

Mindfulness for teachers and students

By **Elizabeth Grassi**, Professor of Education, Regis University (USA) and Fulbright Roving Scholar in Norway 2023-24

Over the past decade, mindfulness meditation has been implemented in schools to help students relieve anxiety and stress, regulate strong emotions, and increase focus in the classroom. Teachers also benefit from practicing mindfulness with their students as they find increased well-being and lowered stress levels as well.

In the last few years, with the use of functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging (fMRI) technology, neuroscientists are able to see how meditation impacts certain regions of the brain. Most neuroscience studies have been conducted on the Mind-

fulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) 8-week program from the University of Massachusetts Medical School (Kabat-Zinn, 1990), and have found that after 8 weeks of meditation the volume of certain aspects of the brain changes. For example, the hippocampus (responsible for learning and memory) increases in volume, the amygdala (responsible for the flight or fight response to perceived stress), decreases in volume, and the prefrontal cortex (responsible for decision making and focusing attention) increases in volume and increases in connection to other parts of the brain (Holzel, et al., 2013). Further

studies are being conducted which indicate that meditation causes structural and functional changes in brain networks (Afonso, et al., 2020).

The difference between mindfulness and meditation

The words “mindfulness” and “meditation” are often interchanged, but they are not the same thing. *Mindfulness* is simply “paying attention to the present moment, on purpose, with total acceptance and non-judgment” (Kabat-Zinn, 1990). This sounds simple in theory, but the practice is actually quite difficult at first. For exam-

ple, if you were told to take one minute and be mindful, your mind would become very active during this one minute as it jumped between thoughts of the past and thoughts of the future, never landing on any aspect of the present moment. In order to become “mindful” one needs to practice **meditation**, which is a type of training for the brain. Many teachers and students spend much time exercising the body, engaging in sports or training in the gym, but rarely do they spend the same amount of time exercising the brain. Yet exercising the brain - spending 10-20 minutes a day on focused meditation - is what increases mindfulness and brings the beneficial results of mindfulness listed above.

How does one practice meditation?

While many people believe “meditation” is the practice of clearing the mind, meditation is actually the practice of “noticing” the mind, the body, and the emotions. Your mind is filled with thoughts that are constantly pulling you this way and that. We have thoughts of the past (“I can’t believe I said that at lunch!”, “I wish I could be back at that beach we visited,” or “I can’t believe they actually did that!”), and thoughts of the future (“I need to pick up butter,” “I’ve got to grade the students’ papers tonight!”, “I can’t wait for vacation”). Rather than staying in the present moment, our minds like to constantly jump between the past and the future. In the meditations I describe in this article, we focus our minds on a present moment “anchor,” such as the breath, the body,

or sounds around us, and, consequently, train our minds to stay within the present moment for short periods of time. When we first begin this practice, our thoughts from the past and future will become anxious and they will occupy us and pull us here and there. In meditation we call this being “hooked on a thought.” But we simply notice that we are hooked on a thought and come back to our present moment anchor. At first, we will need to come back from our thoughts to the present moment anchor many times in a short practice, but the more we practice the more our minds will settle and the longer we can focus on the present moment anchor. This practice of coming back to the present moment anchor is what produces the benefits of mindfulness.

Meditation strategies

If the practice of meditation is simply *noticing the present*, then there are some quick and simple strategies teachers can implement into their busy lives or implement in the classroom with students to notice the present moment (Hansen, 2019; Rogers, 2016). Below are five different strategies that require very little time and can be conducted almost anywhere:

1. Noticing the beauty around you

Noticing the small but beautiful things around you can increase well-being and happiness. For this meditation, our present moment anchor is our five senses. As you walk into your building to teach, take a moment to notice some-

thing beautiful you see, hear, smell, taste, or feel. Do you notice the color of the leaves changing, the feel of the sun on your face, the fresh smell of coffee, the smile of a colleague? As you notice these ‘everyday beauties,’ feel where they land in your body and absorb this feeling of well-being, warmth, or happiness into your body for a few seconds before beginning your day. Noticing something beautiful and then noticing where you feel this in your body is the practice of meditation. This practice can be used by teachers to start their day, and with students to begin or end a class on a positive note, fostering a supportive and uplifting learning environment.



© Michał Rojek | Dreamstime.com



© Khosrork | Dreamstime

2. Simple breathing

Our breath is something that we always have with us and can be used to anchor us to the present moment. Pause and just notice where you feel your breath in this moment. Some people may feel their breath in the rise and fall of their abdomen, perhaps the rise the fall of their chest, the back of their throat, or the tip of their nose. Any place you feel your breath is fine. Now, just take a moment to feel your breath go into your body – follow it as long as you can – and then feel your breath come out of your body. When your mind wanders to thoughts, just notice you are thinking and come back to your breath. You can practice this for 1 minute or more. This practice can also be used with students if students are given the freedom to stop or not participate if they feel uncomfortable.

Sometimes sitting still and focusing on the breath can make people more anxious. In this case, it is best to stop the practice. But those students who are open to trying this technique, will probably become more attuned to their bodily experiences and may learn to acknowledge and manage distracting thoughts or emotions that may arise.

3. Sound meditation

Many people enjoy using sounds around them as an anchor for the present moment. As you are teaching, or walking to and from school, sitting in your car, or perhaps walking to the lunchroom, take a moment to just notice where you feel your breath in this moment. Perhaps the rise and fall of your abdomen, the rise and fall of your chest, the back of your

throat or the tip of your nose. As you notice your breath, also take note of any sounds that come to your ears. You can label the sounds for what they are, such as “talking,” “coughing,” “air conditioning,” “birds,” “cars,” or you can just label them as “sound,” “sound,” “sound.” Once you have heard a sound and labeled it, come back to the sensation of your breath until another sound comes to your ears. Keep labeling the sounds and coming back to your breath for as many minutes as you have available. This practice is also helpful to bring students to the present moment. The teacher can pause the class and just have students write down any sound they hear for 1-5 minutes.

4. Gratitude practices

Taking the time to find gratitude for the small things will increase your sense of well-being. Gratitude practices have also been shown to increase happiness, especially when practiced regularly. Noticing where this gratitude lands in your body, really feeling it, and writing it down will help even further.

Example: **Gratitude list.** At the end of your day, take a moment to notice, feel, and write down what was good within your hard day (e.g., one of my students loved my lesson, an activity I did was really effective, a colleague helped me out today, one of my students made me laugh). As you write these down, notice your body. Where do you feel the sensation of gratitude? What does it feel like? By really noticing the feeling of

gratitude in your body and holding it for a few seconds, you are engaged in a short meditation that will help you reap the benefits of this practice. This is a practice that can also be done with students before a class begins or after a class has ended.

5. Walking meditation

For this meditation, the present moment anchor is our feet and any sounds we hear. If possible, it helps to do this meditation barefoot. Teachers can guide students in this practice in a circle around the classroom, or outside for a short break. Take a very, very slow walk and as you walk, notice just the sensations in your feet. How are your feet moving to propel you forward? Which muscles are working? Do you have any sensations in your feet such as warmth, coolness, perhaps nothing at all? How does the ground feel under your feet – bumpy, rocky, smooth? Are there other parts of your body that need to help your feet move you forward? What do they feel like? Are there any unpleasant sensations in your feet or body? How about pleasant sensations? If your mind wanders to thoughts, that's OK. Just notice that you are thinking and bring your focus back to the sensations in your feet.



© nbfox1 Pixabay

Becoming more mindful

The more teachers and students practice different types of meditation, the more mindful they become. As teachers and students notice their body, their breath, their emotions, or the sounds around them in short moments throughout the day, they start to come into the present moment and notice aspects of the present moment in everyday life. In other words, they become more **mindful**. But as mindfulness slowly emerges, one needs to continue to practice meditation. Every time we catch ourselves thinking of the past or future, or we engage in short meditations, we remind our brain that it can come back to the present moment. And by coming back to the present moment for short moments, we increase our well-being and decrease stress. As noted above, meditation does not need to involve a formal practice where one is seated for an hour, but short bursts can be

incorporated into a busy day and move us more towards becoming more mindful. Research has not indicated the exact amount of time needed to reap the physical, mental, and emotional benefits of meditation, but even a short practice is a way for both teachers and students to relax and reset before continuing with their day.

Bibliography

- Afonso, R.F., Kraft, I., Aratánha, M.A., Kozasa, E.H. (2020). Neural correlates of meditation: a review of structural and functional MRI studies. *Frontiers in Bioscience, Scholar*, 12, 92-115.
- Hanson, R. (2019). *Hardwiring happiness: The new brain science of contentment, calm, and happiness*. Harmony.
- Holzel, B.K., Hoge, E.A., Greve, D.N., Gard, T., Creswell, J.D., Brown, K.W., Barrett, L.F., Schwartz, C., Vaitl, D., Lazar, S.W. (2013). Neural mechanisms of symptom improvements in generalized anxiety disorder following mindfulness training. *NeuroImage: Clinical*, 2, 448-458.
- Kabat-Zinn, J. (1990). *Full catastrophe living*. Delta Publishing.
- Rogers, H.B. (2016). *The mindful twenty-something: Life skills to handle stress. . . and everything else*. New Harbinger Publications.