



INTRODUCING MINDFULNESS INTO EDUCATION

Published in Sunday Times Malta 24th April 2016

In Malta, as in most countries around the world, we are seeing an increase in young people drinking more alcohol, experimenting with drugs and self-harming. All these behaviours stem from the effects of anxiety, stress and depression.

Mindfulness is emerging as one way to help tackle these problems and it's being done by simply introducing Mindfulness into schools. A wealth of scientific evidence shows teaching mindfulness in the classroom reduces behaviour problems and aggression among students, and improves their happiness levels and ability to pay attention. Teachers trained in mindfulness also show lower blood pressure, less negative emotion and symptoms of depression, and greater compassion and empathy.

The best description of what mindfulness is comes from Jon Kabat-Zin Ph.D., who pioneered the Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction Program at the University of Massachusetts Medical School in 1979.

*“Mindfulness means paying attention in a particular way;
On purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally.”*

Mindfulness practice in schools enables children to recognise and overcome the many ways in which we tend to get caught in rumination, distraction and resistance. They reveal the inherent ability of the mind and body to rebalance and sustain wellbeing, and help us to discover positive new perspectives, behaviours and solutions (Mental Health Foundation, 2011).

Who practices Mindfulness?

Mindfulness is recommended by the National Institute for Clinical Excellence (NICE). Psychiatrists; psychologists; medical professionals; teachers, schoolchildren, the Armed Forces; staff at Google and the Bank of England are just some who have trained in mindfulness. If you don't have time to practice mindfulness, then you're probably the very person who needs it!

How is mindfulness being taught into schools?

A certified Teacher such as one trained by the EFT and Mindfulness Centre, can offer an informal introductory session to give a flavour of the course. The curriculum based courses are suitable for ages from 5yrs to 18yrs. Mindfulness is based in neuroscience and pupils learn to self-regulate behaviour and mindfully engage in focused concentration required for academic success. The course includes lively pupil-friendly visuals, interactive exercises, practical demonstrations and a student workbook. A certificate will be awarded to each pupil who completes the average 6 week course. The course can be delivered during or after school time, once or twice a week. The Mindfulness in schools course is taught in a secular way (not affiliated with government or religion) with emphasis on flourishing young minds in the broadest sense. They are not therapeutic interventions; they are curricula designed to introduce young people to the potential benefits of mindfulness in the safety of the school classroom or venue with a certified EFT and Mindfulness Centre Trainer.

The courses aim to help young people:

- **Increase attention and focus** – with exams and tests, in sports and in social settings
- **Reduce Stress** – allowing children to learn more and perform better;
- **Improve Impulse Control** – increasing teaching time in the classroom; develops emotional regulation – teaching children to “respond” rather than “react.”
- **Build empathy and compassion** – cultivating greater understanding of cultural, religious and sexual diversity as well as reducing cruelty, bullying, and violence and, hence, safer and happier schools
- **Fulfil their potential** - to feel confident to pursue their own goals
- **Experience greater well-being** (feel more calmer, happier and more fulfilled)

Mindfulness has also been shown to be effective in other areas such as for weight loss, pain and workplace stress.

What research has been conducted?

The vast majority of studies on Mindfulness have been done with adults, but in recent years researchers have begun to explore how it might be applied to teenagers and even to very young, pre-school children. The results to date in this emerging field suggest that mindfulness training is both feasible and beneficial for children across a wide range of ages and contexts. Secondary school students who

followed an in-class mindfulness programme, reported reduced indications of depression, anxiety and stress up to six months later. Also, these students were less likely to develop pronounced depression-like symptoms. The study, conducted by Professor Filip Raes (Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences, KU Leuven), is the first to examine mindfulness in a large sample of adolescents in a school-based setting

The actress Goldie Hawn has been working with neuroscientists, cognitive psychologists and educators to develop a mindfulness curriculum for schools. I am delighted to say that their research reported that mindfulness education in schools has proven benefits: it increases optimism and happiness in classrooms, decreases bullying and aggression, increases compassion and empathy for others and helps students resolve conflicts.

How can my child use Mindfulness?

Before starting the exercise, ask your child to sit in a straight back chair with their feet on the floor in a regal way, much like a King or Queen would. Alternatively they can sit cross-legged on the floor or lie down.

Mindful Breath Exercise

1. Imagine being in your own 'bubble' for this exercise
2. Soften your eyes or look down at your lap
3. Imagine your tummy is like a balloon that gets bigger as you breathe in and smaller as you breathe out. If this is too difficult, simply breathe as you normally would.
4. Sit as still as you can (like a frog does) and count your breaths as they come in and out of your body.
5. The 'in' and the 'out' counts as 1 breath.
6. Use your fingers to keep track of where you are in case your mind wanders.
7. If your mind does wander, gently come back to your breath

If they try this exercise before doing their homework for example, ask them to notice any changes afterwards.

Helena Fone is a certified Mindfulness Coach and Accredited Teacher of the Mindfulness in Schools Programme (www.mindfulnessinschools.org). For more information on other Mindful courses for Teachers, Adults and children, please visit the EFT & Mindfulness Centre at www.eftandmindfulness.com.