

INFORMATION FOR TEACHERS

We all experience the difference in how quickly we learn something new when we are fully focused, and how easily new information can pass us by when our attention is elsewhere. For as long as we have had schools, we have had the challenge of getting students to pay attention. For each of us there are things that interest, excite, puzzle, or worry us. Learning experiences will only be effective if we can pull the learner away from those things in the outside world and into the immediate lesson or activity. Every teacher knows this challenge only too well.

There is emerging evidence of the potential of long-existing practices used in other domains to improve individuals' control over their attention, reactivity, and stress. Research indicates that Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR), first introduced in the field of medicine by Dr. Jon Kabat-Zinn, helps individuals to calm themselves and bring their attention to the present moment through controlled breathing and awareness. With practice, individuals learn how to distance themselves from distracting thoughts and emotional reactions so they can focus more effectively on the task at hand. Under the umbrella term of "mindfulness," there have been MBSR practices of various types and durations designed for and tested in public schools. Studies to date suggest that mindfulness practices can make a difference in students' stress levels and ability to focus and sustain attention.

We worked with a group of Baltimore City middle school teachers to understand the challenges they face every day. Teachers reported difficulty completing their lesson plans due to a lack of student focus. Many mentioned students yelling out in class as routinely distracting from instruction. And most teachers expressed a desire to give more positive feedback to their students, but were thwarted by the challenges of classroom management. Some teachers expressed sympathy for the stressful lives students lead; but they have neither the time nor resources to both focus on teaching and give students the personal attention they know many need.

The purpose of mindfulness is well matched to teachers' concerns. Relatively short and simple exercises can give all students in the class an opportunity to calm and let go of stress. As students develop the ability to calm themselves over time, the stressors that prompt negative feedback should diminish.

We reviewed an array of existing programs and practices. Learning to Breathe (L2B), for example, is a fully developed mindfulness curriculum that specifically targets adolescents and has demonstrated impact in research trials. An intervention led by the Baltimore-based Holistic Life Foundation has introduced a program into several schools that includes yoga, meditation, and breathing exercises, and has also demonstrated positive impact. And there are now numerous apps that guide the user through mindfulness exercises, some of which are targeted specifically at adolescents.

Focus 5 draws on many of these other resources, but responds to a set of constraints we imposed on the design, informed by what we heard from teachers.

1. *Take fewer than 5 minutes a day.* Teachers' primary purpose is instructional practice. If teachers are going to be asked to do something other than instructional practice, it should not compete for time in any significant way or take them too far out of their comfort zone with students.
2. *Provide clear, simple supports.* Most teachers will have no experience with mindfulness exercises, and will need very specific support: clear directions on exactly what they are being asked to do, why, and how.
3. *Benefit students and teachers simultaneously.* Teachers are themselves operating in a stressful environment. Any intervention should be helpful to teachers as well, not just one more demand on their time.
4. *Minimize the "out of role" behavior asked of teachers.* While yoga or other practices associated with mindfulness may be beneficial to students, most teachers do not have the training to engage in these activities, and may have no interest in pursuing such training. We therefore constrain ourselves to practices that require no training.

Focus 5 exercises can be done without schools investing major resources in new materials or in bringing outside service providers to the school. The fully developed programs and outside services may be extremely valuable, and we are by no means discouraging their use! Our purpose is simply to introduce a low-cost, low-effort approach that teachers can use on their own whether or not the school or district makes those additional investments in outside support.

THE EXERCISES

The seven exercises can be laminated as a set of cards for teachers. They can also be printed on a two-sided legal-size page and folded as a take-home booklet for students. There is no specific order in which the practices should be done, but initially you may wish to introduce them consecutively since the earlier exercises are simpler than the later exercises.

Once students are familiar with the exercises, you may allow a student to choose which exercise to do each day. Some exercises might be suited for different purposes. If it's a particularly busy day, you may want to do a one-minute exercise, or if students need a chance to move around, you might do "Tight and Loose" or "Mind in Motion." If it's a high stress day for students, you may want to do "Breathe Deep," giving students a little more time to destress.

It can be challenging to get started with *Focus 5* because students are often noisy and inattentive as they enter the classroom. A bell or chime can help with the transition. Initially you may need to ring it several times as a signal to quiet down. Then ring once to mark the beginning and end of the exercise.

Use *Focus 5* either as a daily routine, or when you or your students are anxious or stressed. Don't rush through the exercise; give yourself and your students time to breathe and relax. Read each step, pausing after each prompt to let students engage in the action. How long should you pause? The answer will change over time. As students become more comfortable with silence and deep breathing, you can gradually lengthen the exercises.