

Mindfulness Techniques: Benefits for Teens--and Parents

by Dr. Roni Cohen-Sandler

Recently, I was discussing the topic of stress with a group of articulate high school students. After they described the pressures they were experiencing, we spoke of various effective strategies they could employ to take good care of themselves, develop healthy attitudes, and set realistic expectations. The students taught me about new online resources for improving study skills that I am now passing along to other teens.

As positive and empowering as this conversation was, however, the issue stirred up tense feelings. So I ended the workshop with a short, calming exercise. The girls trustingly followed my directions to sit quietly for five minutes with their eyes closed and simply concentrate on the movement of their breath. When this time had elapsed, a palpable and visible sense of serenity had filled the room. The students, their faces relaxed and smiling, seemed reluctant to leave.

In my practice, as well, I am seeing that mindful awareness is helping teens, tweens, and adults to make meaningful changes in their mood, sense of well-being, and behavior. These observations are borne out by a tremendous volume of new neuroscientific research on the physiological and emotional benefits of yoga, meditation, biofeedback, and mindfulness, including:

- Reduced stress
- Promotion of well-being
- Bolstered immune system
- Increased gray matter of brain
- Improved longevity

It is no surprise that “Mindful Techniques” was featured on the cover of The American Psychological Association’s October 2011 Monitor on Psychology. One recent study showed that after just three months of doing a simple mental exercise such as the one I did in my workshop with high school students, there is a profound shift in how the brain allocates attention.

By focusing on sensations and gently, non-judgmentally letting go of whatever thoughts wander into our minds, we teach ourselves to be fully present in the moment. While open to thoughts, moods, and sensations, we don’t become overwhelmed by or lost in them. Our minds are calmed and quieted. Over time, we become more adept at analyzing our own thought processes--an ability that psychiatrist Daniel J. Siegel refers to as the 7th sense or mindsight. He talks of achieving a state of “Dual-Attention,” which allows us to be aware of implicit memories so that they don’t distort our awareness of the present.

Mindfulness is a technique increasingly used to help parents approach challenging situations more effectively. Over time, mothers and fathers find that instead of behaving habitually or impulsively, developing focused attention allows them to see situations more accurately and to make better choices in how they respond to their kids. Even when dealing with impulsive and defiant children, parents find that by intentionally changing their reactions, they refrain from triggering further conflict and negative emotional experiences.

What helps in these situations? More balanced emotions, response flexibility, and more compassion for their teens as well as for themselves.

Teens and tweens who practice mindful techniques demonstrate similar benefits. Justine, for example, is a 17-year-old girl who made enormous strides in a relatively short period of time. When I first saw her, she was experiencing considerable anxiety, despair, self-deprecation, and symptoms of bulimia. As we worked together, she described being in a state of almost constant agitation at home, as she tensely anticipated her alcoholic mother's unpredictable volatility and hurtful verbal attacks. As Justine became better able to monitor and accept her own emotional reactions without becoming swept away by them, she could more accurately assess situations that arose.

Once she did so, she quickly accessed healthier coping strategies. In the face of provocations, Justine became more adept at staying calm and focused rather than responding rashly. She learned to communicate with greater clarity. Remaining in control fostered more self-acceptance. Most important, as she more astutely analyzed her thought processes, she was able to maintain love and concern for her mother while also taking more appropriate care of herself.

Remarkably, such changes in parents and teens are long-term. Due to neuroplasticity, mindfulness and similar exercises alter the structure and functioning of even mature, adult brains. In fact, research increasingly shows that mindful awareness is effective in helping to treat attention deficit and mood disorders--and reduces or eliminates the need for medication.

There are many different exercises that can be used to develop mindful awareness. To do the simple breathing exercise I used in the high school workshop, start with just five minutes in a quiet, private place. Focus on the flow of oxygen in and out of the nostrils or the rising and falling of the chest and abdomen. When inevitable, intrusive thoughts or feelings come to mind, gently note them and just refocus on your breathing. As comfort increases, gradually increase to 15 or 20 minutes per day.

This practice is appropriate for tweens and teens in the family, too. In fact, many young people today are learning about and embracing yoga, meditation, and other forms of mindful awareness. Some are even being offered yoga as an option for physical education in public and independent schools. Talk with your teens and tweens about the scientifically proven, short- and long-term gains. Encourage family members to practice mindfulness, especially during times of the day that would bring everyone an immediate sense of peacefulness. This is one thing you can definitely try at home!

TOOLS TO USE

FOR RELAXATION DOWNLOADS:

www.dartmouth.edu/~healthed/relax/downloads.html

FOR GUIDED MEDITATION AND MINDFULNESS PRACTICES:

www.marc.ucla.edu

www.drdansiegel.com/resources/everyday_mindsight_tools/

FOR FURTHER READING:

Everyday Blessings: The inner work of mindful parenting., M. Kabat-Zinn and J. Kabat-Zinn, 1997, Hyperion.

Parenting from the Inside Out: How a deeper self-understanding can help you raise children who thrive, by Daniel J. Siegel, MD, and Mary Harzell, M.Ed., 2004, Tarcher.

ONLINE MINDFULNESS COMMUNITY:

http://innerkids.ning.com/?xg_source=msg_mes_network