

Mindfulness for Stress Management



Mindfulness is now widely being used as a tool to manage stress and anxiety in a variety of settings including schools, hospitals, universities and large organizations like Google. Thirty years ago, Jon Kabat Zin, author of *“Full Catastrophe”* defined mindfulness as “paying attention in a particular way, on purpose, in the present moment non-judgmentally”. So, how can this deceptively simple practice help our students manage stress and support academic performance?

According to leading researchers, including neuroscientist Dr. Ritchie Davidson, Centre for the Investigation of Healthy Minds and Dr. Patricia Broderick, Penn State psychologist, the brain is the primary organ of stress. How we think about an event determines our response to it as well as our level of stress and anxiety. For example, being in a new situation where we don’t know anyone, can be stressful for some, but a source of fun for others. Different people have different responses to the same situation and varying levels of tolerance to stress. The physiological responses to stress, are similar, i.e. accelerated heart rate, sweaty palms, shallow breathing etc. The resulting actions are also generally similar, fight, flight or freeze.

Why Mindfulness?

Mindfulness works its magic to mitigate stress by training our minds to develop a more flexible response to stressful situations rather than an automatic habitual reaction. The practice involves engaging our attention on an object (breath), noticing when our mind wanders and redirecting our attention back to our breath. This process is repeated over and over again. We are training our attention to engage with an object (breath) sustaining attention and inhibiting distractions. In so doing we are strengthening the pre-frontal cortex (top down) and modulating the physiological response (bottom up) triggering the relaxation response. The prefrontal cortex we know, is responsible for reasoning and thinking, therefore as this is strengthened, attention and focus is also strengthened. As a bonus, the bottom up physiological response to stress is also modulated and emotional well-being supported.

“[Mindfulness] has you feeling like a new person. You feel refreshed.” - R. B. Gr. 10

Mindfulness Practice Tip

The 5-minute Breath Awareness practice. This is something that can be done anywhere, anytime.

- Sitting in an upright posture, either in a chair with your feet comfortably touching the ground, or on the floor in a comfortable position. Simply become aware of your breathing. You can notice sensations around your nose or belly or elsewhere in your body.
- Do not get too focused on any one type of sensation but simply and gently become aware of your breathing.
- When you notice that your mind has wandered (and it will), gently bring your awareness back to your breathing.

(R. Davidson, *Life Ed: Making Meditation Part of Daily Life* – NBC News.com)

(By Marjorie James, TDSB Social Worker – Area D)

Supporting Students' Mental Health and Building Resiliency Through Mindfulness



Dr. Norman Bethune CI Grade 9 Boys' PE Class participating in a "Body Scan".

"Mindfulness has been something really simple to incorporate into my lessons - listening to the audio or just breathing - and students in both my English and PE classes have benefited from it. We are all better people when we take some time to tune into ourselves and our bodies; everyone benefits." Whitney Aziz, Teacher - Dr. Norman Bethune CI

"I am so touched that the teachers took the time to teach us about how to improve our lives and manage our stress by teaching us about mindfulness. I feel like they really care about us." E.N Gr. 10

"Mindfulness has helped me to take just a few minutes to relax and see the bigger picture in many of the everyday tasks we must overcome. I am able to focus better on tasks and complete them with a better ability because the stress is taken off." M.Y Gr. 12

Mindfulness is about reflecting on our own experiences and emotions and understanding them more deeply. It is contemplative in nature, but it is not meditation. Through a survey at Dr. Norman Bethune CI, our students told us that they are struggling. They are involved in extra-curricular activities, they work hard, achieve good results, feel safe and they like their school. When we asked them how we could better support them, they asked for help in managing their stress. We realized that supporting mental health for our students had to be a whole-school approach, not just an intervention program for some students. A Mindfulness program became our proactive approach to supporting mental health and well-being for both staff and students.

The Mindfulness program is in its second year and it is quickly expanding. Last year we took a very intentional approach with our staff and with our Grade 9's. It began with a small group of staff who were part of our "Health and Wellness" PLC. The committee was looking for ways to support teachers in the area of wellness and to respond to our students' need to be supported in how they managed their stress. Mindfulness practice began as a way to inform the staff of techniques that would help us as individuals and professionals and we began Mindfulness sessions once a week during lunch. We quickly realized that these techniques would benefit our students. Twenty-five teachers participated in a full day of Mindfulness training, this same group of teachers developed and implemented six workshops that were delivered to our Grade 9's over a period of two months.

Our goal is to expose every cohort of Grade 9's to Mindfulness practice and incorporate Mindfulness strategies in all of our classrooms. For example, some teachers will begin a class or a test with a minute or two of practice. It may involve taking students through the process of turning their environment inward, being aware of sounds and their breathing, and taking a moment to recognize (and let go of) what is interfering in their ability to focus.

For the students who have had the six workshops, they have learned to be mindful through small cues. For example, during the first session, we drew their attention to the colour blue and the letter 'B' as a cue to develop students' awareness of their body and their breathing, and to take a moment to turn things inward. Every student received two blue stickers, one to place in a common location at home (such as their computer screen) and one to place in a common location at school (such as their locker or agenda). Simply seeing this sticker now reminds them to take a moment to be aware of the present moment. At the end of their six workshops, each student made a key chain of six coloured beads, and each bead corresponded to a different theme or Mindfulness practice (i.e. being aware of their breath, body, thoughts, feelings, letting go of judgment, being kind to themselves and practicing Mindfulness regularly while doing everyday activities).

After the training, the Grade 9's offered feedback. They felt they had learned techniques that will help them in life. They reported that they find themselves stopping to "take some mindful breaths" when they are stressed or overwhelmed. The Mindfulness program at Dr. Norman Bethune CI has received overwhelming support from our staff, students and community. We've come to realize that Mindfulness is not just changing how we learn, or how we teach, it's changing how we think.

(By Sandy Kaskens, Principal - Dr. Norman Bethune CI)

Whole Class Mindfulness: Everyday Breathing Room

In a pilot project last year, Grade 9 English students at Sir Wilfrid Laurier CI were led in a ten week daily 5-10 minute mindfulness-based practice at the beginning of each lesson. These daily lessons taught students how to ground themselves in a room, give their attention to the present moment and to look at situations with more clarity via practicing non-judgmental awareness. These practices helped build the students' capacity to self-regulate, thereby increasing their well-being and decreasing the feelings of physical and emotional stress and anxiety.

At the end of the ten weeks, via pre and post-practice questionnaires, students reported on average a 79% increase in their ability to concentrate, an 82% decrease in being emotionally distracted by events that happened before or those that may occur after class and a 78% decrease in stress felt in their bodies. There was a 14% increase in class average with a 26% increase in assignments submitted—with some of the most struggling students increasing their grades by anywhere from 15-29% with very little classroom intervention.

Breathing Room, a mindfulness training program created by myself, in collaboration with Mark Lilly from *Street Yoga*, is focused on Whole Classroom Mindfulness and aims to increase both educator and student capacity for greater well-being, grit and resilience through body-based mindfulness practices.

This three-part training is being offered to ER 13 educators as a pilot project. By first assessing our own core needs, educators in ER 13 will cultivate their own daily mindfulness practice and from there work on developing and implementing these practices to help meet the diverse needs of our students and our schools.

Breathing Room is not only a trauma and mental health informed training, but it builds core resilience skills and provides insight into how Whole Classroom Mindfulness practices are beneficial for all students, including student athletes, struggling and at-risk students, students with mental health concerns, high achieving/high functioning students, LGBTQ students and students on the autism spectrum.

(By Dani Harris, TDSB Teacher, Sir Wilfrid Laurier CI)

"Mindfulness really relaxed me and helped me out with work and staying focused. Living in the moment, 'cause it's there, now. It just works." M.K. – Gr. 11

"There were times when I'd come to class and I felt mad. When I did the breathing in and out, I felt calm after. I use this when someone gets me mad and I don't want to do anything to them." – F.C. Gr. 9

Mindfulness Resources:

The Mindfulness in Schools Project → <http://mindfulnessinschools.org/>

Everyday Mindfulness → <http://www.everyday-mindfulness.org/>

We Want to Hear from You!

Do you have great Mental Health and Well-Being initiatives in your school? If so, send us pictures, student written work, or art work that you would like to highlight.

Please email submissions to: saleem.haniff@tdsb.on.ca

Remember to view the "Foundations of Children and Youth Mental Health and Well-Being" online training module on KEY to Learn. This module has been loaded onto everyone's Learning Profile - click on the "MyLearning" tab to get started.

Upcoming Events

First Annual Secondary School
Anti-Stigma Student Symposium
Toronto Don Valley Hotel - 175 Wynford Dr.
November 27, 2014

Health and Wellness Room - Grand Opening
Lanor JMS
450 Lanor Ave.
December 4, 2014

Mental Health and Well-Being Core Leadership Team

Heather Johnson & Saleem Haniff, Social Workers, Mental Health and Well-Being – System Support

Rose D'Alimonte – Chief of Social Work Area D

Marcia Powers-Dunlop, Interim Senior Manager – Professional Support Services

Sandy Spyropoulos, Executive Superintendent – Student Support Services and Care