



Mindfulness for Educators:

A Trauma-Informed approach to supporting ourselves and our students

The expectation that we can be immersed in suffering and loss daily and not be touched by it is as unrealistic as expecting to be able to walk through water without getting wet. - Rachel Naomi Remen, Kitchen Table Wisdom 1996

Impact of Stress

Health

Destructive effects of stress affect the entire body. Our bodies regulate stress using a system called the HPA axis. HPA stands for “hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal”, which sends chemical signals through the brain and the body in reaction to intense situations. Some recognizable emotional and physical responses to these chemical signals are: fear and anxiety, increased heart rate, clammy skin, and a dry mouth.

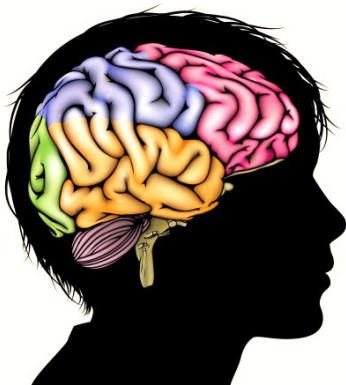
Many effects of the HPA axis are less immediately apparent: neurotransmitters activate, glucose levels rise, the cardiovascular system sends blood to the muscles, and inflammatory proteins surge through the bloodstream.

Unfortunately, the HPA axis can't distinguish between different types of threat, so it activates every defense, all at once, in response to any threat.

Overloading the HPA axis, especially in childhood, produces serious and long-lasting negative physical, psychological, and neurological effects. It's not the stress itself but the body's reaction to the stress. The process of managing stress, called “allostasis”, causes wear and tear on the body. If the body's stress-management systems are overworked, they eventually break down under the strain or allostatic load. The higher our allostatic load, the greater the risk of damage.

Child Development and The Brain

The part of the brain most affected by early stress is the



prefrontal cortex, the area responsible for self-regulation. Children who grow up in stressful environments have more difficulty with concentration, sitting still, rebounding from

disappointments, and following directions. Being overwhelmed by uncontrollable impulses and distracted by negative feelings,

it's more difficult to learn the alphabet, manage anger and calm back down, follow directions, and other self-control-related behaviors.

In early childhood, our brains and bodies are most sensitive to the effects of stress and trauma. In adolescence the damage inflicted by stress can lead to serious and long-lasting problems. While problems for kids in elementary school might include being sent to the principal's office or fighting with a friend, adolescents might engage in high risk behaviors like using drugs or alcohol, having unprotected sex or dropping out of high school. These behaviors are likely to have long-term consequences.

Benefits of Mindfulness

Mindfulness

Here, now. Present moment. Not judging our experience as good or bad, but simply experiencing it.

Health

Mindfulness practice is an effective method to reduce stress and tension, and promote physical, emotional, and spiritual relaxation. The link between stress and disease has long been established by both Eastern and Western health studies. Mindfulness techniques directly train the central nervous system—the intermediary between the body and the mind—to relax. This increases stamina and intellectual performance, as well as promoting good health. Positive reactions can range from feeling less pain and having more energy, to being more centered, relaxed, and comfortable with your body. Some people report that they sleep much better; others report greater flexibility and balance.

Scientists have discovered the benefits of mindfulness techniques can lower blood pressure, reduce chronic pain, alleviate gastrointestinal difficulties, and improve sleep.

The Brain

The neurons in our brains connect together chemically and electrically in clusters called neural pathways. Our sense impressions, memories, abilities, and emotional patterns are all encoded this way in the physiology of the brain. Mental traffic tends to follow existing routes, regardless of whether the neural

pathway is appropriate, accurate, or actually beneficial. The more we repeat a particular pattern, starting in our childhoods, the more habitual it becomes.

Mental Wellbeing

Mindfulness provides a great tool for self-acceptance, which helps build compassion for others. Mindfulness techniques help us train our mind to observe our own thoughts, feelings, and sensations with an objective view. Mindfulness practice presents an effective method to get to know oneself (self-regulation of emotions), to reduce stress, and to live in the present moment, which can cultivate reduced anxiety and fear and foster resilience.

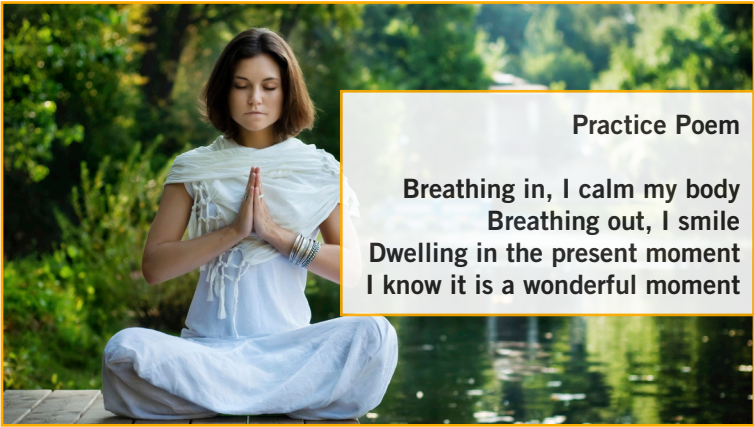
Our True Home

Every time we listen to the sound of the bell, we can silently recite this poem: “I listen, I listen, this wonderful sound brings me back to my true home.” Where is our true home that we come back to? Our true home is life, our true home is the present moment, whatever is happening right here and right now. Our true home is the place without discrimination, the place without hatred. Our true home is the place where we no longer seek, no longer wish, no longer regret. Our true home is not the past; it is not the object of our regrets, our yearning, our longing, or remorse. Our true home is not the future; it is not the object of our worries or fear. Our true home lies right in the present moment. If we can practice according to this teaching and return to the here and now, then the energy of mindfulness will help us to establish our true home in the present moment. – Thich Nhat Hanh

10 Breaths practice – Glen Schneider

This is a simple way to use conscious, rhythmic breathing to help us connect with ourselves and our life and live more fully.

1. Stop whatever you’re doing.
2. Close your eyes. Put your dominant hand on your belly, and begin to pay attention to your breath. Notice the rise and fall of your belly as you breathe. Take three deep breaths to settle and clear your mind.
3. When you feel more present, either open your eyes and look at the object of your concentration, or keep your eyes closed and keep your focus on your breath. Take a deep slow breath in and then out. That is “one”.
4. Continue counting each breath: “two”, “three”, “four”. Let your encounter unfold naturally. Just behold the object of your concentration and observe it without mental commentary or judgment as you count. Notice its color, shape, sound, or smell.



5. While counting, become aware of your body and any sensations or emotions that may arise. Allow every cell of your body to open up to the encounter. Allow the experience to be as full as possible. Don’t hold back
6. When you have reached “ten”, rest in the feeling of the moment. If you’d like, take ten more breaths the same way.

**When something wonderful calls you,
this is a “10 Breaths” moment**

We can also teach youth that they can use this for everything from eating chocolate, to watching a sunset, to walking along the beach, to playing with a pet. We can encourage youth to do the 10 Breaths practice every day, but it requires that they have a regular opportunity to be guided by a supportive adult.

Thanks to neuroscience research, we know that it takes about 30 seconds to root a new neural pathway. If we’re taking 10 breaths while savoring a positive experience on a regular basis, we’re slowly rewiring our brains.

Resources

Practice Poem

In, Out
Deep, Slow
Calm, Ease
Smile Release
Present moment, Wonderful moment

Books

Schneider, Glen,
Ten Breaths to Happiness,
Parallax Press, Berkeley, CA. 2013

Willard, Christopher,
Child’s Mind,
Parallax Press, Berkeley, CA. 2010

Apps

Mindfulness Clock
www.mindfulnessdc.org/mindfulclock.html

Stillness Buddy
www.stillnessbuddy.com/

Meditation
www.headspace.com