

Health & Science

Mindfulness training helps teens cope with stress and anxiety

Students work on yoga postures during a mindfulness class at Wilson High School in Portland, Ore. (Gosia Wozniacka/AP)

By Gosia Wozniacka December 15, 2014

As the morning school bell rings and students rush through crowded corridors, teenagers in a classroom settle onto mats and meditation pillows. They fall silent after the teacher taps a Tibetan “singing bowl.”

“Allow yourself to settle into the experience of being here, in this moment,” teacher Caverly Morgan tells two dozen students at Wilson High School in Portland, Ore.

The students are enrolled in a for-credit, year-long mindfulness class meant to ease youth anxiety and depression and to prevent violence. For 90 minutes three days a week, they practice a mix of yoga, sitting and walking meditation, visualization techniques, deep breathing, journaling and nonjudgmental listening.



The idea behind mindfulness is that focusing on the present moment helps a person deal better with stress, difficult emotions and negative thoughts.

Mindfulness, yoga and meditation have gained popularity among Americans in recent decades, buoyed by studies showing their benefits to emotional, mental and physical health. The centuries-old practices have roots in Buddhism and Hinduism, but Western culture has secularized them to focus on physical postures, breathing and relaxation techniques.

The year-long course is one of a growing number of programs incorporating mindfulness, yoga and meditation into school curriculums to bring socio-emotional benefits to students. (Gosia Wozniacka/AP)

Such practices are now offered to employees by corporations such as Google, Target and General Mills. Prison inmates, hospital patients and the U.S. Marines are using them to combat stress and illness, and to increase focus and well-being. And now schools all over the country are introducing the practices to help stressed kids.

“High school is the hardest period of time for kids,” Bruce Chatard, Wilson’s principal, said. “You’ve got emotional changes, hormonal changes, all the social pressures. It’s also the onset of mental illness for some kids, depression hits, and there’s the pressure of college and sports. All these things kids do is overwhelming without having a strategy to deal with it.”

Some people have greeted the move with less than enthusiasm.

Last year, an elementary school in Ohio ended its mindfulness program after parents complained it was too closely linked to Eastern religion, and a conservative Christian law firm sued on behalf of a couple in Encinitas, Calif., arguing — unsuccessfully — that their school district’s yoga classes indoctrinate children.

But many school districts are reporting success.

In Richmond, Calif., where a teacher started a program called the Mindful Life Project, schools have reported drops in detentions and disciplinary referrals among low-income, at-risk youth.

The school district in South Burlington, Vt., implemented a mindfulness course as part of a health and wellness program, and

now administrators there have written a manual on incorporating mindfulness into K-12 curriculums.

Portland is known for its progressivism, so it should be no surprise that the idea of teaching mindfulness is being embraced there. Students at Wilson say the class has been a boon for them.

“Sometimes I have trouble breathing; I have panic attacks. This class helps me bring more attention to my breath and overcome that,” junior Cassia McIntyre said. “I’m less stressed-out and able to better cope with stress.”

ADVERTISING

The class is the brainchild of Morgan, who trained at a Zen Buddhist monastery for eight years and opened a meditation center in Sacramento. After moving to Portland two years ago, Morgan teamed up with Allyson Copacino, who teaches yoga to children. The two started an after-school program at Wilson. After hundreds of students signed up, principal Chatard took note. The school was dealing with a student’s suicide, and few resources were available to address students’ emotional and mental health.

Pediatric psychologists at Oregon Health & Science University are partnering with the mindfulness program to study its impact on students. A similar year-long program is offered at nearby Rosemary Anderson High School, which serves students who were expelled or dropped out, are homeless or who are single parents.

Unlike at Wilson, mindfulness at Rosemary is mandatory for about 70 students. Some were initially skeptical and complained about the course, principal Erica Stavis said.

But on midterm reviews, students reported that the class had helped them better recognize their feelings, deal with anger and distance themselves from destructive thoughts during difficult family situations.

“This program filled a gap,” Stavis said. “It helps students build capacity to problem-solve.”