

How Mindfulness Can Help Educators and Students

A *Time* magazine cover story heralded “The Mindful Revolution.” Anderson Cooper explored mindfulness in a 60 Minutes segment, and more than 3 million users have downloaded an app called Headspace. These are just a few signs that mindfulness is gaining in popularity and acceptance.

So, what is mindfulness? It’s being aware of what is happening in the present moment. Most of the time, we are busy regretting something that happened in the past or worrying about the future. Although it is, of course, helpful at times to reflect and plan, many of us spend far too much time on repetitive thoughts and rumination, causing unnecessary pain and suffering. Mindfulness is the counterbalance to living our lives on “auto-pilot” in an increasingly distractible and agitated mind state.

Healthy stress is a natural part of life, including childhood. To grow and develop, children and adults need to be challenged. However, in the modern education system, healthy stress is frequently displaced by toxic stress, which occurs when life’s demands consistently outpace our ability to cope.

For students, toxic stress impairs attention, emotion, mood regulation, sleep, and learning readiness in the classroom. Even more troubling, prolonged exposure to childhood toxic stress can have a lifelong impact on mental and physical health.

For educators, toxic stress can impact productivity and creativity, and it can cause more serious symptoms, such as anxiety, dissociation, frustration, and burnout. Statistics show that more than half a million teachers in the United States leave the profession each year—many due to burnout and job dissatisfaction.

Solid evidence suggests that mindfulness practices can help teachers and students to:

- Increase attention by bringing their focus back to where they want it
- Respond appropriately by recognizing their emotions as they experience them
- Be more compassionate by better understanding what others are going through
- Find a sense of calm through breathing and other simple mindfulness practices
- Change behavior through an awareness of patterns
- Increase resilience by seeing everything objectively

There are many ways to integrate mindfulness in a school setting, but it is important to recognize that mindfulness truly comes from the inside out. Administrators can consider offering, or attending, an optional introductory program about mindfulness for school staff. It can be framed as “self-care” or “wellness,” which will resonate with most educators. Once teachers begin to understand how these tools can help them, they can take advantage of the online courses, workshops, and retreats that are available to help educators teach these skills to their students.

Breakthrough Magnet School in Hartford, Connecticut has embraced mindfulness and is experiencing its many benefits. Maritza Soto-Gomez is the school’s mindfulness program director, working with students to help them deal with the social and emotional demands of school and life. Soto-Gomez also helps teachers take care of themselves, and she provides them with the skills to teach mindfulness to students. She teaches even the youngest students about how the brain functions, uses music and video to guide lessons, and addresses the entire student body once each month to talk about topics related to mindfulness.

Mindfulness can benefit teachers, especially in a city like Hartford where there are so many challenges, said Katie Leonard, Breakthrough II Magnet School’s acting principal.

“The work that we do every day can take an emotional toll as we work with children that come from poverty, domestic violence, and have mental health issues, and these situations just touch the surface,” Leonard said. “Empathy for these situations takes on a new meaning through mindfulness and a ‘how can I help’ mindset sets in.”

Because mindfulness has so much potential to positively impact education, CREC and Central Connecticut State University are hosting an inaugural conference about mindfulness on December 10 and 11 at the university's New Britain campus. Keynote speakers include Linda Lantieri, director of the Inner Resilience Program, Brandon Nappi, executive director of the Copper Beech Institute, and James Tillman, an inspirational speaker and author.

CREC is a regional education service center that operates 18 inter-district magnet schools in Greater Hartford and offers more than 120 other programs and services.