstatic, blessed, kind

Needs my mom, my family, my phone

Wants life to go as planned, go to college,
pay my mom's bills

Fear Losing my mom, God , becoming a
junkie

Likes to eat chicken alfredo, seafood,fried
chicken

Watches Martin, The Flash, BlackLighting

Is a resident of Florida

Poem by DP, a student in FL

Jatalyn

Is kind, quiet, honest

Loves food, sleeping, movies

Is good at basketball, reading, music

Feels sleepy, calm , tired

Needs money, family, food

Wants to be rich, a big house, cars

Fears heights, clowns, dogs

Likes to eat jerk chicken, burgers, home
cooked meals

Watches Insidious, The Nun Jason

Is a resident of Pensacola, Houston TX

Poem by JP, a student in FL

STUDENT ARTWORK

Student from DE



Student from NJ

This colored-pencil landscape shows a peaceful autumn landscape with tall trees, a flowing river, and distant mountains. Warm reds, yellows, and oranges fill the sky, while cool blues color the water. The scene feels calm and balanced, inviting viewers to imagine exploring nature during fall on a quiet afternoon alone peacefully.



Student from FL

"Someday. Someday, I will be up on that roof, overlooking the city. Maybe from the penthouse."



Why Our Brains Resist Change

Written by Kaylah, BreakFree Education

There's a quiet pressure many people carry in their minds. It shows up when things feel unfinished and says: You should be past this by now. You should be stronger. You should have it figured out.

That pressure can feel overwhelming, especially in environments that value results, labels, or improvement as fast as possible. It can start to feel like your worth depends on being calm, healed, or "fixed." But mental well-being doesn't work that way. Growth takes time, and healing is not a straight line. Needing time doesn't mean you're failing; it means your brain is doing what it was designed to do.

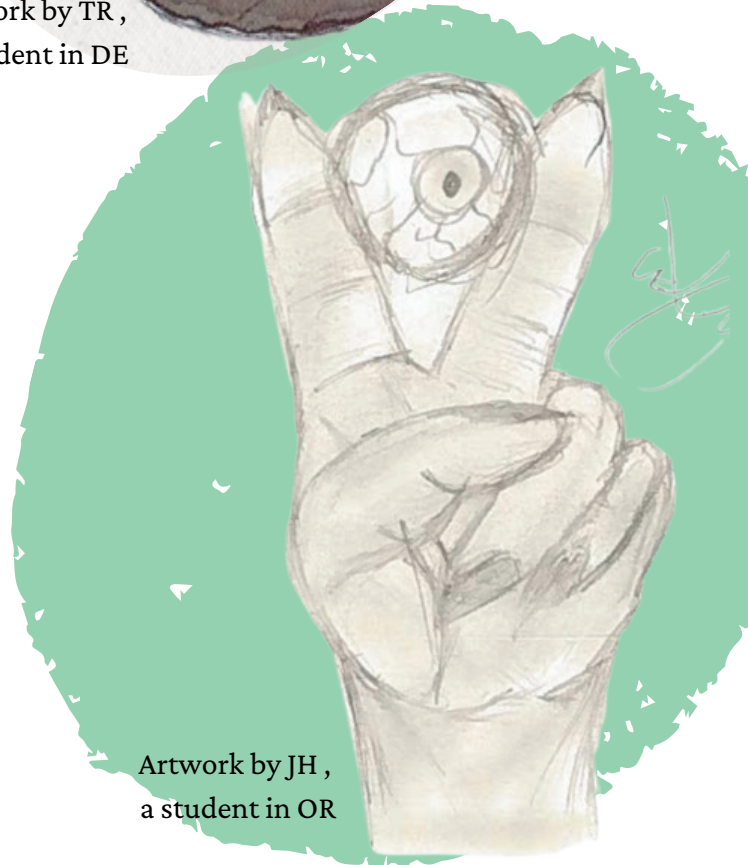
Our brains are built to protect us. They look for safety, predictability, and familiar patterns. When something changes — even a positive change — the brain can read it as a threat. New routines, new emotions, or new expectations require extra energy, focus, and attention.

When life feels uncertain, stressful, or unfamiliar, the brain often responds with worry, self-criticism, or an urge to "fix" things quickly. That response isn't weakness. It's your nervous system trying to keep you safe by avoiding the unknown.

If you've experienced trauma, loss, or instability, your brain may resist change even more strongly. Wanting things to feel settled or controlled makes sense. But when we rush ourselves to feel better or be different, we often miss the strength it takes just to keep showing up.



Artwork by TR,
a student in DE



Artwork by JH,
a student in OR



Resilience Isn't Loud

When people hear the word resilient, they often imagine someone fearless or unstoppable. But real resilience is quieter than that.

It looks like:

- Getting through a hard day
- Staying calm when emotions feel big
- Trying again after messing up
- Taking care of your mind when things feel overwhelming

These moments don't always get noticed, but they matter. They are signs that your brain is learning how to respond differently, even when change feels uncomfortable.

Learning to Work With Your Brain

Your brain resists change because it's wired for survival. Mental growth happens when we learn how to work with our minds instead of fighting them. Being "in progress" isn't a failure; it's evidence that your brain is practicing new ways of thinking, coping, and responding. You don't need to be fully healed to be worthy of respect. You don't need all the answers to move forward. Change happens one adjustment at a time.

Ways to Strengthen Your Mind:

Mental strength is something you can practice.

Here are a few small ways to start:

- Notice your thoughts. When a thought feels harsh, ask: Is this helping me right now?
- Name your progress. What's one thing you handled better than before?
- Give yourself grace. Growth doesn't happen in straight lines.

Reflection Prompts:

- What is one small effort I've made recently to care for my mental health?
- What advice would I give my past self during a difficult change?
- How does being "in progress" allow space for growth instead of pressure?
- What is something I've learned from a setback or mistake?
- How does showing myself compassion help me keep moving forward?
- What word best describes where my mind is right now?

YOUR PROCESS INVENTORY

Write down your current journey: coping skills you're building, habits you're practicing, thoughts you're unlearning, or reminders you need to hear. Big or small, every step counts.

EXPLORING MY LIFE

We Wear the Mask
By AL, a student in TX

We wear the mask that shows we're happy instead of sad.
It hides our covered-up lies and broken tags.
This mask is made of struggles, yet they never last
With my family by my side, we walk to the end of the earth
To show the world that this too shall pass.

Why should the world care if I'm happy or sad?
On the inside, I feel dead.
Let them see only the smile on my face.
We wear the mask.

We make it seem like nothing is wrong,
But inside we're broken and torn.
Our lives cry out for help, reaching to be heard.
God, please give us Your words.

We try to fix it on our own,
But you can't go through hard times alone.
Beneath us, the devil lies and waits for us to make a mistake.
But let the world stay strong, because...
We wear the mask.

A MIMIC OF PAUL LAURENCE
DUNBAR'S POEM:
"WE WEAR THE MASK"

Own Kind of Special

by BM, a student in ID

Love is love, as some would say, but my story is a lot different. People don't understand my point of view, and they don't respect my opinions. They don't realize that everybody is entitled to their own opinion.

My question to y'all is: why be like everybody else instead of being yourself? Many people want to be like their role models. For example, many fans of Michael Jackson want to be just like him — getting the moonwalk down, his “hee, hee, hee,” and his famous lean toward the crowd.



Artwork by BM, a student in OR

Many kids like Spider-Man or Superman, and they want to be just like them with their powers and web-shooters. But in real life, they can't be what they want, and they have to follow what society wants them to be — like going to school or being a state worker, a construction worker, or even a scientist.

I say, “**Let people be what they want to be instead of what you want them to be!**” Why do people have to be one thing or the other? Why can't people be their own kind of special?





Know your mind

Your mind shapes how you experience the world. Learning how your mind works, especially under stress, can help you build resilience and confidence.


Your mind plays a powerful role in how you experience life. These prompts are an opportunity to slow down, check in with yourself, and reflect on how you've grown. Mental strength isn't about being perfect. It's about learning, adapting, and continuing forward.

Your mind is not your enemy. It's a tool, and you're learning how to use it.
Choose at least three questions to answer in the space below.


Reflection Prompts

- What helps calm my mind when I feel overwhelmed?
- What is a challenge I've overcome, even if it was small?
- How does my body tell me I'm stressed?
- What is a healthy habit I want to build for my mental well-being?
- What is one thought I'm trying to replace with a healthier one?
- When do I feel most like myself?





MINDFUL DOODLING



Doodling can help slow your thoughts and release stress. There's no right or wrong way to do this. Use shapes, colors, symbols, or words to show what's happening inside your mind today.

As you draw, think about:

- What thoughts feel heavy right now?
- What thoughts bring calm or hope?
- What helps your mind feel balanced?



Doodling Legend

- Sharp lines = stress or tension
- Soft shapes = calm or safety
- Dark colors = heavy thoughts
- Bright colors = hope or strength

Quick Hits Answers

BINGO:

No pressure to check all the boxes.
Life (and school) can be hard.
Every square you check means you
practiced resilience, and that's a
win.

Shoutout!

Special shoutout to the students and teachers whose
work is featured in this issue!

Kimberly McKenzie, Cleveland White School DSCYF in Delaware
Denise Barnett, Escambia County School District Jail Program in Florida
Andrea Ohman, Juniper Hills in Idaho
Kelly Boley, Watkins Mills Camp in Missouri
Srinath Vadapalli, Turning Point Academy in New Jersey
Lisa McCready, Trask River in Oregon
Kimberly Molidor, Academy for Academic Excellence in Texas
Andrea Harned, Academy for Academic Excellence in Texas

Get Ready for Our Next Issue! Submit Your Work!

Have something to share?

We want to hear from you!

The next issue of Break Free is coming soon, and
we're looking for your stories, art, and ideas. This is
your space to celebrate your journey, creativity, and
voice.

To submit your work,
head to our website:
www.breakfree-ed.org/magazine.