

Premier’s Anika Foundation Youth Depression Awareness Scholarship

Addressing systemic barriers and drivers to implement mindfulness practices in high schools, to combat adolescent stress, anxiety and depression

Mirela Fricot

Relieving Senior Psychologist, Education, Port Hacking High School

School Counsellor, Panania Public School

Sponsored by



# Introduction

Mission Australia collaborated with the Black Dog Institute on the 2017 Youth Mental Health Report. It states that one in four young people are at risk of serious mental illness with depression and coping with stress among the problems that concern them the most. It also states that mental illness risk increases as adolescents age and the risk is greater in Indigenous groups and young women. The need for a whole-school intervention is also supported by the report’s finding that young people seek help reluctantly.

In the USA, the source of the findings for my research, 16.1 million Americans reported in 2015 to be experiencing major depression during the previous year and often struggling to function while grappling with crippling darkness and despair. There’s an arsenal of treatments at hand, including talk therapy and antidepressant medications, but what’s depressing in itself is that they don’t work for every patient (Powell, A. 2018).

Current research points to the benefits of mindfulness practice for children and adolescents: (Semple, R. J., Lee, J., Rosa, D., & Miller, L. F. (2010); Schonert-Reichl, K. A., Oberle, E., Lawlor, M. S., Abbott, D., Thomson, K., Oberlander, T. F., & Diamond, A. (2015). However, it requires more than just acquired knowledge about mindfulness to exact an impact that drives a cultural shift amongst staff and in turn, integrates sustainable initiatives and programs. Professional experience has shown that implementing mindfulness initiatives in the high school setting is challenging.

This study tour however has provided direction to overcome systemic difficulties such as funding staff training and shifting the school mindset and culture, thus making the task of implementing mindfulness less challenging.

# Focus of Study

The focus of this study was to research the systemic approaches which have resulted in embedding mindfulness practice within a high school setting. Practical challenges reported by developers/implementers of mindfulness-based curricula within a school setting include:

* motivating schools to embrace the curricula
* frequent changes in school’s proposed solutions and decision makers
* finding trained and experienced mindfulness instructors to train teachers (Meiklejohn, J et al., 2012).

Prior to embarking on this study tour, I had tried various strategies to introduce mindfulness practice within the high school setting. Those initiatives included presenting at the Deputy Principals Network meeting and teacher professional development days; running weekly mindfulness/yoga classes for staff and collaboratively developing a mindfulness interest group with staff. I also provided readings and online links as a self-guided approach to the Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) program (Kabat-Zinn, J. 1979). I also invited senior students to attend lunch time Mindfulness Moment sessions as well as piloting the MBSR-T (Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction –Teens), (Biegel, G. 2009) program with small groups age 15 and 17 years reporting high anxiety and experiencing life stressors.

Each of these initiatives met with systemic barriers such as: a crowded curriculum which meant limited access to students during school hours to teach mindfulness; lack of space to conduct classes; no funds to train teachers and reliance on teachers volunteering their effort and time. The goal of this study tour was to not only research strategies for introducing mindfulness practice within the high school setting but to also embed the practice into the school culture and curriculum.

The outcomes from this study tour have highlighted the drivers to implementing mindfulness practice in the high school setting. The opportunity to directly observe and consult with staff who have successfully integrated mindfulness, has developed my capacity to offer leadership for educational teams in developing strategic plans that will translate to effective initiatives; establish sustainable programs; enhance skills in program delivery as well as model and facilitate programs.

# Significant Learning

From the extensive observations and interviews conducted throughout this study, two consistent factors emerged as crucial for mindfulness practice to be established as a school-wide program. Firstly, establishing a mindfulness program entails a commitment embedded within the school’s vision, mission statement or wellbeing policy which is fully endorsed by the executive staff. School executive must be openly supportive of any initiatives and willing to lead or support their staff and community. As one Principal phrased it, “this is a non-negotiable”. It is only from this stance that the process of establishing a sustainable, school-wide program can be launched.

Having committed to introducing mindfulness into the school curriculum, the executive, staff and parents are better able to collaborate on issues as they present. Some issues reported by the schools I visited were parents’ concern that school mindfulness programs are perceived to hold religious connotations; students expressing boredom during the practices; teaching staff choosing to use the time to catch up on other work and lack of space to accommodate the program.

Each school I visited had the full support of the executive. This meant that actions which lead to embedding a mindfulness program into the school’s culture could be implemented positively. These actions include releasing necessary funds; allocating resources; training staff and prioritising the program in the face of other school demands,

The other factor emerging as crucial for a mindfulness program to be established school-wide is the importance of always presenting the scientific research supporting the practice and to make the benefits relevant to the audience. For example, it would be of most interest to teaching staff and parents to know that meditation helps to protect our telomeres which shorten with age due to stress and result in a higher risk for many diseases including cancer (Tonya L. Jacobs et al., 2010)

It is also important, for the sake of credibility, to ensure that the benefits of mindfulness are not marketed in such a way as it becomes the panacea for all mental health ailments. There are a handful of key areas — including depression, chronic pain, and anxiety - in which well-designed, well-run studies have shown benefits for patients engaging in a mindfulness meditation program, with effects similar to other existing treatments. However, some findings have been called into question because studies had small sample sizes or problematic experimental designs. These findings include [studies](http://www.wbur.org/commonhealth/2018/04/06/harvard-study-relax-genes) on the benefits against an array of conditions both physical and mental, including irritable bowel syndrome, fibromyalgia, psoriasis and post-traumatic stress disorder. (Powell, A. 2018).

The presentation to students also needs to be carefully considered. High achieving, mature students, whom I interviewed, were unanimous that it was the science that won them over. They understood and appreciated the benefits such as helping them to manage test anxiety and increased capacity to focus. Students with emotional-regulation issues, on the other hand, were not as sold on mindfulness initially and therefore their commitment evolved and grew as a result of actually practising mindfulness over time.

Another factor, I noted amongst the schools I visited as being not as crucial but effective in helping to overcome systemic barriers when implementing mindfulness practice within the high school setting was that staff and community tended to embrace the concepts more readily when it was presented for the teachers by the teachers. Whilst it did not seem vital that the teacher initiated the program, it certainly did help that they drove the program. It appears, the teachers who became responsible for implementing the programs could rely on their credibility and connections with the staff to enable other teachers to take the necessary risks inherent when teaching a practice that for some, could seem foreign and strange. As one principal noted, “Mindfulness has a PR problem”. Its history and religious connotations alone make it difficult to attract support.

The process of establishing mindfulness practice as a school wide program may begin with a commitment amongst the school decision makers, presentations focusing on scientific evidence and research as well as a dedicated few whether they be parents, teachers or students. The heavy lifting which follows remains a formidable undertaking which requires staff training. Mindfulness works best when those who teach or facilitate the practice have developed their own understanding and engage in their own personal practice.

The schools approached this requirement in various ways. Some engaged the services of not-for-profit organisations who had trained personnel ready to train the teachers. The schools, due to their low socio-economic status were able to rely on successful funding applications to the education department to meet the ongoing costs. Another more affluent school relied on the principal allocating funds for guest speakers for teacher professional development and the school counsellor developing a curriculum for the teachers to implement for the school-wide Daily Focus 10 minute session at the start of each day. The principal also offered staff two simple mindfulness practice techniques to support them with leading the students during the school’s one minute Mindful Moment session at the start of each class. A school with a similar socio-economic status, was fortunate to have a teacher with a psychology degree. The teacher offered the eight week MBSR program to staff with the sole agenda being an opportunity for the teachers to invest in their own self-care. Yet another school also not able to rely on government funding approached two experienced and highly regarded teachers. These teachers voluntarily undertook their own training in order to offer workshops to the students. Fortunately, these teachers were able to enlist guidance from a therapist who volunteered to collaborate in the development and implementation of the workshops.

Harnessing the already existing strengths within the school and community is another factor worth noting that greatly assists addressing the inherent systemic barriers which may arise when implementing mindfulness practice within the high school setting. For example, one high school recognised that the students themselves had the ability to take on responsibility for introducing mindfulness practice to their peers. The school initiative began with two highly esteemed teachers presenting weekend three hour workshops, Mindfulness and Positivity for the students and offering before school 30 minutes mindfulness practice sessions. A dynamic, small group of mainly senior students who had participated in the workshops also started attending the mindfulness sessions before school once per week led by these two teachers whom they trusted and respected. It is also important to note that, in this instance, the students’ parents were extremely encouraging of their children attending the sessions.

Various traumatic incidents had greatly impacted on the school and the parents, one of whom had a background in counselling, recognised mindfulness practice as being an antidote to the daily stressors their children were facing. The students decided to form their own mindfulness club with a president elect. Each week they led the mindfulness sessions for other students with the support of their teachers. They prepare activities following their own research into mindfulness practice and encourage students from all grades to attend. Student testimonials are positive, and from sheer word of mouth the club has grown to up to 70 regular attendees from its inception just over a year ago. Plans are now underway to train more teachers and at last count, almost 50% of the teaching staff had committed to complete training.

Another factor observed to support the introduction of mindfulness practice within a high school setting is to ensure that student participation is always voluntary. In the aforementioned mindfulness club, student attendance was encouraged, but never compulsory. In another middle school, mindfulness practice grew into elective subjects offered each semester with grades credited towards PE and Health. In yet another middle school, parents are asked at time of enrolment, to complete a consent form to allow their child to learn about and participate in meditation following introductory presentations on school open nights. Parents are therefore well-informed of the school charter which includes a commitment to self-care. Students are graded by the teachers during their two daily sessions lasting 30 minutes in total. Students are allocated a grade of two for best practice; one for distractible to self or others and zero for disruptive. Upon three warnings, the student is given a zero plus removal grade whereupon they complete quiet time in the Dean’s office in order to reflect on their attitude and behaviour. Whilst this strategy may appear stringent, enforced and at odds with the values mindfulness practice upholds, the underlying intention at all times is to support, not coerce. The grading system allows for the site leader to identify those students who may be disrupting the practice of other students so that they may offer more individual attention and counselling for these students. In addition, students are dealt consequences not for refusing to meditate but rather for disrupting others from being able to meditate. If they wish to not participate, they are welcome to sit quietly during the sessions.

Another challenge inherent when introducing a mindfulness program into the high school setting is ensuring sustainability. Each of the schools visited had achieved this to a greater or lesser degree by developing a model which established enough momentum amongst the students, staff and community to ensure the embedding mindfulness into its curriculum. From the range of models observed, the most sustainable are those schools that have a detailed and prescriptive curriculum thus requiring minimal teacher training as opposed to a mindfulness program requiring the teachers to teach mindfulness; allotted time and space within the school timetable and requiring minimal funding. The closest fit to these essentials was a middle school that teaches a mindfulness program during the allotted roll call time at the beginning of each day. The prescriptive program, developed by the school counsellor, can be taught by any teacher i.e. no further training is required. The students have the opportunity to enhance their practice during the one minute Mindful Moment time allotted at the beginning of each subject throughout the day. In terms of sustainability, other middle schools have achieved some success. For example, one offers mindfulness as an elective subject to its Freshman and Sophomore cohort. These electives were developed by the teacher/psychologist at the school, who currently teachers the elective courses alongside another teacher who completed further studies at her own expense.

The fact that time and space is allotted in the timetable ensures the program’s sustainability to some degree. However, dependency on other variables such as reliance on voluntary work by the staff and the supply of qualified teachers affect the program’s maintenance. Another model relies on the commitment and voluntary support of its students who have formed their own mindfulness club. However, teacher training to ensure a broader base of support for the students’ initiatives, ongoing student interest as well as continued workshops for the students and teachers is necessary to sustain interest in the program. A model adopted by a lower socio-economic middle school conducts a four day workshop for all new students at the beginning of the school year and has site leaders from a paid organisation who oversee the program throughout the year. Therefore, ongoing funds through applications and donations are necessary to secure the services of the organisation.

A final key contributor which supports the introduction of mindfulness practice within a high school setting is knowing how to market mindfulness practice to adolescents in order to develop their knowledge and hence shift preconceived judgements they may have about mindfulness, which to most, is just meditating. Students interviewed stated that initially they felt weird about practising the mindfulness exercises such as body scan or following instructions to notice their breath. They stated that they did not fully understand what they were doing and whether they were doing it correctly. Given that mindfulness practice is not a mandatory subject, which does not ensure success anyway, the schools had to strategize on how best to spark interest amongst the students. One school started by advertising before school sessions on posters, which appealed to teens, around the school. The students of another school stated that it was the fact that mindfulness was an evidenced-based practice that drew them in initially. Other students stated that it was the benefits of mindfulness such as more developed focus which piqued their curiosity particularly for those interested in maintaining high grades or achieving in their sports. Other schools managed to achieve success in embedding mindfulness practice within their school setting, though not relying on voluntary uptake by the students A few schools, having established parental consent and teacher training, simply rolled out a mindfulness program relying on the fact that over time, the benefits would speak for themselves.

# Conclusion

Many initiatives implemented prior to this study tour led to limited success in being able to introduce mindfulness practice within the high school setting. These initiatives included presentation to staff and executive; piloting the MBSR-T program for small groups of targeted students aged 15 to 17 years and offering mindfulness sessions to senior students. It became clear that to embed mindfulness practice within the school curriculum and culture, key drivers were necessary to overcome systemic barriers.

From the extensive observations and interviews I conducted, certain factors were recognised as essential or contributory to the success of implementing mindfulness programs. An essential requirement is commitment from the school’s decision makers to establish a mindfulness program to combat youth anxiety and depression. Having secured support, it is important that mindfulness practice is presented to the students, staff and community as a scientific, evidenced-based practice.

Contributory factors, not essential yet helpful, which can lead to the successful implementation of mindfulness programs in the high school setting are:

* inviting teachers to lead and teach other teachers
* being creative in ways to support teachers to develop their own personal practice
* utilising the inherent strengths of the school community
* ensuring voluntary participation
* careful consideration of how to advertise mindfulness practice to the students themselves.

In addition, sustainability is the main aim and it is achieved with a curriculum requiring minimal teacher training; allotted time and space within the school timetable and minimal funding.

With the goal to embed mindfulness practice within the school culture and curriculum, I have had the opportunity to share my findings with the principal and executive staff of Sir Joseph Banks High School, located in the south-west Sydney network. Having gained their support, a strategic plan has been collaboratively developed commencing with a whole school presentation on the school’s planned staff development day. This presentation will focus on the wealth of scientific evidence supporting mindfulness practice as the learning from this study tour has indicated is an effective, introductory approach.

# Acknowledgements

I wish to thank the staff and students of Visiticion Valley Middle School in San Francisco, California; Cheyenne Mountain High School in Colorado Springs; Lausanne Collegiate School in Memphis; Marblehead High School in Massachusetts and Brooklyn Urban Garden School, in New York who were most generous with their time and resources.

Thanks also to the board members of the ANIKA Foundation for your sponsorship, support and interest in this research.

# References

1. Alvin Powell 2018. When Science meets mindfulness. Researchers study how it seems to change the brain in depressed patients. The Harvard Gazette.
2. Biegel , G 2009. Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction-T (MBSR-T) Program.
3. Kabat-Zinn, Jon Ph.D., Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) Program. 1979 at UMass Medical Center.
4. Meiklejohn, John & Catherine Phillips & M. Lee Freedman & Mary Lee Griffin & Gina Biegel & Andy Roach & Jenny Frank & Christine Burke & Laura Pinger & Geoff Soloway & Roberta Isberg & Erica Sibinga & Laurie Grossman & Amy Saltzman.(2012) Integrating Mindfulness Training into K-12 Education: Fostering the Resilience of Teachers and Students
5. Schonert-Reichl, K. A., Oberle, E., Lawlor, M. S., Abbott, D., Thomson, K., Oberlander, T. F., & Diamond, A. (2015). Enhancing cognitive and social–emotional development through a simple-to-administer mindfulness-based school program for elementary school children: A randomized controlled trial. *Developmental Psychology, 51*(1), 52-66.
6. Semple, R. J., Lee, J., Rosa, D., & Miller, L. F. (2010). A randomized trial of mindfulness-based cognitive therapy for children: promoting mindful attention to enhance social-emotional resiliency in children. *Journal of Child and Family Studies, 19*(2), 218–229.
7. Tonya L. Jacobs, Elissa S Epel, Jue Lin, Elizabeth H. Blackburn, Own M. Wolkowitz, David A. Bridwell, Anthony P. Zanesco, Stephen R. Aichele, Baljiinder K. Sahdra, Katherine A. MacLean, Brandon G. King, Phillip R. Shaver, Erika L. Rosenberg, Emilio Ferrer, B. Alan Wallace, Clifford D. Saron. (2011) Intensive meditation training, immune cell telomerase activity, and psychological mediators. *Psychoneuroendocrinology* Vol 36, Issue 5, June 2011, Pages 664-681