

The Importance of Mindfulness for Anxious Students

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Abstract

Anxiety is a large issue among youth. Physical and mental symptoms can develop from anxiety, and educators must recognize these symptoms in their students. The stigma that is attached to mental health can make it difficult for students to receive support and treatment. Mindfulness is a way that educators can address anxiety in their classroom. Mindfulness teaches students to understand how their brain reacts to stress, and how to train their brain to interrupt anxiety. Mindful breathing and listening are two strategies that help students self-regulate themselves. A mindfulness program will provide students with tools to help reduce stress and anxiety.

Everyone has experienced some sort of anxiety in his/her life (Peters Mayer, 2008). In fact, anxiety is very normal. Anxiety affects students' mental and physical state, which educators must recognize before it develops into depression (Climie & Altomare, 2013). Unfortunately, there is a stigma around mental health, and that can prevent students from gaining access to strategies and treatments (Cowan, 2014). Kabat-Zin (2003), the pioneer of mindfulness, developed a mindfulness-based stress reduction program to help reduce stress, pain, and illness. Mindfulness can alleviate students' anxiety (Viafora, Mathiesen, & Unsworth, 2015). There are many benefits to learning mindfulness strategies, and there has been an increase in research about how mindfulness positively affects students. Along with mindfulness, it is beneficial for students to understand how the brain reacts to stress, and how the brain can be trained to respond appropriately. From there, students learn specific mindfulness strategies such as breathing, listening, and eating. It is up to educators to address mental health and implement a program such as mindfulness.

Problems with Student Anxiety

Since anxiety affects students' physically and mentally, it could lead to depression, which may be left untreated due to the stigma around mental health. Anxiety can mask itself as "part of normal developmental changes or personality" (Cowan, 2014, p. 15), which is why so many educators miss the warning signs. If educators ignore anxiety, it can have severe consequences for the students (Headley & Campbell, 2013). For students with anxiety, school can be a nightmare. It is an environment that involves tension, deadlines, judgment, evaluation, and fitting in (Peters Mayer, 2008). The mental and physical symptoms of anxiety can be exhausting and uncomfortable (Peters Mayer, 2008). A test can cause a student to wake up that morning feeling nauseous and begging to stay home from school. Test and homework anxiety are very common, along with refusing to attend school and stress over being apart from the caregiver. Mentally, students may have a loss of concentration and feel overwhelmed. Physical symptoms can present as hyperventilation, bodily tension, headaches, or a pounding heart. These intense feelings and symptoms can affect all developmental areas of a student's life, particularly at school).

In a 2012 survey conducted by the Canadian Teachers' Federation, along with the Mental Health Commission of Canada, 59% of teachers believed that depression was a "pressing concern" (Froese-Germain & Riel, 2012, p. 10). In that same survey, 21% of teachers reported that they had seen students bullied because of their mental health (Froese-Germain & Riel, 2012, p. 14). Many people are unaware that anxiety that is left untreated can develop into depression, particularly for teens and young adults (Lyons, n.d.). Since anxiety has become so prevalent in students, it is no surprise that depression rates are increasing (Lyons, n.d.).

Students with anxiety and depression may feel helpless and hopeless (Cowan, 2014). Many of these students have had suicidal thoughts (Findlay, 2017). Students need access to supports, and often it is left in a school's hands to initiate treatment. Mental health supports may not even be considered by parents until the school offers to provide support (Cowan, 2014). At the same time, there are parents who are reluctant to share their child's mental illness with the school (Cowan, 2014). It is crucial that educators recognize anxiety in students and support them before it is left untreated and develops into depression (Climie & Altomare, 2013).

There is a stigma attached to mental health and accessing mental health treatment (Cowan, 2014). I was afraid to tell anyone that I was using a counsellor. It took me three years to build up the courage to access help. The stigma that is attached to mental illnesses prevents many people from accessing supports (Froese-Germain & Riel, 2012). Students who are identified with a mental illness may be bullied by their peers because of the negative connotation associated with it (Froese-Germain & Riel, 2012). Although everyone has experienced anxiety, teachers can be skeptics when it comes to students' anxiety (Cowan, 2014). Being skeptical of students' anxiety is harmful because they may not feel comfortable to ask for help or they may feel shame. Students need an adult to trust so that they can begin to self-advocate for themselves (Cowan, 2014). Teachers need to be comfortable talking about mental illness within the classroom, in order to alleviate the stigma that surrounds it.

Mindfulness as a Means to Reduce Anxiety

I believe that mindfulness is a practice that educators should implement in classrooms to reduce anxiety by teaching students to pay attention to the present moment, understand how the brain responds to stress, and practice mindfulness strategies. Stressors from home or school can affect students' "learning, behaviours, and overall academic performance" (Harpin, Rossi, Kim, & Swanson, 2016, p. 149). Mindfulness-based stress reduction and its positive effects have been researched for over 30 years in the medical and health care field (Solar, 2013). Recently, researchers have stated that programs that strengthen students' mental and emotional health are needed (Viafora et al., 2015). Many schools already have interventions put in place to assist students with emotional distress, and mindfulness would complement any of those programs (Solar, 2013). When used in addition to other interventions, mindfulness may provide students with the confidence to manage their behaviours in a school setting. There are already programs designed to teach mindfulness specifically to students. Mindful Schools has a course designed for educators to implement mindfulness within the classroom. The course is designed to work with other programs that address the social and emotional needs of the student (Mindful Schools, 2015¹). Schools that incorporate mindfulness are "calmer, less distracted, and respond more appropriately to each other" (Solar, 2013, p. 45), which serves to reduce student anxiety.

Mindfulness is explained to students as "simply paying attention . . . to what's happening inside and outside of oneself, in this present moment" (Viafora et al., 2015, p. 1179). Students are taught to have complete awareness of their thoughts and feelings in each moment (Solar, 2013). Once students become aware of their thoughts and feelings, they have the ability to choose an appropriate response, which is empowering for them. Mindfulness also assists students with conflict resolution (Mindful Schools, 2015). I spend a lot of time each day assisting students to solve problems. These problems range from engaging in conflicts with other students to not understanding concepts being taught. Emotional distress happens very quickly

¹ Mindful Schools. (2015). *Module notes: Mindfulness & education overview*. Retrieved from an online course on mindfulness, not available to the general public.

for some students when they are faced with a problem. Mindfulness teaches students to self-regulate their emotions and other responses (Viafora et al., 2015). A more effective “learning and working environment” is created when students are taught mindfulness strategies to pay better attention (Solar, 2013, p. 45).

Students with an anxiety disorder may use their disorder as a reason for not fully engaging to certain aspects of schools. I have had parents tell me that their children can be excused from certain activities because it makes them anxious. What these parents and students do not realize is that they can train their brain to respond to stress and anxiety appropriately, rather than avoiding what triggers anxiety (Mindful Schools, 2015). Students will buy in to mindfulness if they know that they have this ability. Educators need to help those students “shift gears in the brain and nervous system” (Mindful Schools, 2015, p. 6). The Mindful Schools curriculum teaches students about the specific parts of the brain, and how mindfulness can change how the brain reacts and responds. Mindfulness increases a student’s self-awareness of feelings that arise during situations that they know will cause them anxiety (Kabat-Zinn, 2003; Talathi & Mhaske, 2017; Viafora et al., 2015). For example, if physical education class causes a student anxiety, the student will be able to recognize the anxiety and use a strategy that will help him/her to participate. By teaching students about how the brain can be trained to respond to stress, they will fully engage in a mindfulness-based stress reduction program.

Teaching and practicing new mindfulness strategies such as listening, breathing, eating, heartfulness, and movements (Viafora et al., 2015) may assist students to self-regulate their emotions (Harpin et al., 2016). To gain context for the students, these strategies can be used to explore specific themes. Some examples of themes could be mindfulness while writing an exam, mindfulness of enjoyable experiences, or sending kind thoughts toward oneself or to others (Viafora et al., 2015). When students have understood the importance of each mindful strategy, the students will be able to acknowledge what caused an emotional response (Solar, 2013). Deciding what to do after a conflict or emotional response can be a new concept for many students (Solar, 2013). Students who have practiced mindfulness at school are more likely to practice it outside of school and to recommend it to others (Viafora et al., 2015). In my opinion, the most powerful aspect of mindfulness is that the students learn not to feel shameful about their emotions or responses, but to accept what happened and how they felt (Solar, 2013). Teachers who teach mindfulness strategies in the classroom noted a difference in students being able to regulate their emotions, behaviours, and perform better academically (Harpin et al., 2016).

Conclusion

Anxiety is currently one of the most prevalent mental health disorders in young people (Higgins & O’Sullivan, 2015). Educators must recognize the mental and physical symptoms of anxiety in students, or else it could possibly morph into depression. There is a stigma that is attached with any mental health issue, and schools must address anxiety (Froese-Germain & Riel, 2012). Mindfulness is one way that schools can address anxiety. Research indicates that mindfulness is a feasible option to assist students with stress and anxiety (Harpin et al., 2016). When anxiety occurs, the “decision-making” part of the brain is affected (Mindful Schools, 2015, p. 6), and students should understand how the brain can be trained to interrupt anxiety. Mindfulness takes regular disciplined practice for there to be a chance at anxiety reduction (Kabat-Zin, 2003, p. 148). Specific strategies such as mindful breathing and listening should be taught so that students can learn how to self-regulate their stress and anxiety. Anxiety has become a large mental health concern in students, and schools should implement mindfulness to teach students to understand and regulate their anxiety.

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About the Author

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