



Mindfulness Practice: Empowering Fragmented Teens to Become Whole

Through innovative programs, youth discover their inner selves, face fears and embrace personal power.

When 18-year-old K. attended an Insight Meditation Teen Retreat, she was seeking answers, reaching for help, trying to make sense of her pain and suffering. A college-bound Caucasian student from a comfortable middle-class suburban setting, K. had begun self-harming. Knowing it was wrong and starving for guidance, she immersed herself in an intensive 4-day residential mindfulness meditation program.

"I felt a victim of my own mind, almost a victim of myself," says K. "There was a feeling of being unable to take refuge in anything, of being caught in the tangle of my emotions and really feeling at the mercy of my own mind."

Through mindfulness practices, physical exercises and group support, K. realized she had a rich and deep interior self. She told her teachers that she had found her roots, the part of her that was strong, steady and stable: she could stop the downward cycle of self-harm and proactively heal her wounds with compassion. While she knows it's an ongoing process, K. now feels confident that she has within her what she needs to move forward.

When T., a 17-year-old Hispanic boy, arrived at a community treatment facility

for residential care, he had a record of multiple Juvenile Hall visits. Gang life dominated his inner-city community; violence and aggression characterized his behavior. T. joined the Inner Life Skills program, a residentially-based mindfulness skills program in Oakland, California. Through experiential exercises, group discussions and mindfulness practice, he began to differentiate between the external pressures that had channeled him into a dangerous lifestyle and an internal knowing that deep within, all people—himself included—are basically good, are whole and are okay.

T. told his teachers that before learning about—and feeling—this basic goodness, it hadn't occurred to him that he had goodness inside him. He saw how his environment had hardened him. Feeling goodness inside himself helped T. see goodness in others. His violent outbursts declined. He began thinking what it was like to be in others' shoes. His attitude began changing, leading to direct changes in behavior and in how he related with others. T. experienced self-compassion. He realized he had the power within to connect back to this "basically good" part of himself and move his life in a more positive direction.

Our youth need support.

Adolescent mental health issues have risen significantly over the past 50 years (Biegel et al.). In 1999, 1 in 5 American adolescents was experiencing signs and symptoms of a mental health disorder. Conditions included ADHD, depression, anxiety, substance abuse and eating disorders, among others. In 2008, approximately 30% of 12- to 19-year-old Americans took at least one prescription drug (Gu, Dillon & Burt 2010). Youth are struggling, with few positive options for help.

"For me, stress is simply another word for life," says Kimberly Eichenberger, a 16-year-old in Zurich, Switzerland, who contends daily with academic, peer and family pressures. Challenging teen issues—defining an individual identity, separating from parents, coping with peer and romantic relationships, dealing with academic and future life decisions, and facing ethical dilemmas regarding drugs, alcohol, sex, violence, bullying and other choices—are all amplified by life's electronic speed, information overload and social media's instant publicity. What's more, young people today are entering adulthood in an interconnected global

WHAT IS MINDFULNESS?

“Even though we experience pain and suffering, we have the power to control how we react to the things that happen to us. We’re more powerful than we think.” —*T’Andra, a female participant in the Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction for Teens program in San Jose, California*

Jon Kabat-Zinn, PhD, who developed the Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) program, defines mindfulness as paying particular attention “on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally” (Kabat-Zinn 1994).

This “paying attention” includes observing the mind’s internal fleeting thoughts and emotions, as well as noting external sensory stimulus through touch, taste, smell, sight and hearing. Practicing observational awareness

enhances our ability to see the mind’s tendency to evaluate what’s happening around us through a filter based on assumptions that may or may not be accurate. Through disciplined mindfulness training over time, it’s possible to cultivate an “embodied,” nonjudgmental awareness of our present experience. Rather than immediately judging and reacting to situations, we can learn to observe the tendency to *want* to react and choose whether that is the desired response under the circumstances. Studies show that experienced adult practitioners of mindfulness meditation have improved abilities to concentrate, to direct attention and to regulate emotions.

“Mindfulness is the awareness that arises when we pay attention in an open, accepting and discerning way,” says

Shauna Shapiro, PhD, associate professor of counseling psychology at Santa Clara University in Santa Clara, California, and author of *The Art and Science of Mindfulness* (American Psychological Association 2009). “There are three elements: *intention*, *attention* and *attitude*. Intention sets the direction of why we’re paying attention. *Attention* is actually knowing and experiencing our present moment. *Attitude* is the open, curious, accepting and kind quality that we bring to our attention.” In other words, attitude is the “heart” of mindfulness that allows qualities such as patience, compassion and nonstriving to emerge.



society steeped in serious economic, environmental and security problems.

These stressors impact adolescent health. But there is hope. Some teens are finding help through mindfulness training. Experts agree that mindfulness-based programs for adolescents are timely, are emerging worldwide and are offering a complementary self-help option for the whole spectrum of normal, stressed teen to highly troubled youth with clinical diagnoses. Scientific evidence is validating the health-promoting value of these programs and showing why adolescence, due to neuroplasticity and development of the brain, may be an ideal time to offer mindfulness education.

Mindfulness Training: Tailoring It to Teens

Jon Kabat-Zinn, PhD, developed Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) in 1979 to help adults suffering from stress, pain and/or illness take better care of themselves and live healthier, more adaptive lives. MBSR was designed to complement medical treatment for a wide range of physical and psychological conditions. Today, MBSR is growing rapidly and is offered internationally. In a

group-based 8-week program, instructors guide participants through various experiential practices—mindful breathing, mindful eating, the body scan, guided meditation, walking meditation, sitting meditation and hatha yoga postures. Participants also receive stress education, join group discussions and commit to a daily home practice. Gradually, they develop mindfulness skills by cultivating their own inner resources. People feel more able to manage stress, to process difficult emotions and to give compassion to themselves—qualities associated with better health.

Significant research evidence exists that MBSR—as well as other mindfulness programs—not only helps healthy adults manage stress but also reduces medical and psychological symptoms in those with clinically diagnosed conditions such as depression, anxiety and chronic pain (Cullen 2011). Most studies, however, have focused on adults. Now that interest in teen mindfulness programs is rising, program developers agree that curricula must be adapted for younger people. As Amishi Jha, PhD, associate professor in the department of psychology at the

University of Miami, points out, in teens the “prefrontal cortex is not fully online. In addition, their brains are at the mercy of a tumultuous hormonal bath, which all makes for a high degree of flux in their functional development.”

With teens, experts say, it’s important to

- talk in accessible terms;
- recognize teens’ attention span;
- use a lot of informal practice, such as being mindful during typical teen activities like listening to or playing music;
- include games and fun, playful activities; and
- “keep it real.”

“We have to consciously attend to youth in terms of self-knowledge and resilience and in terms of tapping their *own* creativity, their ability to communicate and their sense of innate wholeness,” says Florence Meleo-Meyer, MS, MA, director of Oasis Professional Training at the Center for Mindfulness in Worcester, Massachusetts, and creator of Cool Minds™, a mindfulness-based stress reduction program that has been adapted for teens.

“Stresses of dealing with parents, anxiety, depression, eating disorders—it’s



“It has given me more strength and filled me with so much love. It reached into me deeper than ever before and let me face my fears head-on and, most importantly, I was not alone. What helped me was being free of judgment.”

—Emily, a 17-year-old participant in an Inward Bound Mindfulness Education (iBme) retreat for teens

all part of kids’ lives,” says Rebecca Bradshaw, Insight Meditation Society Teen Retreat lead teacher, in Barre, Massachusetts. “In our discussion groups, the idea is to create a safe place where teens can talk about tough topics and no one will judge them or tell them what to do. We try to draw wisdom out of them. How does this affect you? Is this supportive of how you want [to live] or where you want to go in life?” This helps self-discovery of their interior world.

Today’s overstimulated teens need guidance on how to experience the actual, rather than the virtual, present. Gabriel Kram, president of Applied Mindfulness Inc. in Berkeley, California, and primary author of the Inner Life Skills curriculum, says, “It’s particularly important to [teach young people to] connect with the environment. So much of modern living is dissociative and isolating, like people in public spaces with headphones on in their own private world. Young people on average are texting, looking at computers and receiving media 10 hours a day. Mindfulness practice can be used as a context not only for turning inward but [also for] intentionally connecting with our environment through the senses.” Teens need to learn skills for simply being.

Kram and Gina M. Biegel, MA, LMFT, and founder of the Stressed Teens program based in San Jose, California, that offers Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction for Teens (MBSR-T), both feel that repetition and short, daily exercises are most helpful for this age group. “We emphasize doing a little each day to build up the ‘muscles’ of

attention, empathy, etc.,” says Kram. “We’d rather see youth practicing 5–10 minutes every day than once a week for an hour. The way to build new neural pathways is through repetition.”

Neurodevelopment of the Teen Brain

Another factor driving interest in teen mindfulness practices is our current understanding of adolescent brain development and our awareness that how we use the brain during this period can impact our brain’s functioning over a lifespan.

“Certain parts of the brain have much more dynamic growth at different stages of life,” says Jay N. Giedd, MD, a neuroscientist at the National Institute of Mental Health whose research focus is teen brain development. “In adolescence, the key changes are in the frontal part of the brain involved in controlling impulses, long-range planning, judgment, decision-making.” This is critical to why learning mindfulness skills as a teen can offer profound lifelong value.

Studies on brain maturation from early childhood through age 20 show that the brain does not reach “adult” development until the early 20s and that gray-matter volume peaks in early adolescence (Gogtay et al. 2004). The brain experi-



For a list of resources (including teacher-training programs), plus a bonus

sidebar, “Research on Mindfulness Training for Teens,” please go to www.ideafit.com/mindful-teens.



ences “pruning” and refinement through the teen years into the early 20s. This pruning represents a *loss* of gray matter and unused synapses and a *strengthening* of the synapses (communicative or networking fibers) that are used most. Some scientists believe that changes in the teen brain are an example of age-related biology supporting the transition from dependence to independence (Dobbs 2011).

This new evidence—that training the brain during its adolescent years can actually impact its lifelong course—is motivating to both adult program providers and teens who are learning mindfulness skills. “We now know that what you choose to do, the ways that you choose to engage your energy, and learn to train your attention, can actually have a huge impact on the rest of your life,” said Meleo-Meyer. “Kids get excited about this. This message is hugely empowering and is a major antidote to the despair and helplessness that is felt.”

How Teens Benefit From Mindfulness Practice

“Today for the first time I found myself offering myself metta (loving kindness) in a troubling moment. It was such an amazing experience to realize that I could actually want myself to be happy.” —*Liota, who attended an Inward Bound Mindfulness Education (iBme) teen retreat at age 16.*

Program leaders agree that today’s youth are under tremendous pressure from all sides—peers, adults, media—and from self-criticism. By helping teens learn to know themselves in a benevolent way, mindfulness training offers a breath

of fresh air. It also teaches essential life skills; for adolescents with clinical conditions, it can reduce or replace drug therapy; and for all teens, from highly troubled to normal, it can offer hope that even if they don’t find compassion in their immediate environment, they can learn to cultivate that quality in themselves and can create community with others who embrace a nonjudgmental, present-focused approach to life.

Biegel believes mindfulness education is ideally suited for teens because mindfulness qualities include basic qualities of human living, such as how to be a good friend, to be empathic and nonjudging—basic elements of social and emotional learning that are necessary for teens to become full-rounded adults.

Daren Dickson, division director of the Seneca Center for Children and Families in Oakland, California, offers an Inner Life Skills curriculum for youth in the foster care, juvenile justice or mental health systems. “Our basic approach is to try and meet these youth where they are—without the numbing effects of medications—and to offer them an unconditionally caring, accepting relationship. We’ve found that much of what makes these youth angry, sad, fearful and hopeless is a sense of disconnection—from others, from hope and, most importantly, from themselves.”

“The Inner Life Skills curriculum has proven to be an excellent way to gently introduce these youth to their own inner lives and to help them develop skills to feel connected to others and to the world again. We’ve found that it’s an excellent complement to other therapeutic interventions.”

Meleo-Meyer thinks the message of hope is one of the most powerful reasons mindfulness training is valuable for teens. She believes that teens can feel despair at the world they’re entering as adults. “That despair can lead to the notion, ‘What’s the use?’ Mindfulness tools help youth connect with their own self-knowledge and resilience and discover their ‘wholeness’ within. [That] positions them to have creative ways to solve problems.”

Conclusion

Mindfulness-based mind-body training has the potential to empower teens with tools for self-care, impulse control, anger management and reflection at a critical life stage.

We don’t have all the answers. What we do know is that some teens benefit from this training and that it does not have the side effects associated with prescriptive drugs. Most important, says Meleo-Meyer, it can stimulate youth to tap into their innate resources in the service of living well with wisdom and clarity. With teens themselves seeking ways to contribute to the world and wanting to be kinder, less stressed and more connected, it seems incumbent on us to offer tools that can help—and to watch mindfulness education developments with an open and curious heart and mind. ■

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The reference list for this article is available online at www.ideafit.com/idea-fitness-journal/2012/february.

Initial Research On Mindfulness Programs For Teens Shows Promising Results

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Emerging research suggests that mindfulness is feasible and acceptable for youth and may also be beneficial to them (Burke 2010). Qualitative, quantitative and randomized clinical trial studies show that teens accept mindfulness-based programs and do not experience any adverse effects from them. Studies also show that mindfulness approaches are producing benefits in teens in the form of more feelings of well-being, less anxiety and worry, and less emotional reactivity (Burke 2010).

From 2005 to 2006, Biegel et al. conducted a randomized clinical trial to evaluate the effectiveness of an Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) program adapted for teens aged 14–18 who were receiving treatment in an outpatient psychiatry facility. The study included 102 individuals randomized into either a treatment-as-usual [TAU] group or a group receiving TAU plus participation in an MBSR program adapted for teens. TAU consisted of either individual or group therapy and/or drug therapy.

Clinicians took pretest, post-test and 3-month follow-up measures of participants' mental health. Methods included a psychiatric diagnosis and assessments of levels of general psychological and social functioning. Clinicians who made these measures were blinded to the subjects' group status. At post-test and follow-up, subjects were scored on the basis of whether there was no change in their diagnosis, an improvement or a lack of improvement.

The findings, published in the *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, showed that participants in the MBSR group had a higher percentage of diagnostic improvement than those in the TAU group. MBSR group members also showed reduced symptoms of anxiety, depression and somatic distress and increased self-esteem and sleep quality compared with the TAU group. Investigators recommended that more methodologically rigorous, large-scale clinical trials be conducted.

SIDEBAR: Resources

PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT

Applied Mindfulness Inc. (instructor training, program development and implementation services), www.applied-mindfulness.org (<http://www.applied-mindfulness.org>).

Insight Meditation Society Teen Retreat (accepts volunteer instructors; contact Rebecca Bradshaw), www.dharma.org/ims/retreat_detail.php?id=261 (http://www.dharma.org/ims/retreat_detail.php?id=261).

Stressed Teens (online teacher training available), www.stressedteens.com (<http://www.stressedteens.com>).

TEEN MBSR OR MINDFULNESS MEDITATION PROGRAMS

Center for Mindfulness in Medicine, Health Care, and Society,

www.umassmed.edu/Content.aspx?id=41310 (<http://www.umassmed.edu/Content.aspx?id=41310>).

Insight Meditation Society, www.dharma.org/ims/retreat_detail.php?id=261 (http://www.dharma.org/ims/retreat_detail.php?id=261).

Inward Bound Mindfulness Education, <http://ibme.info/retreats/teens/> (<http://ibme.info/retreats/teens/>).

Mass General/North Shore Center for Outpatient Care (Cool Minds™ Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction for 14- to 17-year-olds), www.nsmcfamilyresourcecenter.org/ (<http://www.nsmcfamilyresourcecenter.org/>).

Stressed Teens (Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction for Teens, MBSR-T), www.stressedteens.com/ (<http://www.stressedteens.com/>).

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