

# Meditation and Teacher Stress

*Learn how meditation can mitigate stress and promote emotional well-being for early childhood teachers.*

**Imre Emeric Csaszar  
& Teresa Buchanan**

Early childhood teachers can be relaxed and peaceful as they create playful and harmonious classrooms, even if they work in stressful contexts. Effective teachers sustain respectful and caring relationships with children and adults (Cooper, 2003; Essa, Taylor, Pratt, & Roberts, 2012; Ray, Lambie & Curry, 2007). However, the stressors faced by teachers may lead to negative consequences that can undermine their ability to sustain personal health and positive interactions. Meditation is a tool that can mitigate teacher stress, promote emotional well-being, and contribute to affirming exchanges between teachers and students.

**Stress is the relationship between the person and environment.**

Stress is an ordinary part of everyday life for all individuals. Selye in his epic book *The Stress of Life* (1984) explains that stress is a condition that forces physiological and or psychological burden(s) on a person. Similarly, Lazarus and Folkman, defined stress as: “a particular relationship between the person and the environment that is appraised by the person as taxing or exceeding his or her resources and endangering his or her well-being” (1984, p. 19). Although these definitions are over 30 years old, they still hold true today, particularly as it relates to teachers. Teachers are prone to enormous stress as they face the demands and expectations of students, parents, administrators, local communities and society. Some stressors from a typical day include facilitating appropriate individual student conduct, developing effective individualized curriculum and learning activities that meet

the learning needs of children, and amplified workloads associated with increased demands for accountability including high stakes testing. In the absence of positive coping strategies, stress may lead to increasingly negative outcomes; specifically, stress experienced by teachers may lead to emotional exhaustion, a precursor to burnout.

## The Practice of Meditation

One approach teachers can use to mitigate stress is the holistic wellness practice of meditation. The practice of meditation offers a promising approach to promoting teacher wellness while developing empathy and compassion. Walsh and Shapiro (2006) define meditation as “a family of self-regulation practices that focus on training attention and awareness in order to bring mental processes under greater voluntary control and thereby foster general mental well-being and development and/or specific capacities such as calm, clarity, and concentration” (pp. 228-229). The practice of meditation may be traced back to ancient times as an active element of spiritual practice by many religious groups, including Christianity (Shear, 2006). Meditation is a personal and internal activity with the aim of facilitating mental clarity.

In the last several decades the practice of meditation has become prevalent in Western culture and many contemporary health providers include meditation as part of their alternative strategy to combat a multitude of health related difficulties their patients may face (i.e., neurological issues, digestive and metabolic concerns, pain, insomnia, depression, stress) (Ospina, Bond, Karkhaneh, Tjosvold, Vandermeer, Liang, Bialy, Hooton, Buscemi, Dryden, Klassen, 2007). According to the National Center for Disease Control’s (CDC) *National Health Statistics Report #12*, in 2007 there were more than 20 million adults in the U.S. practicing meditation, which translated to closely 9.4 % of the adult population at that time (National Institutes of Health, 2010).

One of the benefits of meditation is that it promotes holistic wellness, particularly in the area of emotional and spiritual wellness. An overwhelming body of evidence from research shows that meditation can reduce and alleviate stress, fatigue, and physical illnesses (Carlson, Ursuliak, Goodey, Angen, & Specca, 2001; Goleman & Bennett-Goleman, 2001; Grossman, Niemann, Schmidt, & Walach, 2004; Ospina et al., 2007). While many practical forms of meditation exist (e.g., tai chi, yoga, structured and guided meditations), a potentially useful form that can be used to help alleviate educator stress is a simple practice called “mindfulness” (Curry & O’Brien, 2012).

**Meditation can mitigate teacher stress.**

## Mindfulness

Mindfulness as a concept has received increasing attention in recent years as providing an alternative technique to address negative thoughts and emotions and to assist people who experience physiological and/or emotional challenges (Stewart, 2004). In the United States, Jon Kabat-Zinn was the forerunner of the mindfulness movement, establishing the Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction Program in 1979. He has defined mindfulness as a “moment to moment non-judgmental awareness” (p. 626). The main goals of practicing mindfulness are 1) to be in and accept the present moment as well as 2) to engage in nonjudgmental observation of self and others (Kabat-Zinn, 1994).

## Dimensions of Early Childhood

## Table 1. Meditation Resources

### Websites

- Free Guided Meditations (audio). (2013). *University of California-Los Angeles (UCLA) Regents*. Retrieved July 10, 2014 from <http://marc.ucla.edu/body.cfm?id=22>
- Guided Meditations (audio). (2014). *Tara Brach*. Retrieved July 10, 2014, from <http://www.tarabrach.com/audioarchives-guided-meditations.html>
- Mindful Self Compassion (audio). (2014). *Christopher Germer*. Retrieved July 10, 2014 from [http://www.mindfulselfcompassion.org/meditations\\_downloads.php](http://www.mindfulselfcompassion.org/meditations_downloads.php)
- Loving Kindness (metta) Meditation (audio). *Lisa Dale Miller*. Retrieved July 10, 2014 from <http://www.lisadalemiller.com/Lovingkindness-Meditation1.xml>

### Books

- Hanh, Thich Nhat. (2008). *Mindful Movements: Ten Exercises for Well-Being*. Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press.
- Hanh, Thich Nhat (2012). *Work: How to Find Joy and Meaning in Each Hour of the Day*. Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press.

There are numerous ways to practice mindfulness that include deep breath work and various forms of yoga. The goal of mindfulness is to clear the mind of thought, judgments about self and others, and to enter a state of advanced relaxation that allows the body to decompress. Meditation can be done while listening to music or no music, with or without structure and guidance. Meditation should be done in a quiet, clean space. Noteworthy, new practitioners don't have to purchase books or expensive programs, clothes or gear of any type to get started. There are many places for beginners to find free, structured, guided meditations including the health site run by University of California Los Angeles (UCLA). (see Table 1) These guided meditations provide instructions and take varying amounts of time (3 minutes to 19 minutes).

One specific type of meditation that has been useful to teachers and other helping professionals is called “loving kindness meditation” (Csaszar, 2013; Leppma, 2012).

### Loving-Kindness Meditation

Loving-kindness meditation is a type of mindfulness meditation with roots that can be traced back to the positive psychology movement. However, loving-kindness meditation advances mindfulness by cultivating positive emotions and by introducing the practice of compassion and empathy toward self and others (Fredrickson, 2002). This is particularly important for teachers who may suffer from emotional exhaustion which can lead to decreases in empathy and compassion and can impact teachers' relationships with their colleagues and students (Crippen, 2010).



The steps of loving-kindness are very simple. First, the practitioner finds a comfortable place to sit in a relaxing position. (It is important to not lie down.) After closing her eyes, the meditator begins by deep breathing and thinking, *“May I be healthy and strong. May I be happy. May I be filled with ease.”* Some find it helpful to draw an imaginary circle on the ground around oneself. After doing this for at least three repetitions, the next step is to think of someone the meditator loves deeply (e.g., spouse, children, parent, pet) and to focus on that person while repeating at least three times, *“May you be healthy and strong. May you be happy. May you be filled with ease.”* Again, some people find it helpful to imagine that loved one joining the meditator in the circle. Third, this process is repeated for a person the meditator feels neutral about, a person she neither likes nor dislikes (e.g., cashier at the grocery, postal worker), and imagining that person joining the meditator and loved-one in the circle. Fourth, the meditator considers a person she dislikes, focusing on the person, possibly imagining that person in the circle with the meditator, and repeating at least three times, *“May you be healthy and strong. May you be happy. May you be filled with ease.”* This is generally the most difficult step for beginners. Finally, the meditator imagines everyone in the universe while repeating the same phrases. There are many free audio resources available that can be a great help when beginning a practice like this. Evidence suggests that teachers who do this every day show significant increases in empathy and decreased stress after only six weeks (Csaszar, 2013). It is a simple thing to do in the morning before school or in the evenings before



Photos courtesy of the authors

*Meditation can be a useful tool to practice in an early childhood classroom.*

bedtime and can have a positive effect on teaching in the classroom.

Teachers face extreme stress and may feel overwhelmed by assessment demands, accountability, teaching loads and classroom management. Some educators may not have positive coping mechanisms and adaptation strategies to handle these stressors appropriately. Over time the stress may build, exacerbate the level of emotional exhaustion one may experience and lead to burnout and eventual impairment. Teachers inadequately dealing with their stress levels may also be less effective professionally (e.g., student outcomes, professional relationships). Some may choose to leave the profession due to their inability to cope with the difficulties they may face.

**Meditation can contribute to affirming exchanges between teachers and students.**

## Conclusion

Although there are many things individuals can do to improve wellness (e.g., eating nutritious food, getting adequate sleep and rest, balancing work and social time, exercising), one potential wellness practice that can promote empathy and compassion is meditation. Further, this approach may help teachers mitigate stress and prevent burnout and promote emotional wellness. This approach may be implicated in assisting teachers to establish and gain the emotional resources they need in

order to meet the developmental and social concerns of children.

## References

- Carlson, L.E., Ursuliak, Z., Goodey, E., Angen, M., & Speca, M. (2001). The effects of a mindfulness meditation-based stress reduction program on mood and symptoms of stress in cancer outpatients: 6-month follow-up. *Support Care Cancer*, 9(2), 112-123.
- Cooper, K. (2003). From left field to safe at home-base: Building community in the pre-service classroom and beyond. *Teacher Education Quarterly*, 30(4), 83-94.
- Crippen, C. (2010). Serve, teach, and lead: It's all about relationships. *Insight: A Journal of Scholarly Teaching*, 5, 27-36.
- Csaszar, I. (2013). *The effect of Loving Kindness Meditation on student teachers' stress and empathy*. Retrieved from <http://etd.lsu.edu/docs/available/etd-06272012-080110/unrestricted/csaszardiss.pdf>.
- Curry, J., & O'Brien, E.R. (2012). Shifting to a wellness paradigm in teacher education: A promising practice for fostering teacher stress reduction, burnout resilience, and promoting retention. *Ethical Human Psychology and Psychiatry*, 14(3), 178-191.
- Essa, E.L., Taylor, J.M., Pratt, J.M., & Roberts, S.A. (2012). The inside out project: Illustrating the complexity of relationships in kindergarten and first grade. *Young Children* 1(7), 24-33.
- Fredrickson, B. L. (2002). Positive emotions. In C. R. Snyder & S. J. Lopez (Eds.), *Handbook of Positive Psychology* (120-134). Oxford: University Press.
- Goleman D., & Bennett-Goleman, T. (2001). *Emotional alchemy: How the mind can heal the heart*. New York: Harmony Publishing.
- Grossman, P., Niemann, L., Schmidt, S., & Walach, H. (2004). Mindfulness-based stress reduction and health benefits: A meta-analysis. *Journal of Psychosomatic Research*, 57(1), 35-43.
- Kabat-Zinn, J. (1994). *Wherever you go, there you are: Mindfulness meditation in everyday life*. New York: Hyperion.
- Lazarus, R. S., & Folkman, S. (1984). *Stress, appraisal, and coping*. New York: Springer.
- Leppma, M. (2012). The effect of loving kindness meditation on empathy, perceived social support, and problem solving appraisal in counseling students. (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). University of Central Florida, Orlando, FL.
- National Institutes of Health. (2010). *Meditation: An Introduction*. (NCCAM Publication No: D308). Retrieved July 10, 2014 from <http://nccam.nih.gov/health/meditation/overview.htm>
- Ospina, M. B., Bond, T.K., Karkhaneh, M., Tjosvold, L., Vandermeer, B., Liang, Y., Bialy, L., Hooton, N., Buscemi, N., Dryden, D.M., Klassen, T. P. (2007, June). *Meditation practices for health: State of the Research*. Evidence Report/Technology Assessment No. 155. 1-263. Retrieved July 10, 2014 from <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/17764203>
- Ray, S., Lambie, G. W., & Curry, J. (2007). Building caring schools: Implications for professional school counselors. *Journal of School Counseling*, 5(14). Retrieved July 10, 2014 from <http://www.jsc.montana.edu/articles/v5n14.pdf>
- Selye, H. (1984). *The stress of life* (2nd Ed.). New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Shear, J., (Ed.). (2006). *The experience of meditation: Experts introduce the major traditions*. St. Paul, MN: Paragon House.
- Stewart, T. (2004). Light on body image treatment: Acceptance through mindfulness. *Behavior Modification*, 28, 783-811.
- Walsh, R., & Shapiro, S.L. (2006). The meeting of meditative disciplines and western psychology: A mutually enriching dialogue. *American Psychologist*, 61(3), 227-239.

## About the Authors

**Imre Emeric Csaszar** earned his doctoral degree in Higher Education Administration at LSU. Dr. Csaszar is a licensed professional counselor and counselor supervisor in the state of Louisiana and also holds a certification as nationally certified counselor. He is an instructor of counseling, teaching and educational administration at Louisiana State University. His research interests are in stress reduction, holistic wellness and meditation, particularly loving-kindness meditation.

**Teresa Buchanan** is an Associate Professor at Louisiana State University in the College of Education, where she has been teaching early childhood courses for 19 years. She earned her PhD at Purdue University in Child Development and Family Studies. Her research interests are teacher education and early childhood teaching practices, specifically in finding ways to model developmentally appropriate practices in teacher-education programs, including mediators of stress for early childhood teachers.