

# TRAUMA INFORMED TEACHING PRACTICES: TEACHING SELF REGULATION THROUGH MINDFULNESS

Suggested Audience: Educators, Administrators, School Counselors and Staff  
Donald D. Matthews, Psy.D.



Practice Brief, Vol. 3, No. 1  
(October 2022)

## OVERVIEW AND KEY DEFINITIONS

- Trauma can be described as an emotional response to a distressing situation or experience. Traumatic events may include brief single events or sustained experiences over time. Trauma can result from a serious threat to life or an uncontrolled feeling that seems beyond a person's control.
- Self regulation involves the ability to monitor cognition, attention, and emotions and to adapt cognition to specific situations.
- Mindfulness based interventions are self care strategies that are taught to students to help them improve self-regulation and to manage their responses to internalized trauma.
- Trauma informed educators are better able to respond to the needs of students who have experienced or are currently experiencing trauma and are able to help them learn how to self-regulate their emotions and behaviors.
- Trauma Informed teaching practices are particularly relevant in light of the trauma that students and teachers have experienced as a result of the COVID 19 pandemic and its impact on mental health.
- Trauma informed schools respond to the needs of students by providing access to social, behavioral, and emotional supports (NCTSN, 2017).



## FINDINGS

According to the Education Law Clinic at Harvard University:

- A trauma informed school model increases staff awareness of trauma, creating a more positive, responsive and supportive school climate by constructing a safe and caring environment for children and adolescents modeling compassion and promoting trust building relationships with their students.
- Trauma informed teachers within educational organizations are able to reduce the likelihood that students will become overwhelmed with psychological distress.
- A “trauma-informed approach” addresses the culture of the school while having an impact on the organization and the staff. This shift includes both teaching practices and policies within the organization, allowing systemic change that can more competently address the learning needs of children who may be impacted by trauma.
- Teachers have become aware that students who have experienced trauma often have difficulty meeting academic expectations because students have less ability to regulate attention, emotions, and behavior (Briggs et al., 2012).
- Trauma informed teaching practices like mindfulness, meditation, and mindful breathing teach students how to become more self-aware so they can learn to regulate their attention and emotions (NCTSN, 2017).

## PREVIOUS RESEARCH

on Mindfulness-Based Interventions shows promising results for the following:

- Reducing negative affect with rumination (Chambers et al., 2008; Corcoran et al, 2007; Shapiro et al., 2007).
- Increasing emotion regulation (Chambers, et al., 2008; Eberth & Sedelmeier, 2012; Kabat-Zinn, 1990; McKim, 2008).
- Increasing positive affect (Hoffman et al., 2010).
- Decreasing anxiety and negative affect (Corcoran, et al., 2010; Davidson et al., 2003; Farb et al., 2010; Kabat Zinn, 1990).
- Reducing emotional reactivity (Cahm & Polich, 2009; Goldin & Gross, 2010)
- Increasing attention regulation (Eberth & Sedelmeier, 2012; Kabat-Zinn, 1990; Ortnier et al., 2007).
- Recent research shows that mindfulness practices can reduce the adverse effects of trauma (Ortiz et al., 2017).

## RELEVANCE AND KEY OUTCOMES

From 2012 to 2017 a significant number of children and adolescents aged 4–17 years engaged in mindfulness meditation practices. In 2017 alone, 3.1 million children and adolescents engaged in various forms of mindfulness meditation in the United States. Viewed as complimentary health approach by the National Institute of Health (NIH, 2021), various forms of mindfulness meditation are often used for children experiencing anxiety or stress (Ortiz et al., 2017).

Mindfulness-based interventions have been extensively researched and lend themselves to trauma informed teaching practices. They are “present centered” and can be taught to students of all ages to enhance self awareness, allowing participants to identify and label thoughts without responding to them, reducing reactivity, and increasing resilience. Mindfulness based interventions can teach and affirm feelings of self awareness and self control, enhancing self-beliefs and intrinsic motivation, leading to feelings of empowerment and increased perceptions of self efficacy.

## SUGGESTED MINDFULNESS STRATEGY: MINDFUL BREATHING

- Educators and students can begin their own mindfulness practice by learning about mindful breathing using this link: <https://sites.google.com/view/mindfulnessforteachers/home>
- Mindful breathing is a mindfulness strategy that can be taught and practiced over a period of short sessions, usually 5-15 minutes, for six to eight weeks.
- Mindful breathing allows students to observe thoughts and emotions as they reflect on their ability to monitor their attention and emotions.
- Through modeling and rehearsal, students can become more aware of the relationships among breath control, attention, and emotional reactivity.
- After a mindful breathing session, ask the students to share the observations they made while engaged in mindful breathing. This will further build and validate their self-knowledge and self-awareness of attention, feelings of self-control, and their ability to reduce rumination and anxiety.
- Model self-compassion and non-judgment in your responses to students, and share your own experiences learning to be self-aware through mindful breathing.
- Use affirmative statements that demonstrate self awareness: I noticed I stayed focused on my breathing... I am getting better at keeping my attention on my breathing... Each time I practice mindful breathing I feel like I am improving.
- It will take a few sessions to get good at mindful breathing, so allow time for improvement. Ask students how they might measure their improvement. Are they less distracted, more focused, having fewer intrusive thoughts, feeling more grounded and relaxed?
- Remind students that everyone is different, so learning mindful breathing takes practice.
- Teacher observation/assessment. What do you notice about the students after a mindful breathing session? Are they more relaxed and better able to listen to each other? Do they express positive statements about their level of self awareness?



## LIMITS AND CONSIDERATIONS

Mindfulness-based interventions may not be appropriate for every student. Those students who have experienced trauma may have past trauma reactivated in the context of mindfulness-based activities. Asking a student to close her eyes or observe his thoughts may be a trigger and result in emotional reactivity. Always provide options to avoid possible trigger responses such as keeping open eyes, observing the experience in others, or writing about their experience rather than verbal sharing. With sufficient knowledge and training, the educator can be responsive to the past experiences and needs of the students. Always inform parents and seek consent prior to beginning mindfulness-based interventions.

## SELECTED REFERENCES

[www.EdPsych.us/TraumaInformedTeaching](http://www.EdPsych.us/TraumaInformedTeaching)