

# Can Mindfulness Make Us Better Teachers?

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By [Vicki Zakrzewski](#) | October 2, 2013 |

A new study suggests that training teachers in mindfulness not only reduces burnout but also Imagine this: In the middle of a lesson, one of your students deliberately makes an offensive remark that causes the other students to laugh and threatens to derail your lesson. Your fists start to clench and there's a tightening in your chest. Before you know it, you snap angrily in a way that 1) doesn't calm the students down, and 2) makes you spend the rest of the day, or several days, wondering if you're a terrible teacher. Sound familiar?

This scenario is only one of many that add to a teacher's daily stress level, which, over time, can lead to burnout—a major issue for those in the education profession. However, adding to this stress is often an educator's own lack of social-emotional strategies for dealing with the stress and emotional intensity of the job, which researchers suggest may diminish his or her effectiveness as a teacher.

So is there something teachers can do to develop their social-emotional skills, not only to guard against long-term burnout but also to help them deal with stressful events while they're happening? Yes, according to a new study conducted by the University of Wisconsin's Center for Investigating Healthy Minds (CIHM): the practice of mindfulness.

A decade's worth of research has documented the great physical, psychological, and social benefits of practicing mindfulness, which involves paying careful attention to your thoughts, feelings, and environment. In recent years, schools have embraced mindfulness to help improve students' attention, emotion regulation, and learning. For the most part, the focus has been on students rather than teachers.

A group of the Center's researchers, led by Lisa Flook, took a different tack: They conducted a small pilot study to test the impact of an eight-week mindfulness course adapted specifically for *teachers*. The study found that those who completed the training enjoyed a myriad of personal benefits, including elevated levels of self-compassion and a decrease in psychological ills such as anxiety, depression, and burnout. In comparison, a group of teachers placed on a wait list for the course actually increased in their stress and burnout levels. But what made this study unique is that it also looked at the participants' classroom performance, such as their behavior management skills and their emotional and instructional support of students. What it discovered was this: The practice of mindfulness made them more effective teachers, possibly by buffering them from the impact of stressful experiences as they were happening.

In other words, the study suggests that when teachers practice mindfulness, students' misbehavior and other stressors become like water off a duck's back, allowing them to stay focused on what teachers really want to do: teach.

## **So how does the practice of mindfulness actually help teachers in and out of the classroom?**

To start, the CIHM researchers defined mindfulness specifically for this study as, "Paying attention in the present moment, on purpose, and without judgment." Anyone who has taught knows that paying attention in the present moment is incredibly difficult because of the thousand demands on a teacher's attention all at once. And judgment is a very easy state-of-mind to slip into when confronted by a misbehaving child—you don't only judge that child but judge yourself for judging him or her.

One of the most basic mindfulness practices involves sitting quietly and bringing one's awareness to thoughts, emotions, bodily sensations, or an external object. Neuroscientists and emotion researchers have found that this kind of practice heightens the activity in the regions of our brain that regulate our attention, which then carries over into our everyday lives.

For teachers, this means that in the midst of the craziness that is a classroom, we remain aware of what's going on inside our minds and bodies, which can help us rein in our knee-jerk angry reactions to a situation and instead choose a kinder and more compassionate response.

For example, in the scenario I described at the beginning of this article, a teacher skilled in mindfulness would notice his or her clenched fists and tightening in the chest, take them as a sign that he or she was about to hit the roof, and perhaps take a deep breath or two to calm down. Then he or she would be much better

prepared to calmly redirect the students' attention to the task-at-hand. Boom, done, just like that. Moment passed, no lingering stress in the body or mind of the teacher, and the lesson continues.

Mindfulness practice is also a way to deliberately cultivate positive qualities such as empathy and compassion. Previous studies have linked mindfulness to increased activity in brain regions associated with these positive emotions. In its training for teachers, CIHM included activities such as loving-kindness meditation, which has been found to help promote kindness and compassion toward others.

I like to think that teachers are naturally empathic and compassionate toward their students. But often these qualities get lost in the stress of classroom life, and what suffers most is the all-important relationship between the teacher and the student. By deliberately practicing mindfulness techniques that cultivate kindness toward others, a teacher faced with a misbehaving student might ask the question, "What happened to you?" rather than "What's wrong with you?"—a more compassionate response that strengthens rather than hinders the teacher-student relationship.

Finally, the CIHM researchers found that the mindfulness group's self-compassion increased as well—an important component of teacher well-being. Educators have a tendency to beat themselves up over so many things: a failed lesson, saying the wrong thing to a parent, an inability to reach a challenging student, helplessness in the face of a student's tragic home life—the list goes on and on. And we take it all home at night, leaving us with little psychic space to re-charge for the next day. Over time, our teaching suffers. Time and again, teachers ask me in workshops and at our Summer Institute for Educators how they can stop thinking about work after they've gone home. My suggestion, based on the research, is to have a personal mindfulness practice coupled with self-compassion. Mindfulness teaches us to "notice" our thoughts or thought patterns without judging them as "good" or "bad," which helps diminish the emotional charge that keeps these challenging school situations reverberating in our heads. Once we've neutralized that charge, we can choose to take a more compassionate stance toward ourselves, realizing that all teachers face these challenges and that everyone, including yourself, is doing the best they can.

One caveat: The changes rendered through a mindfulness practice do not happen overnight, nor do they last without continuous practice. Although this study showed significant changes in just eight weeks, Richard Davidson, one of the study's co-authors and a leading expert on the science of emotions and mindfulness, is quick to point out that mindfulness is like going to the gym: You have to keep practicing to enjoy the benefits. While the practice of mindfulness is never a "cure-all", research suggests that it is a powerful foundation upon which teachers can start to build their social-emotional skills—and, in turn, improve their teaching. So while we may never be able to stop that student from making an offensive remark, we can control our reaction—which, in the end, may make the student think twice about doing it again.

### **Resources for educators who would like to start a mindfulness practice:**

- If you would like to try mindfulness in the privacy of your own home, UCLA's Mindful Awareness Research Center (MARC) offers these free recordings.
- If you would like to learn mindfulness in a class, there are several programs geared just for educators, including the Greater Good Science Center's Summer Institute for Educators, Mindful Schools, the Garrison Institute's CARE for Teachers, PassageWorks' SMART-in-Education, and Margaret Cullen's Mindfulness-Based Emotional Balance.
- If you're unable to attend one of the above teacher-focused programs, there are numerous workshops throughout the U.S and the world teaching Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR), the program, founded by Jon Kabat-Zinn at the University of Massachusetts Medical School, from which the CIHM's training was adapted.