

MINDFULNESS FOR TEACHERS

An Introduction to Mindfulness for You AND Your Students



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A 2016 study revealed that the most stressed-out profession in the United States was ... **teachers.**

As teachers, we face constant demands every day for our attention and energy. We work amidst frequent interruptions, and we confront challenging situations over which we may not have a lot of control. We continually activate our body's stress response, and begin to experience every day as a crisis.

Do you wish you felt a greater sense of **calm** and **ease** during the day?

Do you wish you had practices to make time for **stillness** and **silence**?

Do you wish you had better ways to manage your **stress**?

Do you wish you could help your **students** with *their* stress?

Mindfulness is not a cure-all, but a growing body of research demonstrates that a mindfulness practice can **reduce stress**, boost the **immune system**, enhance **focus** and **concentration**, **reduce** symptoms of **anxiety** and **depression**, and even help us **sleep** better! It is a powerful tool that can help students **cope with anxiety** and **focus in class**, help **teachers manage their stress** and build nurturing **relationships** with students, and help ALL of us live with greater **ease**.



This Brilliant Mindfulness guide will introduce you to mindfulness, and teach you practical strategies for finding **balance**, cultivating **well-being**, and **putting you back in control of your life**. You'll also learn a few ways to **introduce mindfulness to your students**.

Let's Begin!

What is Mindfulness?

Mindfulness is a popular buzzword these days. The *Huffington Post* proclaimed 2014 “the year of mindful living,” and *Time* magazine featured the “Mindful Revolution” on its January 2014 cover. In the years since, the interested in mindfulness has grown exponentially.

Mindfulness can be defined in many ways — the definition I like is:



compassionate and intentional awareness.

Mindfulness is the practice of **paying attention** — to thoughts, physical sensations, and the environment — without constantly feeling the need to judge what’s happening or to make it other than it is. To cultivate this present moment awareness, we **pay attention on purpose, with an attitude of kindness to ourselves and others.**

“Mindfulness is simply being aware of what is happening right now without wishing it were different; enjoying the pleasant without holding on when it changes (which it will); being with the unpleasant without fearing it will always be this way (which it won’t).”

James Baraz

Mindfulness is essentially a way of being in the world. It is being **present** and **available**. It is a fundamental human capacity.

You've probably experienced it before, whether you've labeled it as such or not.

Think of a time when you were so engaged in an activity — creating a work of art, playing a sport, reading a good book, teaching your favorite lesson — that **your entire being focused on that one activity**. That heightened state of attention is mindfulness.

Mindful Schools program director Megan Cowan describes mindfulness as “a human ability, that, when it is lacking, makes life more unbearable.”

Mindfulness is a way of meeting our experience with the presence of mind to respond skillfully to life's challenges, rather than reacting based on intense emotions.

Mindfulness teaches us an **awareness** of the habits of our **minds** and allows us to catch ourselves in negative patterns of rumination. We may see that a good deal of our suffering comes from the stories we tell ourselves about the events in our lives, rather than from the events themselves.

We find a way to soothe the fight-or-flight response in our body, and activate the so-called "rest-and-digest" mode, so we can feel more at ease, even when we're stressed.

“The happiness of your life depends upon the quality of your thoughts.”

Marcus Aurelius



The Case for Mindfulness

The mindfulness that is taught today in hospitals, clinics, schools, military bases, and corporations is based primarily on Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR), developed by Jon Kabat-Zinn (a researcher at the University of Massachusetts Medical Center) in the late 1970s. He created MBSR to treat patients who suffered from chronic pain, and hadn't responded to traditional treatments. He developed MBSR based on his knowledge of meditation and yoga, stripping them of their metaphysical and spiritual components. Most amazingly, he found that simply teaching people meditation and mindfulness helped relieve their physical pain!

MBSR courses today (there are thousands of them across the US) teach basic mindfulness practices such as body scans and breath awareness, as well as gentle yoga and movement exercises. They are essentially teaching life skills for coping with the human experience.

Mindfulness has become a core component of many mental health therapies today, including Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT) and Dialectical Behavioral Therapy (DBT). Corporations like Google and General Mills teach mindfulness classes to their employees, and incorporate meditation into the workday, and many schools are bringing mindfulness to their students and teachers.



Mindfulness is about accepting the full range of the human experience, whether we might label it as “good” or “bad.”

How to Practice Mindfulness

While mindfulness is a simple practice, it's not always easy. We may find it hard to make time for it. We may find it boring. We may worry if we're doing it right.

Luckily, mindfulness is not something you can do "wrong." No moment of intentional awareness is ever wasted!

The easiest way to begin a personal mindfulness practice is to **spend a few moments each day focusing your awareness on the breath.**

Begin with just 5 minutes each day. Gradually increase the time you spend doing this over several weeks.

A few minutes of mindfulness each day is better than an hour on the weekend. Some researchers have found that **as little as 12 minutes a day** of mindfulness practice over an **eight-week** period can produce **noticeable changes in the brain, decrease levels of anxiety,** and **increase immune function** and overall **happiness and well-being.**



“Mindfulness training can enhance teachers’ sense of well-being. It can also provide a buffer against the stress that arises from the demands and challenges of the classroom environment.”

- Lisa Flook, University of Wisconsin-Madison

mindfulness

The easiest mindful breathing technique is to **count the breath**. Count each in-breath and out-breath with the same number: “One” {in-breath}, “One” {out-breath}, “Two” {in-breath}, “Two” {out-breath}, and so on. Once you hit 10 {which rarely happens before your mind has wandered!} you start over at one.

If you don't like counting, you can simply repeat to yourself “in, out.... in, out...” as you breathe in and out.

When your **mind wanders** ~ which it WILL DO {that's what the mind does!} ~ gently **bring your attention back to your breath**. If you need to start over counting because you don't remember where you left off, that's fine! The key is to not criticize or judge yourself for "letting" your attention wander. In fact, **noticing that your mind has wandered is the whole point of mindfulness ~ you are becoming more aware of the actions of your mind!**

Even the relatively simple instruction to “follow the breath” can sound a bit vague. You can try focusing on **where you notice the sensation of the breath** — in the chest and lungs? the nose? the belly? That is your **anchor**. Each time your mind wanders, come back to the physical sensations of breathing.

When thoughts arise, it's easy to get distracted and follow them and engage with them.... A helpful practice is to simply label the thoughts: “worrying,” “planning,” “remembering.” Don't worry about figuring out the precise label for the type of thought you're having. Just “thinking” will do, too!

And if the thoughts don't go away? It's still okay. Chade-Meng Tan writes in *Search Inside Yourself*, “When we let go of something that distracts our meditation, we are gently inviting it to stop distracting us, but we generously allow it to decide whether or not it wants to stay.”



SELF-CARE FOR TEACHERS

In addition to mindfulness practice, there are many ways we can nurture ourselves and protect ourselves from burnout as educators. Try a few of the suggestions here to keep your passion for teaching alive and to be fully present in your work.

1 Make a Smile File: Save all those lovely notes and pictures and cards from parents and students, and pull them out when you need reminders of the impact you are making.

2 Connect with Colleagues: If you can, eat lunch with your colleagues and enjoy adult conversation and friendship.

3 Set an Intention: Take three deep breaths and set your intention for the day (e.g., “Today may I speak kindly.”)

4 Connect to Your WHY: Each morning, spend a few moments remembering why you teach.

5 Savor the Good: Did a lesson go really well? Did you have a meaningful connection with a student today? Savor the experience, and reflect on the qualities that YOU possess that made the moment happen.

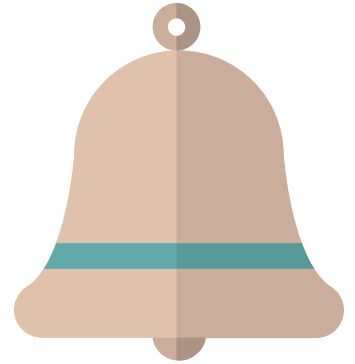
6 Pause and Breathe: Click [here](#) to access your FREE guided meditations just for teachers!

Mindfulness for Students

SIMPLE PRACTICES FOR YOUR CLASSROOM

1. Listen to the bell.

An easy way for children to practice mindfulness is to focus on paying attention to what they can **hear**. You could ring a bell or a set of chimes, or use an app that has bell or nature sounds on it. Tell students that you will make the sound, and they should listen carefully until they can no longer hear the sound. This exercise often has a calming effect, and it's a fun way to teach kids to pay attention to their surroundings.



2. Start with a mindful moment.

For middle and high school students, the school day is pretty busy! Even in elementary school, kids spend a lot of their day taking in information, responding to the environment, interacting with others, and otherwise just being "ON." We rarely give them a moment to pause, settle their nervous system, and refocus their attention and energy on a new task.

At the beginning of class you can take a mindful moment: invite students to close their eyes (if they're comfortable doing so), and take a few deep breaths. They can pay attention to breathing — what does it feel like when they breathe in and out? Or they can notice their thoughts — is their mind really busy or quiet right now?

3. Check in with your attention.

Announce a short "attention check" in the middle of a lesson, or during the middle of independent or group work time. Ask students to pause and "check in with their attention." Is their attention here, in class? Was their mind wandering? If so, where had their attention gone?

Emphasize that mind-wandering is completely normal and to be expected — it's what minds do! The important thing is to notice what the mind is doing, and then to understand you now have a choice about where to direct your attention. We can't force kids to pay attention, but the more we practice this "attention check-in," the more skilled they will become at monitoring their own attention and redirecting it when necessary.

Mindfulness in Schools

Brilliant Mindfulness offers in-person mindfulness programs for **students** (pre-K through 12th grade) in the Minneapolis/St. Paul area. Sarah Rudell Beach, an experienced teacher and a Mindful Schools Certified Instructor, guides students in fun and age-appropriate mindfulness practices to help them improve their **emotional awareness, self-regulation, and concentration, and reduce stress and anxiety.**

[Click here to learn more about programs for students](#)

We also offer powerful professional development programs for **teachers.** Teachers will learn strategies for managing their **stress,** as well as simple ways to **introduce mindfulness to students.**

[Click here to learn more about programs for teachers](#)

Not in the Minneapolis/St. Paul area? Check out our online training for teachers below (group discounts available):



Sarah Rudell Beach, M.Ed.

Sarah Rudell Beach taught high school social studies for 17 years before founding Brilliant Mindfulness.



She has had a long-time mindfulness practice, and truly believes that teaching compassionate awareness to children and adults will change the world. Contact her at sarah@brilliantmindfulness.com.