An Introduction to Mindfulness for School-Based Mental Health Professionals

Kristen Battle-Nicholson, Ed.D., LCSW-C
Baltimore City Public Schools
Tasheka Cox, Ed.D., LICSW
District of Columbia Public Schools
Learning Objectives

• Participants will be able to identify the negative impact of stress on students, educators, and school based staff members.
• Participants will utilize simple mindfulness practices to minimize the impact of stressful emotions.
• Participants will utilize mindfulness-based practices that can be implemented into the classroom and overall school setting.
The stress response involves physiological changes that occur when you face a perceived threat—when you face situations where you feel the demands outweigh your resources to successfully cope.
When your stress response is triggered, a series of changes occur within your body. They include:

• Hormones such as adrenaline and cortisol are released
• Heart rate increases
• Blood pressure rises
• Digestion slows down
Common Symptoms of Stress

• Muscle Tension
• Rapid or Irregular breathing
• Insomnia
• Difficulty concentrating, racing thoughts
• Increased or decreased appetite
• Gastrointestinal and digestive complaints
• Increased irritability or frustration
• Low energy
• Headaches
What mindfulness is not . . .
What mindfulness is not . . . . (cont.)
Mind Full, or Mindful?
What is mindfulness?

Mindfulness is “paying attention on purpose in the present moment, non-judgmentally.” (Jon Kabat-Zinn)

ABC’s of mindfulness
A is for awareness - Becoming more aware of what you are thinking and doing and what’s going on in your mind and body.
B is for "just being" with your experience. Avoiding the tendency to respond on auto-pilot and feed problems by creating your own story.
C is for seeing things and responding more wisely. By creating a gap between the experience and our reaction to, we can make wiser choices.
Why Mindfulness?
How can mindfulness help?

“Between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom.” Victor Frankl
Mindfulness creates space, shifting brain activity from the reactive amygdala to the thoughtful prefrontal cortex.
The Second Arrow

Ouch! 
Arrows hurt!!

I get hit with arrows more than other people!

What if there are more arrows?
There must be something wrong with me.

Arrows are the worst!

I can’t handle another arrow.

That arrow totally had it in for me.
Practicing Mindfulness Meditation

BASIC MINDFULNESS MEDITATION

start here: set intention to pay attention to anchor

focus attention on the breath (or sound, or body)

realize mind has wandered

mind wanders -- memories, planning, worrying, etc.

Brilliant Mindful YOU!

BrilliantMindfulness.com
Mindfulness Exercises

Mindful Breathing

Body Scan
The Best Season of Your Life

Ten thousand flowers in spring, the moon in autumn, a cool breeze in summer, snow in winter.

If your mind is not clouded by unnecessary things, this is the best season of your life.

~ Wu Men, Song period Chán master
Developing a Personal Practice

Formal Practices:

● Sitting Meditation

● Body Scan
Informal Practices/Daily Shortcuts

- Begin each morning with a deep breath. State an affirmation as a form of mindful intention. “I am peaceful today.” “I will radiate peace.” (Bush, 2011)
- Refrain from checking your phone, email, or thinking about work as you are getting ready for the day. As you shower ask yourself, “Am I really in the shower?”
- Connect with your loved ones before you leave the house (i.e., make eye contact, smile, hug). (Bush, 2011)
- When stopped at a red light, wish other drivers goodwill. (Bush, 2011)
- Take a pause throughout the day to notice your breath (i.e., bathroom break, before lunch, before a meeting). (Bush, 2011)
- Do at least one task mindfully (i.e., mindfully eat a snack, washing dishes).
- Limit multi-tasking. Avoid checking email when you’re focused on a task.
- Jot down or visualize at least three things daily that you are grateful for.

(Shortcuts to Inner Peace: 70 Simple Paths to Everyday Serenity by Ashley Davis Bush, LICSW)
Students and Mindfulness Research

Studies find that youth benefit from learning mindfulness in terms of improved cognitive outcomes, social-emotional skills, and well being. In turn, such benefits may lead to long-term improvements in life. For example, social skills in kindergarten predict improved education, employment, crime, substance abuse and mental health outcomes in adulthood.

Cognitive Outcomes
- Attention and Focus
- Grades

Social-emotional Skills
- Emotion regulation
- Behavior in school
- Empathy and perspective-taking
- Social-skills

Well Being
- Test anxiety
- Stress
- Posttraumatic symptoms
- Depression
7th Grade Mindfulness Focus Group

• “It’s helped to where I can ignore people.”
• “Helps me keep calm no matter how much people try to annoy me.”
• “When there’s a problem going on at home I don’t get too wrapped up in it.”
• “To calm down when I see my dad and not think about what he has done in the past and just think about what he’s trying to do now.”
• “I recommend this for people with anger issues or anxiety because you get to pause and see things.”
• “I would recommend this to my mom because both me and her have gone through a lot of stress the past couple of years, so it’d be nice for my mom to like have a time where she can just calm down.”
Benefits of Mindfulness for Students

https://youtu.be/hPkOvgVQFzM
Mindfulness Practices with Students

- Mindful Breathing
- Body Scan
- Mindful Eating

- Breathing exercises (i.e., blowing bubbles, pinwheels).
- Journaling/Drawing
- Use of snow globes/mind jar
- Bell counting
- Inspirational stones
- Worry Boxes
- Creative coloring
- Use of stories about kindness, empathy, and dealing with difficult emotions.
- Mindful movement (i.e., yoga, stretching exercises).
Mindfulness Practices with Students (cont.)
Final thoughts about mindfulness

“What every child wants to know is, “Do your eyes light up when I enter the room? Did you hear me and did what I say mean anything to you?” That is all they are looking for - what everybody is looking for.”

- Toni Morrison
“The foundation for teaching mindfully is always our own mindfulness practice.”

Daniel Rechtschaffen – “The Way of Mindful Education: Cultivating Well-being In Teachers and Students”