



Mindfulness: Sometimes Our Brains Need a Break!

Here's how to give them a rest

By Liz Garden

“What do you think mindfulness means?” I asked the rug full of second-graders staring up at me. I was about to read to them the book *I Am Peace: A Book of Mindfulness*, written by Sarah Verde and illustrated by Peter Reynolds. Some students said “peace,” probably because that

word was part of the title. Some of the students said “relaxing.” Others said they thought mindfulness meant something about stuff going on in your brain. After reading the first few pages about taking time to not worry about what happened yesterday or what was going to happen tomorrow,



We all benefit when we power down our brains every once in a while.

Institute of Mental Health, 1 in 5 children ages 13–18 has, or will have, a serious mental illness. Eight percent of youth have an anxiety disorder.

Anxiety and stress are common in our schools and classrooms. If we can learn to be mindful, then maybe we can combat stress and anxiety, slow down, clear our minds, and be present in the moment.

Mindfulness for Principals

How can principals practice mindfulness? If you have not read *The Mindful School Leader*, I recommend that you take a look at this book, written by Valerie Brown and Kirsten Olson. The book offers leaders simple strategies such as focused breathing techniques and how to practice mindful listening. A key strategy that I implemented was to stop checking email first thing in the morning. It is amazing how that one little change brought about an overall change to my demeanor at the start of each school day. One teacher even commented, “You seem so happy when you come into school each morning.”

Another great book for educational leaders is *Dancing in the Rain: Leading With Compassion, Vitality, and Mindfulness in Education*. This book, written by Jerome Murphy, a former dean at Harvard Graduate School of Education, lays out seven steps through the acronym “MYDANCE,” including discussions and strategies to “disentangle from upsets” and “nourish yourself.” Murphy’s guidebook can help school leaders thrive

under pressure and navigate through “life’s inescapable downpours.”

Mindfulness for Teachers

Encourage your teachers to either start or end the day with some quiet meditation time. There are many free apps that can help educators clear their mind, including Calm, a free app that provides a variety of guided meditation experiences, ranging from three to 25 minutes, and Smiling Mind, another freebie that includes meditation exercises educators can use with their students in the classroom.

Mindfulness for Students

Today’s students live in a highly distracted, nonstop world. Their brains are constantly forced to multitask, and they encounter societal busyness and stress both at home and at school. The first step to helping students practice mindfulness is to acknowledge that there is a lot going on in their brains, and to give them permission to work on clearing their minds. Let them know it’s OK to take time to not think about anything, to focus on breathing, and to close your eyes and sense what is going on around you. Students are always worrying about what just happened and what might happen next; give them permission to spend some time in the moment.

In the fast-paced world of school and life, we could all benefit from just stopping to be in the moment. So I ask you: What does mindfulness mean to you? Take some time to ponder that question. Close your eyes. Clear your mind. Focus on your breathing. We all benefit when we power down our brains every once in a while. ■

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I stopped to tell them about my connection to the book.

I told the students that when I climbed into bed recently, I was tired and trying to go to sleep. But I couldn’t fall asleep. I had so much on my mind that I just could not turn it off and go to sleep. So what did I do? I tried out some mindfulness techniques that I’d read about. I focused on my breathing. I imagined a big whiteboard in my brain, and I slowly wiped the slate clean. I focused on sensing my surroundings. And eventually, I fell asleep.

According to the American Institute of Stress, 80 percent of people feel stress in the workplace. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention says that 75 percent of all visits to the doctor are stress-related in nature, and according to the National