

Debbie Kasman, Author
Lotus of the Heart

Mindfulness in Education

We live in a stress-filled world. Our modern lifestyle contains media exposure and a great deal of high pressure. This constantly triggers the fight or flight response and keeps our bodies filled with stress hormones.

Dr. Patricia Jennings, Director of the Initiative on Contemplation and Education at the Garrison Institute in New York, maintains that it's hard for children to learn when they are under too much stress. Stressed-out children have difficulty engaging the prefrontal cortex in the brain, which makes it difficult for them to absorb and process new information. She also says that exposure to stress can trigger emotional reactivity during childhood development. This can have a long-term effect because it changes the way children's brains and bodies respond to future stressors.

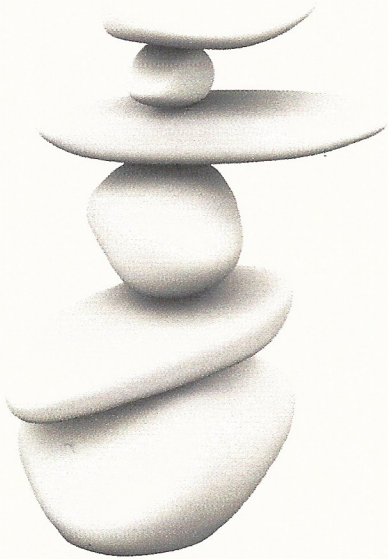
As the result of our stress-filled world, many children come to school with nervous systems that are *unprepared to learn*.

Introducing Mindful Teaching and Learning

Shifting to mindful teaching and learning is a critical step in the evolution of our education system. Mindfulness is the focusing of one's attention and awareness. It's a spiritual faculty but also a psychological one because it can help kids find wisdom through reflection. Mindful practices can help kids de-stress. They can also nurture the development of skills and values that emphasize moral character, love, compassion, patience, harmony, forgiveness, responsibility and a concern for others. All critical in our fast-paced modern world.

A strong body of research indicates the benefits of mindfulness. Highly-regarded research institutions, such as Harvard University and Massachusetts Institute of Technology, have studied what happens in the brain when people practise mindful techniques. There is growing recognition within the scientific community that mindful practices do work. Mindful techniques such as prayer, thoughtful self examination, contemplation, reflective writing and yoga help develop a person's inner self, and change the way the brain functions. According to psychiatrist Steven Selchen, a mindfulness expert and lecturer at the University of Toronto's Faculty of Medicine, there is vast research to show that the regular practice of prayer or other mindful practices can lead to increased brain activity, better immune responses and a reduction in stress.

Mindful practices help us to feel connected to others, to the human community, to nature, and to God. They help us to become more aware of the purpose and meaning of our lives. They help us to experience inspiration, creativity, epiphanies, *aha* moments and intuitive clarity. They help us to cope with the stresses of our world today and to develop sound ethical and moral practices. Mindful-based approaches have the ability to enhance the climate of classrooms and schools, because they help students and teachers stay calm, concentrate, focus their attention, and feel empathy, kindness and compassion toward others.



Mindful Practices Work

Athletes, artists and even great scientists have long known about the positive effects of mindful techniques. Retired basketball legend Kareem Abdul-Jabbar took up yoga as part of his training regime and used yoga techniques in practice and while playing. Albert Einstein used mindful practices to think more deeply. When working out a difficult solution to a mathematical or scientific problem, he would listen to classical music, play his violin, spend time quietly reflecting in his thinking chair (Yes, he had a thinking chair!) or take long walks in nature.

The business world is catching on, too. University of Toronto's Rotman School of Management now gives students the opportunity to practise mindfulness in a business setting through a training program developed at Google. The program uses mindful techniques to help students augment self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy and social skills.


If we reframe the way we think about mindfulness in our own lives and in our schools, it can be a revolutionary prescription for our stress-filled era. By developing our inner selves and those of our children, we will be better equipped to cope with the stresses of daily life, and in turn become better thinkers. We will develop sound ethical and moral practices, find peace within and help bring it to the world. Our students will also benefit from learning and practicing mindful techniques. They will be in a better position to absorb and process new information more easily. They can be healthier, more athletic and more creative, and have the tools they need to tap into their imaginations more freely, develop intuitive comprehension, and be more easily inspired.

With a solid foundation for mindful practice, both educators and the children that we serve will be much better prepared to deal critically, creatively and compassionately with the challenges ahead.

Getting Started

Jack Miller, professor at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto, says that educators have to have some experiential understanding of mindfulness before they can properly introduce it to our students. This means the shift needs to start with us. Administrators, teachers, superintendents and directors all need to develop mindful practices at home and at work. Where do you begin? As Catholic educators, mindful practices such as prayer and reflection are already part of the Catholic tradition. It's a matter of bringing these mindful practices into your busy every day life, at home and at school. You may also want to consider taking up yoga, walking, tai chi, or refresh your mindful skills by signing up for a spiritual retreat. Better yet, bring an instructor to your school and invite staff to participate with you. This kind of work is best done in community.

Another resource is Discover Mindfulness, a non-profit organization based in Ontario, which helps to create communities, tools and awareness in order to bring mindfulness, well-being and mental health to Canadian schools.

You can visit their website at discovermindfulness.ca for more information. 



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