

Youth mindfulness: Inspiring young minds

By Angie Bucu

A recent Microsoft study suggests that the average human attention span is eight seconds, and that's one second less than that of a goldfish. Is this what's in store for the youth of today, or worse? Questionable as this study may be, there is some reality in the theory that we are less able to pay attention for extended periods.

Actually, young people are constantly being asked to pay attention, at school, at home, amongst friends, even in their social media interactions, yet there is very little instruction given on how to pay attention. With a mind full of thoughts and a task list that is constantly being added to for social and academic needs, not to mention the certain pressures that technology brings, it is no wonder youth today are less able to focus and concentrate and are easily distracted. Mindfulness may be the answer.

Mindfulness, or attention focus training, is like waking up from being on automatic pilot. Being mindful means deliberately slowing down and noticing what is happening in our inner world (thoughts, feelings and body sensations) and in the outside environment. Mindfulness skills aid us to live life more fully, to pause and use the breath to pay attention, on purpose in the present moment, and without judging what is happening.

Research clearly shows that in using mindfulness skills children and adolescence learn to improve their ability to pay attention and to self-regulate emotions and behaviors. Mindfulness has been shown to reduce stress and anxiety whilst increasing self-awareness and self-esteem. Real life stories from children, their parents and teachers echo these research findings. For adolescence in particular, mindfulness strategies are shown to strengthen executive function in relation to emotion regulation, and reduce impulsive and risk taking behaviors.

These benefits are not lost on educators, as schools in Hong Kong and throughout the world begin to introduce various mindfulness based programs in the classroom or as an extracurricular activity.

So how can mindfulness be used to inspire young minds? Chances are that many have already experienced moments of mindfulness throughout their young lives. Taking a moment to pause and breathe, perhaps with eyes closed, is a strategy known to calm down the nervous system. By taking this action one step further, to notice body sensations with the breath and pay attention to this feeling, this is mindfulness. Children who play competitive

sport or regularly practice a musical instrument, or perhaps another creative endeavor, will have experienced mindful moments. Many professional athletes and artists credit their ability to focus on their given task to mindfulness.

Despite these positive anecdotes today's youth are wary, they want to know what's in it for 'me'. The picture is often one of having to sit still for long periods in a crossed legged position, which can be overwhelming and even frightening to young people. Yet the reality is that any activity can be done mindfully even the everyday mundane. Introducing mindfulness through a combination of body awareness exercises, asking them to pay full attention to experiences such as brushing their teeth, having a shower or walking to school, as well as short moments of stillness, are the different ways to experience living life more fully by noticing on purpose.

Mindfulness is often referred to as working the attention muscle

because of the positive affect it has been shown to have on the strengthening of the neural pathways in the prefrontal cortex portion of the brain. Like any muscle, to strengthen it we need to work it, so the more children are able to practice mindfulness through stillness and mindful moments throughout the day, the stronger this attention muscle becomes.

With continual practice mindfulness can help cultivate calm when difficulties arise, when they feel stress or distress, or when they are worrying. They begin to recognize how different feelings present themselves in the body, and to use an anchor such as the breath to follow the feeling or to move their

attention to where they want it to be instead. These skills over time, allow young people to move away from habitual mental and behavioral patterns that exacerbate stress and anxiety and can lead to more significant mental health issues such as depression.

Once young minds get a taste of the experience of not getting caught up by the waves of their emotions or thoughts, they appear want to use these skills more often. Studies have concluded that child and adolescent participants are in favour of continuing the mindfulness practice after a course or program.

About Angie: Angie holds a Master of Wellness. From 2012 to 2014 Angie was a tutor of the Mindbody Wellness course at RMIT University, a course that teaches students the theories, research and practice into Mindbody Wellness practices and therapies. At this time she also trained to teach mindfulness to children and teenagers after seeing the beneficial impact of mindfulness practices on young people at university. Angie is completing a research project with RMIT that looks at teacher's views of teaching mindfulness for the first time.

