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Nine Ways To Ensure Your Mindfulness Teaching Practice Is Trauma-Informed

By Katrina Schwartz Apr 8

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A recent MindShift article highlighted some things teachers should be aware of if they're bringing mindfulness into their classrooms. Students may have

experienced trauma that makes sitting silently with their eyes closed feel threatening, and teachers can't assume it will be an easy practice for every child. That awareness is important to create an inclusive environment, but it doesn't mean that teachers shouldn't cultivate their own mindfulness practice or use some techniques with students.

Often mindfulness is used as a way to help students build self-regulation skills and learn to calm down when they become frustrated or angry. Cultivating those skills can be powerful for students, but many teachers say mindfulness is crucial for themselves, helping them take an extra moment before reacting to students.

"The best way to practice trauma-informed mindfulness is [for teachers] to have their own practice and interpret the behavior of the youth through a trauma-informed lens, even if they never do mindfulness training with the kids," said Sam Himelstein, a clinical psychologist, trainer and author who has spent most of his career working with incarcerated youth. He's received a lot of questions about how to be trauma-informed while still using mindfulness in classrooms since the first article. He suggest nine guidelines for teachers that he uses to make sure mindfulness practice with youth is helping, not hurting.

1. Do No Harm

"The assumption behind that is that harm can be done," Himelstein said. "If you teach someone mindfulness meditation who has had a lot of trauma in their life, in fact, harm can be done." That's important for teachers to know. Research on mindfulness shows the practice can bring up uncomfortable feelings, and layered on top of existing trauma can be frightening or psychologically dysregulating. That's why Himelstein stresses that no one should be forced to close their eyes or sit a certain way.

"If you're unintentionally portraying that it's really important to close your eyes, they can misinterpret that," Himelstein said. In fact, it's common for folks who have been traumatized to misinterpret a neutral direction.

2. Establish a sense of safety

"There are some situations in some school settings where youth are not that safe because there's violence that happens," Himelstein said. "If you're not in a place where kids feel physically safe, then you probably shouldn't be doing any deep practices."

Kids can feel vulnerable when attempting to be present in the moment, so physical safety is key. Establishing that kind of safety may take some extra culture-building in the classroom first.

3. Build relational mindfulness

This set of strategies is about building the type of community where students feel safe practicing mindfulness. Teachers can help make their classroom feel safe to students with clear boundaries that are predictable. Group norms or agreements developed with students are one way to do this.

"For people who have experienced trauma those things tend to not be present, so the more you practice predictability by practicing group agreements, and building authentic relationships between you and the youth, and among the youth, it starts to feel more safe," Himelstein said.

It can be tricky to know if relational trust has been built, but Himelstein said when students are more willing to share openly about themselves or they're

relating class material to their own lives, that's one sign they feel safe. Of course it's complicated because of different personality types, some of which may naturally be more reserved. But even with introverted students, teachers can often tell if trust is there through their writing or if they share something out loud even once.

"You can check in with the youth and not just leave it up to your own assessment or guesswork in terms of where they're at in feeling safe and that there's trust in the room," Himelstein said. If there's more work to be done, trust games and icebreakers can help people get more comfortable.

4. Understand intersectionality. Be mindful of implicit bias and culture.

Mindfulness cannot be detached from the other ways teachers interact with students in the classroom. Himelstein said it's important to take note if, for example, girls are being punished more harshly for the same behavior a male student exhibits, but for which he isn't punished.

"It depends on the context, but I've definitely coached some teachers and therapists who work in diverse settings in terms of who they call on the most, who gets the most energy, how their expectations are shifting depending on different folks," Himelstein said.

If students think a teacher is unfair based on race, gender, sexuality or any other identity marker, that will undermine the relational trust needed to facilitate mindfulness and mental health.

"In my work with youth, I never divorce the practice of mindfulness from the greater sphere of building an authentic relationship with that young person," Himelstein said. "I don't divorce intersectionality from the practice of mindfulness."

5. Understand the "window of tolerance" and be on the lookout for it

Imagine two parallel lines. Within those lines is the window of tolerance for physiological arousal. Outside of that is when people may experience tunnel vision, when they can't think straight. Outside the window of tolerance students may be hyperaroused when they're extremely angry or hypervigilant. But students can also be hypo-aroused, when they're disassociated from their surroundings. In both of these states, students won't be able to follow directions.

Himelstein remembers meeting his wife for lunch after a therapeutic session with a client that triggered him. He couldn't physically read the menu because his prefrontal cortex was offline. "My brain was down regulating," he said. "I wasn't quite in fight, flight or freeze, but I was on the way there."

If teachers can recognize those moments with students, they can use other interventions to help students get back into the window of tolerance. Those might include listening to music, playing a rhythm game, dancing -- something that doesn't require the student to process directions.

A teacher might notice a student is getting triggered and naturally take a break from instruction to listen to some music or play a quick game without calling attention to the student who is triggered. This works better if these types of movement or music breaks are already part of the DNA of the classroom. Then it doesn't feel odd or out of place to students when a teacher uses it as a tool to intentionally support a specific student.

"You're hoping in some way the music moves them, not emotionally, but there's something about the music they like," Himelstein said. "Maybe they get that head bob going. That's what you're looking for."

He remembers one young woman he worked with who had been estranged from her father for several years because of his drug addiction. She finally felt ready to reach out to him to try to build a new relationship when she found out he had died of an overdose. Himelstein was with her when she got the news. The young woman was in shock and no mindfulness techniques would have worked at that moment. Instead, Himelstein put on a song he knew his client liked, and they sat and listened until she came out of shock and back into her window of tolerance.

6. The paradox of mental training

The paradox is that paying attention to the present moment -- the heart of a mindfulness practice -- won't always make a person feel calmer. But, at the same time, practicing mindfulness when one isn't upset builds a toolkit that could be useful to stay calm in stressful situations. Himelstein said this is a contradiction teachers have to embrace in this practice.

Deep breathing exercises or a body scan are strategies to practice in a calm state. They can help with stress reduction and emotional management. The goal is to make them part of everything that happens in the classroom so they're second nature, and students can draw on these tools when they need them without thinking.

Himelstein trains youth and guards in juvenile detention centers in these techniques. Recently a young person told him that when a guard called him a name he naturally took a deep breath, providing him the slightest bit of space to consider the consequences of taking action, and preventing him from getting triggered.

"I've heard that in juvenile hall, in education settings, in so many situations," Himelstein said.

7. When teaching mindfulness, prioritize somatic-based exercises.

"The body tends to have the ability to help ground people a little more, or at least not trigger as much," Himelstein said. Especially if students are not used to mindfulness, or don't feel comfortable with it, keeping them out of their heads can be a good thing. Instead focus on how deep breathing feels in the belly and the chest. Do body scans or remind young people to think about the sensations in their bodies.

"When youth don't have a clear sense of what they're supposed to be doing, and it's not as tangible, it's easier for their minds to wander and stumble upon traumatic memories," Himelstein said.

8. Don't over-identify with mindfulness logistics

It can be counterproductive to insist too strenuously that mindfulness look a certain way. Things like keeping eyes closed, holding the hands in a certain way, or having a particular body posture really don't matter, and can lead to power struggles.

9. Think about daily mindfulness interventions.

There are lots of informal ways to bring some of the benefits of focusing on the present into the classroom. It might become routine at the start of the day, or when class begins, to do a mindful check-in: Each student takes a deep breath, and shares how they are feeling at the present moment. Himelstein always encourages youth to use a real emotion like angry/frustrated/happy/sad, as opposed to more generic statements like good/bad. It's also not too much of a stretch to add some element of academic content to these activities.

"It's a great way to embed a mindfulness practice in the DNA of the classroom and also you can easily add a prompt to the end of it," Himelstein said.

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