



Mindfulness is a way of being fully present in this moment — when your complete attention and senses are focused, without judgement, on your inner and outer experience — being fully alert and present in your body (rather than just in your head) experiencing your environment through your senses (what you smell, feel, taste, see, hear). Being in more of a state of generalized ‘awareness’ (of your thoughts, feelings, physical sensations, core self, surroundings) rather than immersed exclusively in your thought.

As a teacher, mindfulness practitioner and mind body therapist, I knew that mindfulness was effective in bringing calm, mental acuity, focus, perspective, emotional regulation, motivation and a sense of daily optimism to my own life, despite overwhelming challenges for the past eight years. I had seen mindfulness in therapy bring people back into their bodies, which generally helped them become calmer, clearer and more revitalized, as well as allowing them to let go of negative mind states, emotions, tension and gain insight and a sense of well-being.

Interestingly, in a field where effectiveness is measured in time and money, business leadership institutions are offering instruction in mindfulness as a leadership development discipline. Harvard Law School has sponsored entire conferences on applying mindfulness to dispute resolution, and Virginia Tech is planning a conference titled *Contemplative Practices for a Technological Society*.

According to psychologist, Jean Twenge, of Case Western Reserve University, average children ages 9-17 are more anxious today than those treated for psychiatric disorders 50 years ago. Dr. R. Cohen-Sandler states that high school counselors, across the country (USA), are reporting a sharp increase in psychological crises among students. This corroborates with my experience working with at-risk youth in drug treatment, as well as youth in mainstream and alternate high schools in BC, Alberta, Saskatchewan, and the Yukon. Youth experience stress due to dysfunctional family life, peer pressure, identity confusion, low self-esteem, insecurity, trauma, learning difficulties and academic pressure, among numerous others (Cohen-Sandler, 2005).

I have witnessed youth experience high levels of anxiety, depression, anger, violence, behavioral issues and slide downhill with the often further

damaging coping strategies they use to try to alleviate this stress. I decided to create a workshop series that would bring the mindfulness experience to youth and this was co-sponsored by ArtStartsBC and the alternate education school, Twin Rivers Education Center, (TREC) in Kamloops. It was called *Art Explosion: Empowerment for Life*. Over the course of three months, I met with students 11 times and facilitated this mindfulness and processing through art workshop series that culminated in *The Urban Art* show.

I met with 13-18 year old youth in groups as large as 18 and as small as five, always beginning with a quick check in around the group as well as inviting each student to check in with what was going on internally with a 10-20 minute guided mindfulness activity.

These activities ranged from basic relaxation exercises, single-pointed mind focus, to connecting with their essential self and getting an embodied sense of their inner resources, with titles like *Connecting with Your Best Friend*, *Strong Mountain Flowing River* and *Meeting Your Inner Resources... & I'm Not Talking About Your Kidney's*.

Then we would discuss what they had noticed once they had calmed and quieted their minds and bodies. Then they would take this a step further by using art making materials like graphite, pastels, paint or clay to express what they had realized, making it more concrete, real and explicable.

This was always a personal process, yet took place in a socially supportive circle environment, where each participating youth typically left in a much calmer, satisfied and optimistic mood.

In one experiment they would chart their physical sensations, emotions and thoughts in response to

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different words, after noticing their breath and turning their awareness inward. What they were able to realize, in a more tangible way through paying attention to their bodies, was how much their experience was influenced by what they focused on. They found that even one word could markedly change their mental, emotional and physical experience dramatically. They generalized their findings to how they could have more control of how they felt in any given situation by choosing what they wanted to focus upon.

Students would sometimes come in pale and agitated and after the 15-20 minute mindfulness exercise would be breathing more deeply, be more relaxed and have more color in their cheeks. There was a noticeable shift in all three domains: the mental, the emotional, and the physical for most of the participants.

Student's written comments reflected this shift with the likes of — *"I liked how calming it was," "I felt relaxed and carefree," "I felt happy during the workshops," "I liked having the guided visualizations before starting the projects so I felt inspired," "I get that my thoughts are powerful and can change my mood," "I think I would deal with stress/drama a little differently now by being mindful and relaxed,"* and *"I see and appreciate more of who I am like my inner peaceful person and my inner warrior 'cause I am strong and a fighter."*

One thing to be aware of with traumatized youth, is that they should be given the option of focusing on

physical movement such as mindful walking or holding a pose with their body such as a yoga pose rather than strictly sitting and focusing on their breath for example. They need the safety and support of a counselor, teacher or yoga instructor there beside them because there has been a loss of a sense of safety within.

I realized this was only one group of students in one school. I couldn't stop there. I believed that if the resources are easily and readily available, many more students in schools across BC and Canada could be developing mindfulness skills and reaping these benefits — more self-regulation, more calm, more focus, more academic success, more resiliency.


So I did two things — first, I put my workshop series online with all of the visuals, audios, videos and lesson plans needed for any teacher or counselor with the interest to be able to facilitate the *Youth Empowerment For Life* workshops themselves.

Secondly, and this was painful, I learned how to operate the Tascam recording software, and developed the Mind Focus Connection guided mindfulness audio and video series. These are more than 30 guided mindfulness and yoga activities youth can plug into anytime to calm, focus, re-energize, build 'mental muscle' and connect with their core self and inner resources. The yoga is 'trauma sensitive' and all activities can be done at a desk.

There are six categories they can

choose from: 1) Let's Drool (relaxation & mellowing activities); 2), Let's Ground Down (activities to help you inhabit your body powerfully); 3), Time to Work Out (mind games and exercises to build mental muscle), and; 4), Becoming Bulletproof (mental rehearsals and explorations connecting you with your inner and outer resources, building new neural pathways for improved mood states, learning to meet more of your own needs and visioning your highest potential). The last two categories are 5) Standing yoga, and 6) Desk yoga.

Educators can use this ready-to-use resource to steadily increase mindfulness and the full range of academic and emotional regulation for students by building practice into the school day (10-15-20 minutes in the morning and/or after lunch). They can be used with students with behavior issues, either in class or at the office, to calm and shift into a different part of their brain. They can also be used with staff as an effective stress reduction and self-care tool.

Although it isn't easy, it is possible, and indeed, critical that we equip youth with healthy coping skills to develop secure positive identities and manage the increased stress of our modern environment. Statistics and our own eyes and hearts tell us that more and more, youth are not managing and we owe it to them to provide them with coping strategies that will work. 

Cea Winter lives with her sons, cats and chickens near Kamloops and teaches in SD#73. For more information, visit her website, Refreshing Education, at www.refreshingeducation.ca. She offers workshops for educators on how to integrate mindfulness intimately, clearly and deeply within the classroom, secondary and post-secondary counselors on using mindfulness and processing through art to improve student academic and relational functioning in groups and individual counseling sessions, as well as leading workshops for youth and adults in schools and the community. Cea also does somatically based mindfulness counseling for attachment and trauma recovery.