

# Mindfulness

## IS NOT A CLASS PERIOD, IT'S A LIFESTYLE

BY JENNIFER CAPUTO

"I think we can all acknowledge that we live, breathe and work in a pedagogical field burdened with buzzwords. The latest word buzzing around is 'mindfulness.' So, let us begin this conversation with the intention of keeping the practice of mindfulness alive in the hearts and minds of educators.

As an educational consultant working with teachers all over New Jersey, Pennsylvania and Maryland for the last 15 years, it's become clear to me that many districts grasp desperately on to the latest buzzword in order to check the proverbial box so they can tout, "Yes! We do that in our district!" Disgruntled teachers share with me that they are provided with very little, or even no, time and resources to properly implement the "latest and greatest" instructional strategies and teaching techniques being introduced.

I've seen my share of educators rolling their eyes and throwing their hands in the air at this sad state of affairs. My conversations with them have shown me that they are open to support the latest and greatest methods and are in desperate need of the time and the resources to be able to implement these "cutting edge" methods properly. Unfortunately, if you've been in education for as little as a full school year, you've no doubt have had some experience with what I am sharing.

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Let's take a look at some education buzz words from the past 20 years. If you can't bear to read through this list, meet me at the paragraph below: 21st-century skills, collaboration, cooperative learning, collaborative learning, critical thinking, creativity, brain breaks, felt need, problem-based learning, inquiry-based learning, equanimity, Bloom's Taxonomy, Common Core, scaffolding, whole child, differentiated instruction, learning styles, multiple intelligences, infusing technology, brain-based learning, brain research, assessments, formatives, summatives, peer assessment, community building, team building, whole-group instruction, small-group instruction, test complexity, growth mindset, personalized instruction, life-long learning, researched-based, stakeholders, paradigm, Web 2.0, college and career ready, right-brain thinking, digital natives, neuroscience, real-world, BYOD, BYOT, sage on the stage, guide on the side, student-centered, digital literacy, digital citizen, data driven, flipping, innovation, tech-savvy, STEM, STEAM, global education, inclusivity, inventive spelling, and most recently—mindfulness.

I mean absolutely no disrespect to any of the terms and practices listed above. I whole-heartedly practice and believe in many of them. I've even designed graduate courses around them. Many of those buzzwords are responsible for keeping me excited about teaching and learning. Several have allowed me to help students successfully gain access to curricula. While mindfulness may be the latest buzzword, I don't want it to die a slow death by hearing it overused and practiced in an isolated manner as if it were a separate subject area, such as science, physical education, or art.

### LET'S TALK ABOUT MINDFULNESS

Mindfulness is paying attention and being aware of the world around you. It is intentional. It is being in the present moment with curiosity and kindness and without judgement. Mindfulness is not merely about the head and cognition, but about our entire being. The practice of mindfulness is beneficial to the brain, body and breath connection. The benefits of this practice are too great to lose.

The practice of mindfulness is popping up everywhere in the world around us. It's become an integral part of the medical field with practitioners advised to breathe mindfully while in the operating room. Janice Marturano, a senior executive with decades of experience in Fortune 200 corporations, encourages mindful leadership in corporate America in her book *Finding the Space to Lead: A Practical Guide to Mindful Leadership*. Professional athletes are paying thousands of dollars for personal mindfulness coaches to help improve their game.

Mindfulness is not the only word that can be used to describe the practice. To avoid its overuse, some alternative words can be used that will help

to keep this healthy habit alive and well in the classroom. These include compassion, awareness, attention, focus, heartfulness, self-awareness, self-cultivation, self-care, consciousness, alert, recognition, kindness, curiosity, non-judgment, non-judgmental, caring, sensible, and paying attention. Once we change our language around this nourishing practice and realize we can substitute one word for the other, mindfulness will naturally become embedded in our everyday instructional practices.

Mindfulness is not a class period, but a way of living day to day, a way to notice what is happening in the here and now without judgement and with kindness and curiosity. It is meant to be a life skill. It is meant to be a shift in instructional practices for teachers and leadership practices for administrators.

### MINDFULNESS IS A PURPOSEFUL PAUSE IN THE DAY.

Some of the names associated with mindfulness are Jon Kabat Zin, Janice Marturano, Dr. Ronald D. Seigel, Ellen J. Langer, and the Ramapo College of New Jersey Krame Center. I am currently designing a graduate level mindfulness course for The College of New Jersey and LaSalle University with the Regional Training Center. Be sure to look for it!

### WHAT MINDFULNESS IS

The practice of mindfulness is about sensory experience. An awareness of what is. It is about being present and being self-aware. Mindfulness creates a space after a stimulus to allow for a response rather than a reaction. Not only is this skill helpful for our students to develop, but it can also help teachers in the way they respond to students with more clarity for greater productivity.

### WHAT MINDFULNESS IS NOT

Mindfulness is not a religion. It is not about using mantras or visualization. It is not about being calm or being absent of thought. It is not meant to be used as a disciplinary measure or a silver-bullet cure-all.

### WHY MINDFULNESS?

Information is careening toward our students at super speeds, and they don't know what to do with it all. This excessive speed results in mindless tweets, inappropriate postings, bullying, feeling overwhelmed, and needing to keep up among



Students use the chimes and the singing bowl to signal the beginning and end of a mindfulness pause.

many other inappropriate behaviors. We are connected now more than ever and many of our students may not realize the emotional impact this has on them. Practicing mindfulness will help students to pump the breaks.

Increasing academic demands on educators and students creates climate of stress and anxiety. As a result, students and staff can have trouble with self-regulation. When used regularly, mindfulness can increase focus and concentration and promote a sense of calm that decreases stress and anxiety, improves impulse control, enhances self-awareness, helps children and teenagers respond to difficult emotions, increases empathy and understanding of others, and develops natural conflict resolution skills.

Not only is this skill helpful for our students to develop, but it can also help all school staff members in the way they react to students. It can improve classroom management and other concerns. Before reacting, taking a moment to check in and breathe can provide more clarity for greater productivity.

### MINDFULNESS AND THE BRAIN

#### *The prefrontal cortex*

The prefrontal cortex is in the front of the brain and is responsible for executive functioning. This part of the brain allows us to pay attention, regulate emotional balance and regulate our bodies. Research indicates that nine factors appear to be dependent on the regulating function

of the prefrontal cortex. These nine factors, which were identified by Dr. Ronald Siegel, are listed in the sidebar on Page 29, translate into nine aspects of well-being that can be developed through the practice of mindfulness.

### **The amygdala**

The amygdala is the emotional center of the brain. It is responsible for the fight, flight, or freeze response. When we are focused and balanced, everything becomes easier. Mindfulness is a big help in:

- Concentrating
- Learning
- Sleeping
- Making better decisions
- Being less reactive

We become more self-aware as we grow the ability to self-regulate. As we grow these abilities, we naturally become more compassionate toward ourselves, others and the environment.

### **The hippocampus**

Simply put, mindfulness improves memory by working to eliminate stress in the body. The hippocampus is the part of our brain that is responsible for memory. We know stress inhibits the storing of information and the recalling of information. Storing and recalling information is what the students are asked to do all throughout their day in our classrooms. Teachers are also required to do the same.

With demands being so high right now for both students and teachers, the practice of mindfulness can help to enhance the ability to store and recall information.

### **MAKING MINDFULNESS WORK**

Like every other skill and strategy educators teach students, modeling is the best approach. Practice along with the class and share your experience with the kids.

1. **Emphasize the breath:** In the practice of yoga, the inhale is an expansion of the breath; the life force of the body. Accompanying the inhale is the symbolic gesture of bringing in elements that best serve you: life, light, love, confidence, courage, trust, ease, calm, etc. In contrast, the exhale is a contraction of the respiratory system. The squeezing out of stale breath from the lungs and elements that no longer serve the body and brain: nervousness, worry, fear, anxiety, etc.
2. **Start slowly:** Release any pressure you feel to be perfect. It's not about being perfect. It's about being easy with the practice. (See [shiftforwellnes.com](http://shiftforwellnes.com).)
3. **Practice:** There is no right or wrong here. The practice of mindfulness is about tuning into the body, brain and breath and noticing what you notice.
4. **Set a goal:** Aim for two, three, five, or ten minutes throughout the day. Transitions are a wonderful opportunity as is relinquishing

the time to practice mindfulness over to the students. I have Tibetan chimes and a singing bowl in the classroom. Each day two students are responsible for leading us into the practice with the chimes and bringing us out with the singing bowl.

5. **Have fun:** Keep it simple so it's sustainable and long term. Allow it to become your classroom norm.

Here are some times throughout the day to consider practicing:

- Morning meeting
- Start of the day
- Transitions/between subjects
- In the middle of a lesson
- Midtest
- Writing prep
- After recess
- After lunch
- When students are tired/drained
- To alleviate negativity
- While waiting in line
- When focus and attention begin to diminish
- Community builder
- Close of the day

### **THE ROLE OF THE MINDFUL TEACHER**

Students can spot a fake a mile away. To teach mindfulness, it's essential that you make it a part of your lifestyle for there to be student buy-in. If you're screaming and yelling at your students all day long, there's no way they are going to close their eyes for you in class. They won't trust you because you're not walking the walk. Don't expect





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miracles. The practice of mindfulness is not a cure-all or meant to be used as a disciplinary tool.

Let's look at some ways perception plays into how we present ourselves in the classroom. There is significantly more occurring in the room than the presentation and exchange of cognitive information. Along with the conceptual information we teach, a large body of nonverbal information is being transmitted. Transmission can be talked about in several different ways:

- Unconsciously mimicking facial expressions
- Vocal expressions
- Postures
- Behaviors of those around us
- Arms folded, hands behind the back, and other stances

Nonverbal information travels in two directions in the classroom: from you to them and from them to you.

#### FROM YOU TO THEM

- You are transmitting your inner state before

you say anything. Their “read” on you is registered nonverbally first.

- If you are not present (because of stress, resistance, etc.), that registers, particularly in youth with trauma who are vigilantly assessing their environment.
- Mindless adults are often the norm for high-risk children and adolescent populations. In this instance “trauma” means highly sensitive, anxious children.

#### FROM THEM TO YOU

- Your ability to sense what is going on in other people is directly proportionate to your ability to sense or access your own feelings.
- Through the development of mindfulness, you can quickly and intuitively assess the mood and energy of the room.
- Through practice, there emerges a spontaneous sense of what is appropriate

based on what is presenting itself in the moment.

#### WHAT MINDFULNESS LOOK LIKE IN ROOM 37

Like every other teacher I know, I am constantly racing against time. Time, however stringent, should not be the reason mindfulness is not practiced. Initially, I was the person in the room who lead the practice and decided when it would happen. To my dismay, I went home too many nights one week realizing I never gave the children time to practice because I was more worried about getting through my lesson.

Without a doubt, of all the skills I teach, this incredibly healthful skill will be the one that will stay with my students throughout their lives. They have already proven that to me as they continue to reach out to tell me stories about how it has been affecting their lives for the better.

I turned the control of the practice over to the class. Each day when students enter the room, one student takes the chimes, and another takes the singing bowl. The children know that I can be in the middle of a word and if those chimes ring, everything stops. Lights go out. Blinds close. Projector goes to mute. There is darkness.

While the class is “shutting down” as we reduce the amount of visual stimulus in the room, children are positioning themselves into their mindful bodies: both feet are planted on the floor, spines are nice and tall to create lots of space for the breath to flow in and out, shoulders are rolled back and down and positioned over their hips, ears are in line with their shoulders, the chin is parallel to the floor, and they continue to grow their spine tall as they imagine a string attached to the crown of their head being pulled up to lengthen their spine to create more space for the breath.

The student with the singing bowl is responsible for ringing us out. The time can be anywhere from 30 seconds to three minutes. To allow the student with the singing bowl the opportunity to enjoy the practice, I will gently lay my hand on their shoulder to act as a reminder to ring us out.

#### DO'S AND DON'TS

The only rules are the ones set by the class. For example, the students

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## WHAT STUDENTS HAVE TO SAY

“Mindfulness is noticing what's happening right now.”  
– a student's definition

“I am always on the go... I'm tired, but on days like this, I am WIDE AWAKE.” – Megan

“I think this makes me happy and nice and calm. I love this and hope for more. This makes me feel good and awesome.” – Shawn

“I really do take the lessons into consideration. If I am ever having a stressful day, I come into class and mediate and everything about my day would go just fine.” – Briana

“This really helps me get the stress off and it is really smooth and flowing.” – Gabby

“...it sets the mood for the day.” – Gabi

“I really enjoy mindfulness because I didn't get much sleep, now I'm energized.” – Connor

“Whenever I'm stressed about something, mindfulness always helps me feel better and feel safe at school.” – Sierra

“...makes me feel relaxed and de-stresses me.” – Grace

“It is fun, and it is just like a mini nap and it makes me feel good.”  
– Milena

“It is wonderful, and it makes me relaxed and nice and ready for the day!” – Mariella

“I don't want to move ahhhhhhhhhhhh. More minutes!” – Thomas

“I like mindfulness because if you have a headache or stressed it will really calm you down.” – Haley

“I was going to ask to go to the nurse when I got to class, but I feel fine now.” – anonymous

MINDFULNESS

do not appreciate the chimes being rung during sustained silent reading time. They feel this is already a mindful practice, and they do not want it to be interrupted. Additionally, they avoid the use of chimes during a test that is timed. Otherwise, the middle of testing is a very popular time for chimes to be rung. On Page 26 is a picture of my students in the middle of a test with their heads down on yoga blocks. In this instance, they had a choice. As the year goes on, students have practice with many different approaches to mindfulness, and they begin to choose what will be best for them in a particular situation on a particular day.

As a mindful instructional practice, I stop class two minutes before the end of the period to encourage children to stop, put their things where they belong, think about where they are heading and gather the materials for their next class. During this time, they prefer the chimes not to be rung.

### COMMUNITY FEEDBACK

I talk about this practice and its importance during Back to School Night. I am always thrilled with the enthusiasm with which the practice is met. Parents are grateful that time is taken throughout the day to encourage students to tune in. They are supporting it at home. Many moms and dads tell me their child practices on their own at home and during extracurricular activities. This is music to my ears!

For me, Mondays are the best when the students come in to share stories with me from the weekend about how their practice helped them during an emergency room visit, a trip to the dentist, or a 3-2 count on the pitcher's mound. This is what it's all about.

We teach because we want to effect change. We want to raise adults and help to create contributing members of society. This practice sets the children in that direction. Imagine a world where everyone walking around in it is paying attention, self-aware, and compassionate. Wow! I want to live in that space. How about you? 🙏



## NINE ASPECTS OF WELL-BEING

The nine aspects of well-being, identified by Dr. Daniel J. Siegel, can be developed through the practice of mindfulness. Siegel is a clinical professor of psychiatry at the UCLA School of Medicine and the founding co-director of the Mindful Awareness Research Center at UCLA ([marc.ucla.edu](http://marc.ucla.edu)).

The nine aspects of well-being are bodily regulation, insight, attuned communication with others, empathy, emotional balance or regulation, fear modulation, response flexibility, intuition, and morality.

To read more about each of these aspects, go to [bit.ly/9-aspects-wellbeing](http://bit.ly/9-aspects-wellbeing).

After current and further research is completed, it's likely that a 10th item will be added to this list: gratitude.



## SAMPLE MINDFULNESS PRACTICE SCRIPT FOR YOUR CLASSROOM

**"Please get into your mindful bodies."**

Mindful bodies: Both feet are planted on the floor, spines are nice and tall to create lots of space for the breath to flow in and out, shoulders are rolled back and down and are over their hips, ears are in line with the shoulders, the chin is parallel to the floor, and continue to grow your spine tall as you imagine an imaginary string attached to the crown of your head being pulled up to lengthen the spine creating more space for the breath.

**"Allow your eyes to close or gaze gentle down at your desk."**

**"Place your hand on your anchor spot."**

Anchor spot is where they notice their breath moving: belly? cheek? nose? throat?

**"Please... (chose one)**

"...take 3 mindful breaths expanding on the inhaled and contracting your belly on the exhaled."

"...breathe mindfully for one minute."

"...listen mindfully for one minute. What sounds do you hear? in the room? hallway? outside?"

**Create your own script.**