

Mindfulness in Schools
Research Project:
Exploring Teachers' and
Students' Perspectives –
Preliminary Report

© Karen Ager, Angela Bucu, Nicole J. Albrecht and Marc Cohen
2014

Designed by Jonathan Shin
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The Age, March 14, 2011

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Executive Summary

A growing body of scientific evidence suggests mindfulness is an essential life skill. Mindfulness practices help focus attention and have the potential to enhance both teacher and student well being (Albrecht, Albrecht, & Cohen, 2012; Black, Milam, & Sussman, 2009). Techniques focus on the development of the whole person – awareness of the mind, body and emotions. Mindfulness is practiced widely around the world and is also a burgeoning area of academic interest. Research started in the early 1980s with people experiencing chronic pain and stress. By the close of 2012 there were approximately 2500 journal articles on the topic investigating its impact on a wide range of health conditions and well-being.

Due to positive research results in adult populations, mindfulness programs have been implemented in schools around the world over the last decade and researchers are conducting studies to determine how learning mindfulness impacts a school community's well-being. The current research project focuses on understanding children's and teachers' experiences and perspectives of learning and teaching mindfulness for the first time in an independent school located in New Zealand. The following questions were posed:

- What is a child's perspective of learning mindfulness practices at school?
- How do teachers make sense of introducing a mindfulness program to children?

In 2013, approximately 40 (forty) Year 2 and Year 5 students from a primary school in Auckland, New Zealand participated in a 10-week mindfulness program. The program was developed in Australia, by Janet ETTY-Leal, and is based on the text "Meditation Capsules: A Mindfulness Program for Children" (see p. *vi* for an outline of the program).

The school's Counsellor and Well-Being Director delivered the program with the general classroom teachers participating in some of the activities. During the mindfulness course, students completed age appropriate journals (see Appendix A) designed by Nicole Albrecht. The journals were then analysed by Karen Ager, who searched for prominent themes associated with the pupils' perceptions of learning mindfulness.

Upon completion of the program, Angela Bucu interviewed the School Counsellor and Well-Being Director to find out about their experiences of teaching the program for the first time. Themes and patterns were generated from the interview data, based on the most meaningful and important experiences identified by the school's facilitators^[1].

The findings support the integration of mindfulness across the whole school, focusing initially on both teacher and student populations. Further research is

[1] For purpose of the report the school's Counsellor and Well-Being Director shall be referred to as the "Mindfulness Facilitators".

recommended to determine whether mindfulness practice leads to long-term whole person development, enhanced academic performance and a reduction in student and teacher stress levels.

Main Findings

Preliminary findings suggest:

- Mindfulness benefits the whole person – the mind, body and emotions.
- Mindfulness enhances the well-being of both students and teachers.
- Mindfulness helps students to develop a greater awareness of their emotions and the feelings of others.
- Mindfulness particularly supports emotionally challenged students.
- Mindfulness enhances student and teacher empathy in the classroom.
- Mindfulness experiences enable students to effectively deal with stress.
- Mindfulness develops a student's ability to focus their attention and seems to enhance academic performance.
- Mindfulness practice helps students to feel calm, peaceful and happy.
- Mindfulness practice helps resolve conflicts.
- Teaching mindfulness enables general classroom teachers to gain new insights about their class.
- Facilitators benefit both professionally and personally from teaching mindfulness.
- Mindfulness helps teachers/facilitators manage stress.
- Teaching mindfulness helps facilitators to become more aware of teaching habits and behaviours.

Mindfulness benefits the whole person - the mind, body and emotions. Mindfulness programs such as "Meditation Capsules" can positively impact both staff and student populations in schools. These programs can support the development of core character traits such as empathy and awareness and enhance well-being. They also help to reduce stress, and to focus the mind and body.



Source: Shayla Smith, student in Karen Ager's class

Introduction

There is a growing body of scientific evidence that suggests mindfulness is an essential life skill for adults and children. Mindfulness practices help focus attention and have the potential to enhance both teacher and student well-being (Albrecht, Albrecht, & Cohen, 2012; Black, Milam, & Sussman, 2009). Practice focuses on the development of the whole person – awareness of the mind, body and emotions.

Mindfulness – What Does it Mean?

“Mindfulness is mostly used to refer to a way of “being” which has prescribed characteristics, activities and programs designed to cultivate this state as well as ancient meditation techniques rooted in various religions” (Albrecht et al., 2012, p.1). It is a natural human capacity, which involves observing, participating and accepting each of life’s moments from a state of equilibrium or loving kindness (Albrecht et al., 2012). Mindfulness can be practiced through meditation and contemplation, but may also be cultivated through paying attention to one’s every day activities (such as eating, gardening, walking and listening) and school-based activities (such as class work) (Albrecht et al., 2012). The concept can be applied to all types of awareness – auditory, gustatory, tactile and visual (Napoli, Krech, and Holley, 2005), as well as one’s thoughts and emotions.

What Does the Research Say About Mindfulness in Schools?

Study on the benefits of mindfulness started in the 1980s in the United States (Albrecht, 2013). The first studies concentrated on assessing the practice's benefits in adult populations who were highly stressed and/or in pain. Since this time, research and practice has significantly expanded and many schools around the world now share mindfulness with children (Albrecht, Albrecht, & Cohen, 2012; Black, Milam, & Sussman, 2009; Kaltwasser, Sauer, & Kohls, 2014).

Research investigating how the practice impacts teacher and student well-being also commenced approximately a decade ago. Studies have found that mindfulness lowers stress levels and positively impacts a child's:

- executive functioning;
- focus and attention;
- meta-cognition;
- academic achievement;
- social skills;
- temperament;
- range of knowledge in regards to emotions;
- emotion regulation skills;
- self-efficacy, which lead to the ability to stand up to bullies;
- ability to relax;
- level of empathy and compassion;
- sleep quality and
- connection with the environment (Albrecht, 2014; Burke, 2009; Carelse, 2013; Coholic, 2011).

There has been less investigation in teacher populations. However, the little research that has been conducted shows mindfulness helps teachers:

- reduce their stress levels;
- with behaviour management strategies;
- improve self-esteem;
- gain a holistic view of the curriculum and
- develop heightened awareness of teaching habits (Albrecht et al., 2012).

School Commitment to Research

The Mental Health Foundation of New Zealand (2012) recommends mindfulness research needs to be conducted in educational settings in the country to build a local body of evidence around the effectiveness of mindfulness.

Currently mindfulness programs are being studied in government schools in New Zealand. However, it is expected, thanks to the staffs' commitment to research, that findings from School's pilot mindfulness program will be the first to showcase the New Zealand experience.

Top quality journals in the field of education and psychology/counselling will be targeted. Results from the study are expected to reach thousands of practitioners and researchers world-wide. Findings may also be published by the media in New Zealand to reach a wider audience.

Mindfulness Program Outline

MEDITATION CAPSULES: A MINDFULNESS PROGRAM FOR CHILDREN

"Meditation Capsules: A Mindfulness Program for Children" was developed in Australia by Janet ETTY-Leal. The program was designed not just to manage stress, but to enhance both student and teacher well-being (Albrecht, Albrecht, & Cohen, 2012). The mindfulness program is now taught in Australia and several other countries, including the United States. Dozens of schools have received government funding to establish a mindful curriculum, based on Janet's program.

The mindfulness program is presented in a text book together with an accompanying CD in a familiar lesson-style format that teachers can readily grasp and put into action (Albrecht, Albrecht, & Cohen, 2012, p. 9). The book is divided into 10 sessions and sequentially builds awareness of how to implement mindfulness in the classroom (Albrecht, Albrecht, & Cohen, 2012, p. 9). ETTY-Leal has integrated a range of techniques with core curriculum subjects to enhance academic performance, compassion and general well-being.

The book shares with children and teachers:

- Relaxation, Meditation and Self-awareness
- Getting to Know the Body
- Awareness of the Breath
- Understanding the Stress Response
- Words and their Emotional Power

- The Sense of Sight, Smell, Sound, Taste and Touch
- The Sense of Humour
- Observation of Thoughts
- Creativity
- Stillness Meditation

Meditation Capsules is designed to suit a range of ages from four to eighteen years of age. The program and book caters for teachers that have no experience with meditation or practicing mindfulness techniques but also is designed to suit individuals with an extensive mind-body wellness background (Albrecht, Albrecht, & Cohen, 2012). ETTY-LEAL also has more books on the way! The latest creation focuses on lower primary school students with activities suited to a range of learning styles and intelligences.

School Students' Perspectives

RESEARCH AIMS AND METHODOLOGY

A Junior School, in Auckland, New Zealand trialed "Meditation Capsules: A Mindfulness Program for Children", during the second half of 2013. Eighteen students ranging in age from 6 – 7 years, and 20 pupils ranging in age from 9 – 10 years learned about mindfulness.

The research aimed to advance understanding about:

- Student perspectives of mindfulness experiences.
- The students' reflections during the mindfulness process.
- The obstacles faced by the students.
- The benefits of mindfulness to student well-being from their perspective.

Students' mindfulness experiences were recorded in a journal designed by Albrecht with text and illustrations (see Appendix A) and then analysed by Ager. Ager searched for prominent themes voicing pupil's perceptions of mindfulness and interpreted the data within the context of her own experience of sharing mindfulness with children in the primary classroom.

PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

Preliminary findings suggest that children benefited from mindfulness practices, and that some activities were more enjoyable and meaningful than others.

Student Experiences

Analysis of student mindfulness journals revealed the following key words:

- Calm
- Relaxed
- Less stressed
- Happy
- Joyful
- Love

These key words expressing the children's "voices" corresponds with other research in the area. For example, Coholic's (2011) qualitative work with children and adolescents in Canada demonstrated that children felt mindfulness lessons were "fun". The lessons seemed to capture their attention and were engaging. Children during interviews said that mindfulness was a worthwhile activity that contributed positively to their wellbeing. In the Coholic study, one child expressed that she was able to appreciate the "beauty of her inner being".

Likewise, the students' reflections to learning mindfulness were deeply insightful. Children noted in journals:

I help dad to breathe when he is feeling stressed.

I feel good about myself.

I feel I'm ready to learn. I feel like learning.

The first student reflection shows how the mindfulness lessons extended beyond the boundaries of the classroom, and helped manage stress in the home environment.

Student Engagement

Most students appeared to readily engage with the activities. Their favourite experiences were:

- mindful eating;
- mindful breathing and
- mindful walking.

A small number of children initially resisted mindfulness activities, writing things such as, “This is boring,” however, journal reflections demonstrated that as the program continued, reluctant students gradually became more engaged with the lessons. Mindfulness Facilitators role modelling their non-judgmental acceptance of the students’ feelings (for example, accepting that they may not initially like the lessons) appeared to contribute to the children embracing and enjoying the activities.

Key areas of student growth appear to be a greater awareness of attentional processes, of one’s self and others and of the surrounding environment. This aligns with Carelse’s (2013, p. 101) research where “all the participants mentioned calmness, relaxation, happiness or peacefulness in their experiences of mindfulness”.

Conflict Resolution

Another important skill derived from learning mindfulness was in regards to “conflict resolution” – for both Year 2 and Year 5 students. Problems with siblings and friendships were written, or drawn about frequently in student journals. Solutions to these problems were found using strategies such as breathing, “hitting the pause button”, saying “are you okay?” and “you can be my friend”.

Source: Magdalena Riecken, student in Karen Ager's class

Mindfulness
breathing

peace



love

Dear Ms. A
I am so lucky to be in
your class. It is the most
peaceful place I have
ever been. Thank you for doing
the breathing it really comes me down

Love



Love



peace



breathing
in breathing
out.

Mindfulness Facilitators' Perspectives

RESEARCH AIMS AND METHODOLOGY

The research aims to advance understanding about:

- Facilitators' perspectives of teaching mindfulness in a classroom setting.
- The lived experiences that were important and meaningful to facilitators during the mindfulness process.
- The obstacles faced by the facilitators.
- The benefits of sharing mindfulness with children.

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), a qualitative methodology developed in the field of psychology was employed to interview teachers and analyse data.

PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

Four main themes emerged from the analysis of interviews with Mindfulness Facilitators in regards to:

- Motivation for Sharing Mindfulness with Children
- Facilitator Engagement
- Program Adaptions and Additions
- Support

Motivation for Sharing Mindfulness with Children

Facilitators expressed four key motivating factors for sharing mindfulness with children:

- Supporting children with emotional challenges.
- Helping children to manage stress.
- Improved social intelligence.
- Enhancing academic performance and the ability to learn.

Research studies have shown that mindfulness practices assist individuals with:

- emotional regulation;
- awareness and acceptance of a wide range of thoughts, emotions and action tendencies;
- pausing, rather than re-acting in times of stress (Hayes & Feldman, 2004).

Teaching children skills to self-regulate their thoughts, emotions and actions, supports well-being and is thought to be critical in promoting school readiness in the preschool environment (Willis & Dinehart, 2013).

The Mindfulness Facilitators felt that the program gave students skills to self-regulate their emotions and to be less reactive. Facilitators particularly noted these changes from sessions four and five, half way through the program. The use of the “pause button”, a technique introduced to the students when discussing stress and how it is triggered, was shown to be successful, as were other techniques such as the use of shark and dolphin (negative and positive) thoughts. These strategies helped them understand and reflect on their thoughts and action tendencies. One facilitator shared an example used with the children, of how despite getting a good appraisal we may sometimes be “dragged down by a shark (negative) thought”. Dolphin thoughts on the other hand, help to pick “ourselves up.”

The Mindfulness Facilitators commented that the students were openly sharing experiences about how they used these and other methods learned with siblings and family members. Facilitators felt that this “openness” reflected how the positive effects of the mindfulness program extended beyond the boundaries of the classroom and was also demonstrated in children’s journals (as previously discussed).

From session four, the facilitators remarked that students “got into the flow” and enjoyed the quiet awareness (silent meditations). This reference to general enjoyment and acceptance is supported throughout the literature (Weare, 2012). Facilitators were also struck by how genuine the conversations and sharings were, commenting that “some of the things they said were quite outstanding, they used metaphors, colors and shapes, or “I was in the presence of.....I didn’t imagine that their imaginations would be so vivid.”

Facilitator Engagement

Findings suggest that facilitator engagement during the mindfulness instruction benefited both the students and the facilitators. “I lived the program and applied it to myself”, was one comment from a Mindfulness Facilitator and reflects how both learners and teachers of the program can benefit.

Facilitators relayed that the Year 2 general classroom teacher who was “involved” during the program received “new insights into the children” in her class. Her engagement in the program allowed her to apply and integrate some of the practices throughout the school day. For example, she used mindful breathing and the “pause button” in order to help calm children, enable them to pay attention and sustain focus on learning activities. The teacher also shared that she benefited personally from her participation.

Key in this finding is the effect on the student of facilitator interaction and participation in the delivery of the program. School based programs are shown to be beneficial for both teachers and students in that they can directly positively influence one another (Rempel, 2012). ETTY-LEAL supports the approach

of teachers learning and teaching at the same time with Albrecht, Albrecht, and Cohen (2012) suggesting that this “offers a humbling and empowering growth opportunity for both adults and children as students cultivate mindfulness together with their teachers” (p. 9). The Mindfulness Facilitators agreed, suggesting “...it can be a real win win, it can be a real benefit to the teacher and the students.”

The research generally recommends that teachers should “embody” a personal practice if they are to bring about the most effective results of intention, awareness and presence into the classroom for the children (Flook, Goldberg, Pinger, Bonus, & Davidson, 2013; Meiklejohn et al., 2012).

Program Adaptions and Additions

A number of program adaptations and additions were incorporated and enthusiastically adopted by both classes. Program adaptation is encouraged by Ety-Leal as she encourages teachers to “use their intuition and wisdom in cultivating mindfulness in the classroom”, (as cited in Albrecht et al., 2012), and in her book states, “This program will provide you with the basic “recipe” – so add whatever “spices and toppings best suit you and the children in your class” (Ety-Leal, 2010, p. 5).

Adaptations and additions (supplementary to the text) found to be most effective for either or both of the classes included:

- pause button – allowing the students to pause / calm before responding
- glitter jar – a tool to be aware of behavior
- dolphin & shark thoughts – connecting the use of positive and negative thought

Facilitators expressed that further age appropriate adaptations could include more “action, sounds and illustrations” for the younger students. Some children have difficulty finding words to express their feelings and so the freedom to decide whether to illustrate, or write about their thoughts and feelings may be important. They felt giving children the ability to decide how best to express their mindfulness feelings i.e. in words or pictures may be an important and empowering part of the learning mindfulness.

Support Structures

Support structures seemed to play an important role when introducing mindfulness into the school environment. Support structures include:

- parents/caregivers;
- management;
- general classroom teachers and
- university.

Mindfulness Facilitators considered the junior school first when introducing the program. They expressed appreciation for the encouragement and support offered by the school administration. Being left to “run with” the program and the guidance provided in securing formal approvals from the parents were highlighted. Parental approval and engagement is of key concern. The pragmatic view is that not all parents will want their children to engage in this voluntary program, and in this regard ongoing management support and commitment in providing a contingency for these children is essential. Furthermore they believe that utilizing formal feedback and surveys throughout the next phase(s) of delivery of the program (if offered) will provide data to parents in support of wider school implementation.

The Mindfulness Facilitators also expressed concern about their ability to adequately facilitate all classes, commenting on issues surrounding their personal time commitment (in view of other responsibilities) and the need for joint facilitation (with the class teacher). It is their view that in order to reach a wider school body facilitation needs to involve the class teacher, suggesting that, “the classroom teacher would have then been able to take other opportunities to plant the seeds and encourage the student to practice throughout the week”, and “if they (the class teacher) were able to learn some of these skills, then that could be a real change agent.”

The facilitators themselves role modelled methods and techniques learned from a visiting mindfulness teacher from the USA, who also teaches Etty-Leal’s Meditation Capsules program. One facilitator commented that “it gave us a new perspective of delivering the program.”

Recommendations

The findings support the following recommendations:

- The integration of mindfulness practice across the whole school, focusing first on both teaching and student populations within the Junior School and Early Learning. It may be important to start the program with teachers who already have an established MindBody Wellness, or mindfulness practice or who are interested in participating in the program. From her findings, Bucu suggests that for the next phase of delivery it may be appropriate to run the program with one counsellor as the primary facilitator and the class teacher as the secondary facilitator. A long-term approach with gradual implementation is recommended.
- Mindfulness practice may be implemented through a 10 week program such as Meditation Capsules, OR integrated into the daily classroom routine by classroom teachers.
- Mindfulness practice needs to include classroom teachers - not just counsellors.
- One day teacher mindfulness training (during working hours) may enhance program delivery and help with teacher / parent communication.
- Effective implementation of mindfulness practice should have flexibility and enable teachers, and students to trust their intuition and to go with the flow.
- Ongoing assessment/research of students and teachers to assess the affects of ongoing application of the mindful awareness, intention and presence techniques learned.

Conclusion

Mindfulness benefits the whole person - the mind, body and emotions. Mindfulness programs such as “Meditation Capsules” can positively impact the well-being of both staff and student populations in schools. The “Meditation Capsules” program has been shown to reduce stress, support the development of core character traits such as empathy and awareness of self and others, and improve the happiness and well-being of teachers and students. It may also help to focus the attention of both the mind and body, and assist with conflict resolution. Research suggests that mindfulness can also affect academic performance, executive functioning, and feelings of connectedness with self, others and the environment (Albrecht, 2014; Burke, 2009; Carelse, 2013; Coholic, 2011).

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Appendices

APPENDIX A (see pg. 19-38)

***My Mindful Journey: A Place To Write What I
Feel and Think About Learning Mindfulness***



Name:

Class:

© Created by Nicole Jacqueline Albrecht , 2013

This journal was designed to help understand Year 2 and Year 5 children's thoughts and feelings about learning mindfulness. Children were learning mindfulness from the text, "Ettly-Leal, J. (2010). Meditation Capsules: A mindfulness program for children. Melbourne: Meditation Capsules."

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You can write in the journal after your mindfulness session each week.

You may like to decorate your journal or give it a name.

In your journal there is no right or wrong answer.

The journal will help other students, parents, teachers and researchers understand how children feel about learning mindfulness. Your thoughts and feelings are important and other people like to read about them.

Year 2: Mindfulness Capsule 1 (Week 1)

Write once sentence about how you felt about the mindfulness session:

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Draw a picture to match your feelings and thoughts:



Feeling words: Happy, sad, joyful, curious, excited, confused, energetic, angry, worried, calm, bored, thoughtful

Year 5: Mindfulness Capsule 1 (Week 1)

Write down how you feel? Do you feel like learning this afternoon?

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Listen to the relaxation track. How do you feel now? Do you feel like learning now or do you feel like taking a nap?

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.....
.....

Feeling words: Happy, sad, joyful, curious, excited, confused, energetic, angry, worried, calm, bored, thoughtful

Year 2: Mindfulness Capsule 2 (Week 2)

If you had a magic wand what would you wish for?

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.....
.....
.....



How are these people feeling?

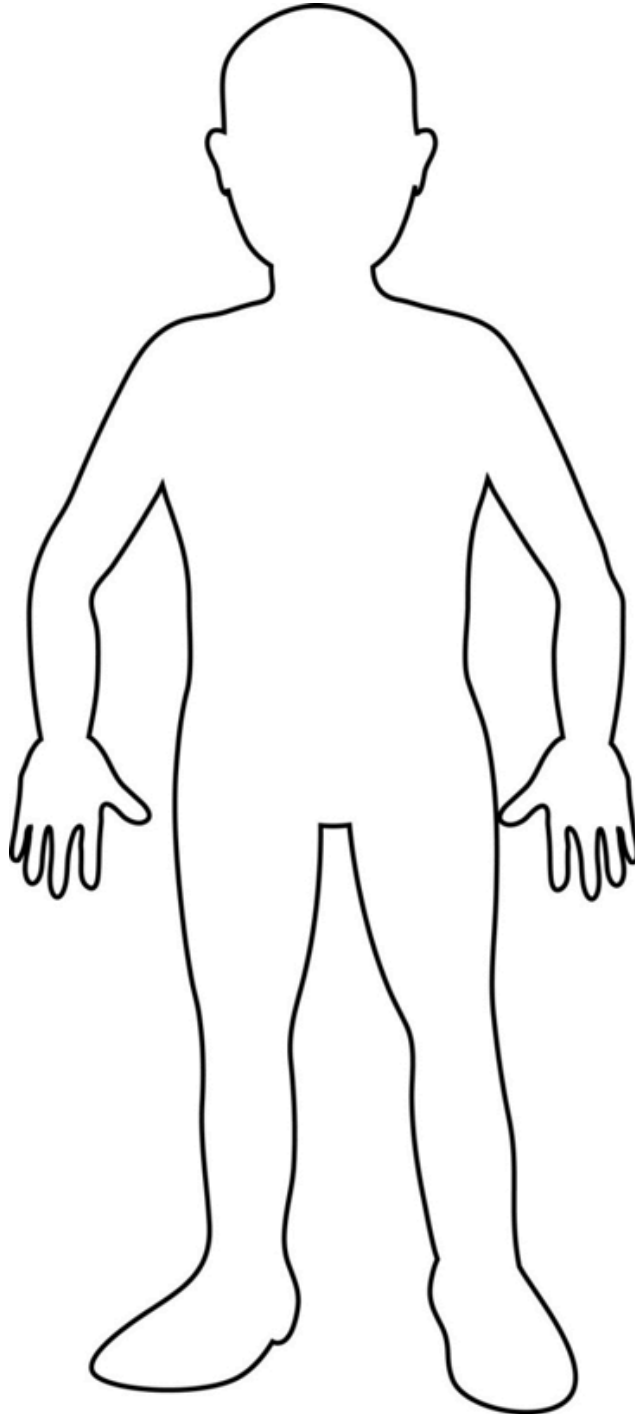
Year 5: Mindfulness Capsule 2 (Week 2)

If you had a magic wand what would you wish for?

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.....
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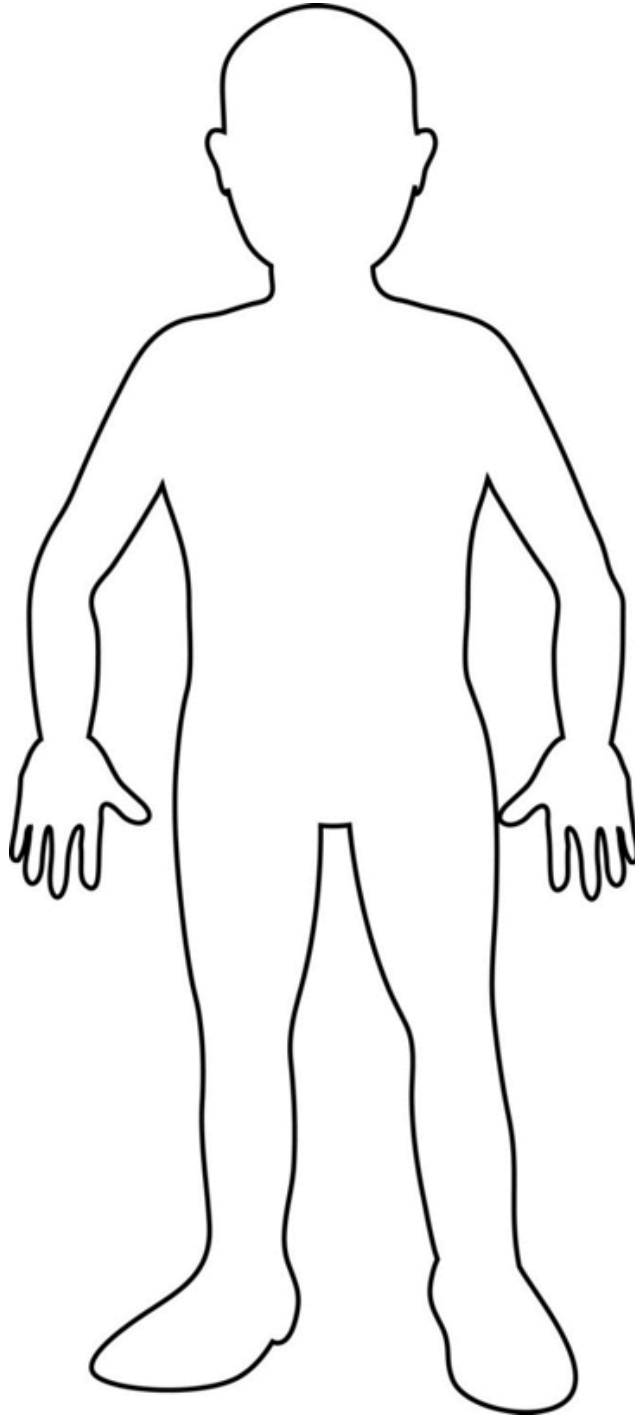


Represent feeling 'free and flexible':



Year 2 and Year 5: Mindfulness Capsule 4 (Week 4)

Choose your own colours to draw in where you notice your 'stress spots'.



Year 5: Mindfulness Capsule 5 (Week 5)

Draw or write about how your body feels when people are kind and loving to you:

Feeling words: Happy, sad, joyful, curious, excited, confused, energetic, angry, worried, calm, bored, thoughtful, relaxed

Year 2 and Year 5: Mindfulness Capsule 6 (Week 6)

How did you feel when you focused your attention on a simple object? What did you see, feel, hear or think?

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Did you like the walking meditation? How did you feel after you had finished it?

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Year 2 and Year 5: Mindfulness Capsule 7 (Week 7)

Write or draw what you liked best about this lesson?



Year 5: Mindfulness Capsule 8 (Week 8)

How do we create our thoughts? Do other people influence your thoughts?

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Year 2 and Year 5: Mindfulness Capsule 9 (Week 9)

Write or draw about your favourite places in the world?

Year 2 and Year 5: Mindfulness Capsule 10 (Week 10)

Travel back through your journal and ask yourself what were my three favourite things about my mindfulness journey?

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