

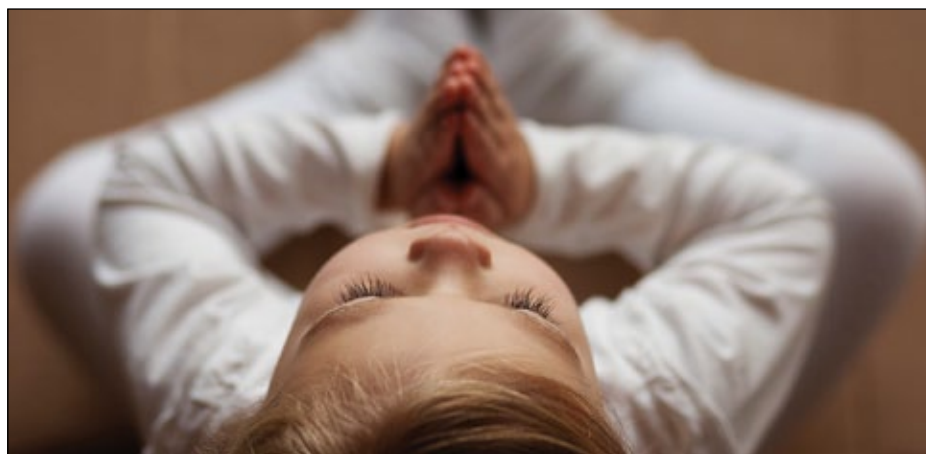
Thirty-three years ago when I started the path of meditation and mindfulness, many friends and colleagues believed I had lost my mind. In actuality, I had only begun to find it.

Over the years, I have had the privilege of sharing the power of mindfulness to thousands of teachers and students. This has revealed a path to a peaceful way of life that for many, previously seemed impossible. The youngest recipient of these teachings was the three-year-old child of a peer who was diabetic. After a painful incident with a needle, she developed an intense fear of them. We took a trip to the park and used the clouds in the air to settle her mind. Thereafter her mother would use imagery of the clouds to help alleviate her fears before administering her needles.

The story that made the most impact on my life was an 18-year-old alternative education student who, after receiving my teachings in the classroom, came for help. He was going to jail for a year for vehicular homicide. He knew the only way to survive being confined in prison was to rely upon the meditation tools he had learned.

Students today are dealing with unprecedented stressors—academic anxiety, low self-esteem, depression, peer pressure and substance abuse. People of all ages are beginning to turn to this thousand-year-old practice, which is time tested and proven to be a great aid in dealing with life's challenges and an effective tool for increasing concentration.

Mindfulness is the ability to live with present moment awareness, in a



non-judgemental way. Its focus may be one's breath, or the practice of observing one's thoughts without giving meaning to them. Many say they could never still the mind but that is not the goal. In fact, as children many of us engaged in this practice without any guidance. Remember the times you lay on the grass, becoming so engrossed in your surroundings—crickets buzzing, leaves fluttering and clouds drifting by—that you lost track of time? This was being mindful. Today, our minds are so inundated with information that our balance and well-being are threatened. We need to return to being that child, fully present in the moment.

Let's explore a simple exercise in becoming more mindful. Begin by sitting on a chair, holding your torso tall. Imagine your spine as a series of lego blocks, securely fastened to the earth while extending toward the sky. Close your eyes and become aware of your breath, as it flows in and out of your nostrils. In your mind's eye, continue watching the breath flow all the way down to the belly pushing gently on

the wall of the abdomen and then let it flow back out again.

The mind will want to create drama and distraction. Past events might flash before your eyes. As each thought arises, allow it to flow through your mind without any judgement. Just watch it arise and fall away. When you notice yourself follow a disturbance in your mind, label it as thinking and come back to the breath process. Just five minutes of this each day can have dramatically positive effects on your well-being.

Science is now showing that meditation changes the structure of the brain, holding tremendous potential for all of us. The cortex associated with attention, sensory awareness and emotional processing is thicker in meditators. As we continue to meditate, we are literally changing the neural pathways of the brain, allowing us to release habitual reactions to stress and create new routes that allow us to apply reasoning to a situation. This does not mean we become emotionless robots, but rather that we gain the ability to interact with life instead of react to it.

Through my years of teaching meditation, I have found that students are very receptive to walking meditation. A mindfulness meditation walk in nature not only draws students awareness to their bodies and their senses but also to the natural world around them. Encourage them to observe the details of nature, as they walk slowly and mindfully. As the wind blows across their face, invite them to completely experience the sensations. Each time their mind wanders, they label it thinking and return to being the witness. Back in the classroom, they can record what they observed. Most students are astonished by the detail of their lives and moments of peace they overlook each day.

Mindfulness is a movement that is revolutionizing school environments, requiring very little capital to initiate. The only thing it does require is the training and discipline to "Do everything with a mind that lets go."

Blair Abbass is a retired teacher of 32 years and a contributor to the PSP Yoga 11 course. He is currently writing a Mindfulness Meditation Manual, which is being overseen by Catherine Rabey and piloted in the classroom by Lyndsay Welsford for both regular stream and special needs students within the South Shore Regional School Board.

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