



MINDFULNESS
TEACHER
TRAINING

MINDFULNESS IN NEW ZEALAND

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■ THE FOUNDATIONS OF MINDFULNESS;

-Developing awareness of body sensations; the body is always in the present moment, it is only the mind that wanders to the past and the future. Cultivating resting in present moment awareness and allowing everything to simply be as it is- without trying to fix, turn away, judge, want, like or dislike brings us in direct contact with the present moment and interrupts the incessant, often aimless wandering mind.

-Cultivating awareness of our emotions and feelings and the tendency to want more of the good, turn away from the perceived not good or simply ignore what is actually happening in the present moment. Putting the spotlight of attention of the continuous shifting states of our thoughts and feelings helps us uncover patterns where we get stuck and provides a tool to help us recognize these unhelpful behaviors. In addition, mindfulness provides a strategy to cultivate presence and accept whatever arises in our moment to moment experience, without judging it good or bad. This does not mean passive acceptance of circumstances that require action and change.

-Becoming aware of the emergence of natural states of kindness and compassion and self-nourishment when the mind is freed from anxious thinking patterns and behaviors.

-Developing a deeper awareness of our connection to nature, each other and the wonder and mystery of life itself. This cultivated awareness takes us out of the often isolated space of our own minds and reminds us we all experience similar states and conditions of being human.

- Developing the ability to observe all that happens inside of us and outside of us without being entangled and controlled by our thoughts and feelings.

■ WHAT IS IT?

Mindfulness is a state of awareness developed through using a set of practical skills involving:

Attention- watching, listening, being aware of what naturally exists

eg. breath, sounds, physical sensations.

Intention- purposefully noticing what is happening inside and outside of you. eg. thoughts, shifting moods.

Presence- being fully engaged in the moment to whatever is present.

Openness- being curious, non-judgmental and simply observing whatever is happening.

■ HOW DOES IT WORK?

There is a two-fold mechanism at work when practicing mindfulness; When you focus your attention it is thought this engages and enhances executive function which accounts for the increased mental clarity and inner spaciousness that arises from regular practice.

Focusing on physical sensations (breath, body sensations) reduces stress and anxious thinking.

Mindfulness doesn't happen overnight- it is a state of being that develops organically over time. You plant the seed (intention) of mindfulness, you water it (attention) and you do all this with a willingness (attitude) to develop a deeper understanding of who you are and how your mind works! Establishing a daily, on-going practice is important to developing a mindful way of being, with a raised awareness of your inner and outer life and strategies to assist when difficult thoughts and feelings threaten to overwhelm us.

Mindfulness is not new. All contemplative practices have some form of mindfulness as part of their training. In particular, mindfulness is a large part of Buddhist practices that have for centuries promoted the need to understand the fundamental workings (mechanism) of the human mind so that we are not controlled by our thoughts and feelings. Having been available for a couple of thousand years we have to ask ourselves; why has mindfulness finally reached mainstream western society and what has happened to help many people, from all walks of life become receptive to the idea that mindfulness might just be something useful and valuable- a strategy to deal with incessant worry and anxiety and unhelpful thinking and behaving patterns?

Here is a tool, a strategy (when practiced on a regular, on-going basis) to maintain mental, physical and emotional equilibrium in the face of increasing stressors, perceived or real. Mindfulness is an effective strategy to train attention and improve social and emotional intelligence. A proven method (empirical research) to train the attention away from worrying about future events, going over past events- to being fully present in the here and now and further, allowing whatever is present to simply be there without trying to avoid or fix it. Acceptance of what is (as opposed to struggling /not wanting/liking what is) underpins the success of mindfulness in creating a new way of being, free from constant tension, uncertainty, fear and perceived stress opening up a spaciousness previously crammed with incessant, often worrying thoughts and feelings.

We live in an age of science. We are trained to believe that unless something can be proven with empirical evidence, we dismiss it as unproven and therefore probably of no real value. Apart from the fact that it has become urgent a to find a solution to the increasing mental health issues that continue to rise (broad predictions of 20% of the population will be experiencing an identifiable mental illness by 2020), a solution to the increasing distraction, dissatisfaction and boredom that is all-pervasive in our technology- obsessed society is needed. Since the year 2000, research has been carried out on all aspects of mindfulness- 2,500 papers and daily rising, to try to pinpoint the reason mindfulness works and to attempt to understand the underlying mechanisms of the brain that are affected when mindfulness is adopted as a self-regulating, self-awareness practice. Being of an age of science, this is comforting to many people that might otherwise dismiss mindfulness as just another passing fad.

■ TEACHING POINTS

Mindfulness is **not** a magic bullet that will **solve** all learning and **behavior** problems in the classroom but it will provide a model within a learning community where students can flourish socially, emotionally and academically. The ultimate aim of classroom management is to teach students to **manage their own behavior**. Mindfulness fits very well with this, as the outcome from regular, daily practice is raised present moment awareness, increased self- awareness of our interconnectivity with others and the world around and transforming reactivity into responding.

It will **provide a model** (and practices) where attention, **self-awareness and kindness are cultivated on a daily basis** and these values become increasingly important to the students-worth and self-care. In addition, it becomes an **important part** of the daily **curriculum** and if introduced to all classes, establishes an across-the-school culture – a mindful school.

As with any subject, the **repeated, regular practicing** of Mindfulness will lead to the many well-documented benefits and for each student, becoming the default mode, especially when the pressures and challenges of life are greatest.

Students (and teachers) will have these additional skills to self-manage and self-regulate and recognize their emotions thoughts and feelings as passing mental events knowing they will pass on in a natural time span if **they don't attach meaning and stories to them and play them over and over** in their minds. They will develop the skill of recognizing and shifting their attention when they get 'stuck' on unhelpful thoughts or feelings.

Mindfulness is about training our attention, purposefully, to notice what is happening around us and inside of us; our thoughts, feelings, reactions and responses and to cultivate present moment awareness. Regular practice strengthens our resilience and emotional and social intelligence. It raises our awareness of ourselves and those around us further cultivating empathy, compassion and kindness. Essentially Mindfulness training is Attention training. If you are more comfortable calling this training Attention Training- do that because that is essentially what Mindfulness is.

■ NO RIGHT OR WRONG OUTCOME- JUST CULTIVATING AWARENESS IN THE PRESENT MOMENT.

Also good to remember that some days it's easier to concentrate on the breath and settle into the practice, some days it's harder to not get distracted by thoughts- especially worrying thoughts. Don't worry about this and frame all sessions of Mindfulness, no matter how short with ;

'there is no right or wrong in Mindfulness- everything that you notice and experience while we do these simple exercises is allowed because it's your experience at the moment.'

Over time we are learning to notice our thoughts and feelings and developing the skill to shift our attention- especially when we get stuck with worrisome thoughts and feelings.'

Remind students that the body is always in present moment it is only the mind that wanders over the past and into the future.

You as the teacher/guide assist the cultivation of Mindfulness by guiding the group and co-creating the conditions where each student can experience and come in contact with the mindful state- awareness and connectivity with self, others and the environment around us. This can be done in a number of ways. (See models for teaching Mindfulness)

Attention and awareness are dynamic and this means you can train in the same way you train for sports or music. Mindfulness is a mental training, quite simple to do but not necessarily easy as it does take some practice to re-wire the mind of old established patterns of reacting and behaving. It is the repeated paying attention (noticing) in a purposeful way (thoughts, feelings, sensations), that leads to establishing a continuous mindful way of being.

The rewards are enormous; greater mental clarity, less reactivity and more thoughtful response, improved memory, better listening skills and retaining information, increased social and emotional intelligence, self-acceptance and improved sense of self-worth, gratitude, kindness and empathy increase, better sleep.

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