

NFL Star A.J. Brown Starts a National Conversation on Inner Peace and the Pursuit of Excellence

This lesson can be presented over 1-2 sessions. Instructors should feel free to use whichever discussion questions and activities you think best for your class or group. We advise giving students the sheet with the definitions of the virtues before the discussion questions.

Lesson Goals

Help students...

- appreciate the importance of mental and emotional training and habits in striving for excellence and inner peace.
- learn about specific strategies to help develop a clear and focused mind that can lead to improved performance and a greater sense of inner peace.
- embrace the power they have over their thoughts and how our thoughts shape the way we see the world.
- view challenges and mistakes as opportunities to learn and grow.
- view learning as a continuous journey, emphasizing learning and growing every day.
- highlight the role of humility in self-improvement and being open to learning from diverse sources.

Highlighted Virtues and Character Traits

Discipline: training expected to produce a specific benefit, moral, mental and / or physical improvement.

Inner Peace: a state of mental and emotional calmness that remains despite life's challenges; being accepting of yourself and the world and people around you; often associated with contentment and happiness.

Authenticity: being comfortable with being one's true self and not feeling the need to hide who one is, even when faced with pressure to act differently. Being true to one's feelings, personality, values, and goals.

Humility: modest opinion of one's own position; an honest self-appraisal of one's strengths and weaknesses; a lack of false pride; realizing that we don't have all of the answers and being open to learning from others

Wisdom: ability to apply knowledge, experience, and understanding in ways that are effective and good. The ability to discern or judge what is true, right, or lasting.

Leader Introduction:

Today, we're going to dive into a story about a surprising moment during an NFL playoff game that caught the attention of millions of fans. In the fourth quarter of the Philadelphia Eagles versus Green Bay Packers wild card game, the camera suddenly pivoted to focus on star wide receiver A.J. Brown on the sidelines, but we don't see him huddling with his fellow players or coaches – instead he is reading a book!

At first, fans said “reading during a playoff game, is he crazy!?” Fortunately, A.J. Brown is not crazy and his decision to read a book during an NFC playoff game has sparked a national conversation on the book he was reading “Inner Excellence” and its core message of how consistent habits, mental preparation, clarity of mind and inner peace can lead to success on and off the field.

Lesson Video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=16Zj0Xmh2MY> (End at 3:14)

Leader Summary:

The video we just watched of Jim Brown, the author of “Inner Excellence”, and of Eagle’s football player A.J. Brown, sheds light on why A.J. was using his time on the sidelines in such an unexpected way. His choice to prioritize reading to help him attain a clear mind, focus and inner peace during a high-pressure NFC wild card game sparked a national conversation and skyrocketed the book “Inner Excellence” to America’s #1 selling book.

“Inner Excellence” aims to help athletes achieve their goals by training their minds to be clear, focused and to have a greater sense of inner peace and fulfillment. We won’t go into every aspect of the book in this lesson, but we’ll focus on several of its key points and discuss how they speak to our lives.

Discussion Question Options: *(discussion prompts / answers are in parentheses)*

Before beginning our discussion, let’s read over the virtues and their definitions, found in the online lesson as a separate document.

1. A.J. Brown discussed with reporters how physically he can train to do anything but “for me this game is mental and I have to believe I can do anything and everything.” Does this statement surprise you, that for a star football player mental training is more important than physical training?

Do you think that this approach is true for other activities such as learning how to play an instrument or even something like doing well in math, that it’s important to not only learn *how* to do it but also believe we *can* do it and reach our goals?

2. Now let’s dig into the strategies that “Inner Excellence” recommends for mental and emotional training to help us achieve our goals. Let’s take several minutes to slowly read out loud the 7 strategies written out in our Highlighted Virtues and Character Traits Summary. (Also listed here on the bottom of page 5. You can ask students to take turns reading, or as the leader read them to your class or group.)

Which of these strategies stands out to you as important?

Which one of the strategies is new to you as something you may not have thought of before?

Which strategy or strategies do you have any questions about or want to discuss further?

3. Let’s look at the definition of “**inner peace**” again: inner peace is a state of mental and emotional calmness that remains despite life’s challenges. It is a feeling of being accepting of yourself and the world/people around you—often associated with contentment and happiness.

A.J. Brown shows us a perfect example of **inner peace** during a challenging playoff game when he wasn't performing well. He could have been frustrated or even angry with himself, but in another interview he shared that "with a clear mind and a clear heart, I have found peace in chaos... I just try to slow my brain down." It may seem strange to think about **inner peace** in a sport like football that is controlled violence and that requires so much physical effort.

If A.J. Brown can have a sense of inner peace during a tense NFL game, do you think we can achieve a sense of inner peace within the high-pressure situations of our lives? Let's talk about some of the specific high pressure situations in our lives and how some of the strategies from the book can help us to achieve inner peace even during these pressured situations.

Are there other approaches, attitudes or activities that you have done that help you to face difficult and high-pressure situations calmly and with focus, whether in a sport, on a test or other activity?

4. Why do you think it's important to stay calm and find **inner peace**, especially during high pressure situations?
(It helps us think clearly, make better decisions, and avoid reacting emotionally.)
5. One of Murphy's quotes from "Inner Excellence" is, "the greatest freedom you have is where to place your thoughts." This quote emphasizes that even if everything feels out of your control, you can still choose how to think and how to respond to any given situation. What are some of the positive thoughts we can choose to focus on when facing a difficult situation or challenge?
(**"This is horrible but I'll do the best I can."** **"I'll try again."** **"I'm still learning."** **"I'll ask for help."** **"This is bad but I'll deal with this and become stronger"**)
6. Another quote from "Inner Excellence" is "There is no failure, only feedback." Feedback is when you or someone give opinions, corrections, or information about the performance of something. For example, feedback could be a teacher giving you advice on how to improve your next assignment. What do you think this quote means?
(**Encourage students toward responses that learning from mistakes is a powerful tool to help us improve. Once we go through the process of learning from our mistakes we are also better able to let go of a failure or mistake and move forward with a clear mind, focus and inner peace.**)
7. The strategies we have read through and discussed from "Inner Excellence" are strong tools to help us succeed and to feel a sense of inner peace, but are these strategies easy to live out, and especially to do so consistently across every major aspect of our lives?

What virtue can we focus on to help us constantly think about and live out the strategies of "Inner Excellence"? (**discipline**)
8. Jim Murphy, the author of "Inner Excellence" says that the goal of the book is to "learn and grow" everyday. Even A.J. Brown, who has reached high levels of success as an NFL player, continues to learn and grow through reading and through analyzing his mistakes. Being willing to learn from others and knowing that we don't have everything figured out is an example of which virtue?
(**Humility**)

Let's share some examples of when being humble enabled us to better learn and improve.

9. A.J. Brown said that he was proud of himself for not changing who he is, even though some people thought it was strange that he was reading at a football game. What virtue does this show?

(Authenticity)

Have you ever done something that others thought was unusual, or have wanted to do something but were worried about what other people would think? It could have been something as simple as a certain style of clothing, music, or a hobby that isn't considered popular, or something important like standing up for someone being bullied or raising your hand in class when no one else does. Let's share some examples of when we stayed true to ourselves and went forward with something, even though others may have thought it was odd.

10. What virtue is A.J. Brown living out as he chooses to focus on his mental training and inner peace?

(Wisdom in that Brown is focusing on habits and values that will enable him to be more effective as a football player and to live a more fulfilling life.)

Can you think of some people in your own lives that live out the virtues of **inner peace** and **wisdom**?

Journal Writing Options:

1. A.J. Brown uses his **inner peace** to stay calm and collected even in the most challenging of moments. Write about a time when you felt stressed or overwhelmed but found a way to stay calm and focused. What did you do to handle the situation, and how did it help you?
2. Write about a time when you made a mistake but learned something important from it. How did that experience help you improve?

Extended Activities:

In a whole group, brainstorm a list of challenges or mistakes that kids their age might face, (ex: struggling with a school subject, losing a game, arguments with friends, etc.)

Divide students into groups of 2-4 and assign each group one of the examples. They will then come up with two versions of responses:

- negative response where those involved view the situation as a failure and get upset.
- positive response where those involved view the situation as an opportunity to grow, to learn and to improve. Encourage teams to focus on some of the 7 strategies listed from "Inner Excellence"

Teams will then act out both versions for the class and at the end present a review of the benefits of the positive response with a focus on how they learned from mistakes, the value of humility, visualizing success and regulating their emotions.

The book *Inner Excellence* offers strategies to help develop a clear and focused mind, leading to improved performance and a greater sense of inner peace. Some of these strategies are:

1. **Purpose and Goals:** Establish clear and specific goals. This provides direction and purpose, allowing you to focus your mental energy on what's important.
2. **Visualization:** Practice imagining yourself working towards and achieving future success and positive outcomes.
3. **Positive Mindset:** Adopt a positive attitude and focus on the good in your life can help you feel more at ease. Replace negative thoughts with positive ones.
4. **Mindfulness:** Being present in the moment by engaging all of your energy and focus on your current activity will help you to appreciate the goodness in each experience and can promote a sense of peace.
5. **Emotional Regulation:** Learning to manage and control your emotions, rather than being controlled by them will help to achieve and maintain inner peace. If for example you're tempted to easily get angry, then practice recognizing when you're beginning to feel anger and come up with a consistent approach to better deal with the situation such as taking some time before saying anything and committing to speaking calmly.
6. **Physical and Mental Health:** Taking care of your body and mind through a balance of regular exercise, healthy eating, and relaxing activities.
7. **Rest:** Ensure you get adequate rest and recovery. Proper sleep and relaxation are crucial for mental clarity and overall well-being.

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