

Mindfulness is A Superpower

Objective: Over two weeks, introduce some definitions of mindfulness and brain research backing up the benefits. Next, try some basic practice modeling basic posture and anchors.

Preparation

- The group sits facing you in any formation so they can see you when you model “mindful posture” and “soft focus/ soft gaze.”*
- You have something like a chime, bell or tone on your phone to signal the beginning and end of practice. Avoid religious items.
- Students sit comfortably, preferably in chairs or on cushions in which they can sit upright and both feet can touch the ground.

Facts

- Your brain continues to grow your whole life, but it’s especially changing as a teen!
- Attention is a skill that can be practiced and enhanced through mindfulness practice.
- The ways you use your brain and the things you focus on can actually change your brain’s chemistry. This is called “brain plasticity.” (The good and bad news?)
- Sitting straight activates the Vagus nerve.
- Using different “Anchors” gives us a focus for our attention.

Discussion- Week 1 (10-12 minutes)

- How old were you the first time you heard someone say, “Pay attention!” How many times do you think you’ve heard an adult say that? Has anyone ever given you any clues as to *how* to pay attention? Did anyone ever tell you that attention is a *skill* that can be learned and practiced? Mindfulness is a way of increasing your ability to pay attention to what you want, when you want. It can also help with “meta awareness”: Being aware of your thinking.
- Read the enclosed list (page 4) “*Have you ever...?*” Participants raise their hands for all the statements that ring true. Look around the room for commonality. Explain that, in addition to focus, mindfulness has been scientifically proven to help with resilience, emotional clarity, less stress and less reactivity

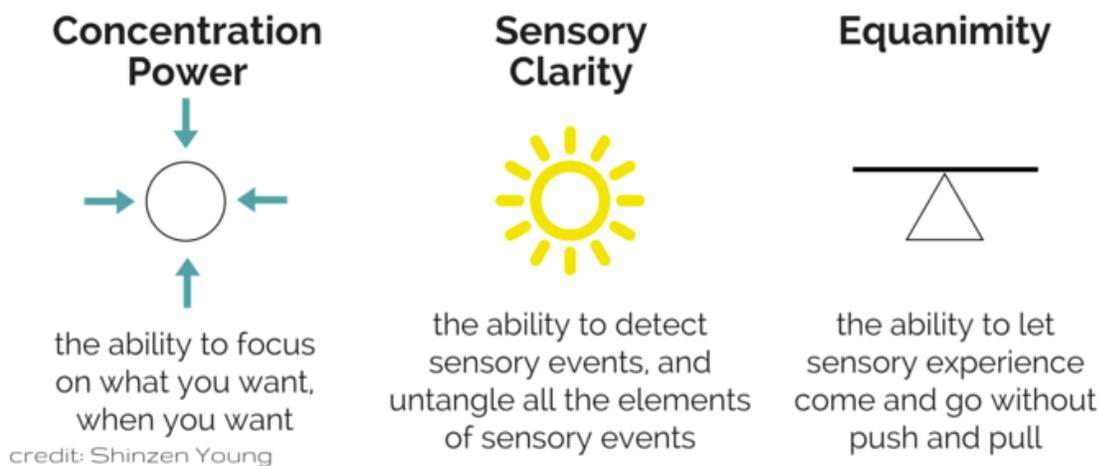
Discussion- Week 1 (continued)

- Show slide or draw Shinzen Young's diagram (below) and give definitions of Mindfulness. Add what it isn't: Not religious, nor hypnotism, nor mind control. It's not always calm. It's not absence of thought. No special skills are needed. Feel free to use metaphors or other things they may have experienced: being in a "Flow" state (in creative acts or sports) of concentration; feeling simply content and grateful to be alive; to feel connected to others, or to nature; to feel curious about whatever is happening, feeling calm yet awake; to feel friendly to oneself. These are all natural states of mind and mindfulness can help you access these states more often and more easily with regular practice. And this is a practice you can use the rest of your life. And it can be done anywhere, any time –no one even has to know you're doing it!

Lesson Resources:

Here are some definitions of mindfulness. Feel free to say it in your own words:

1. "Mindfulness is paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally." –Jon Kabat-Zinn, (ounder of the Center for Mindfulness Medicine, Health Care and Society at the University of Massachusetts Medical School)
2. Shinzen Young explains that Mindfulness is three skills working together:



3. For students: "Mindfulness is choosing to notice what's happening right now, with curiosity."

NOTE: Try to avoid using the word, "meditation," as some students it might think it has exotic, religious or negative connotations.

Week 1 Exercise, Formal Practice with SOUND as Anchor (5 -7 minutes)

There are many different ways to practice mindfulness. One way is thorough *informal practice*, which is just trying to be as fully aware as possible of what you're doing in the moment.

For example: you can try feeling the bottom of your feet as you walk; paying attention to 20 chews of your food while eating; noticing for a day how often you want to check your phone, etc.

Now we're going to try a short "*formal sitting practice*" (The leader/teacher models).

- 1) Watch and sit like me: hands comfortably in your lap, feet uncrossed on the floor. Try to sit up straight so you feel awake, but still relaxed. Allow your shoulders to drop. This posture activates the "Vagus Nerve" which is in charge of the "rest and digest" part of your nervous system, so it's immediately calming. Feel the places where you can feel contact or gravity: your feet, your hands, your seat, etc. See if you can relax as you breathe in and out, just noticing your breath. Where do you feel it most? Nose? Throat? Chest? Belly?
- 2) Now we're going to close our eyes or use a soft gaze*. In a moment I'm going to ring a bell, and I want you to listen to as long as you can it until the sound is completely gone. Once you can't hear any of the bell sound any more, you can open your eyes. Let's try it.
- 3) Now we're going to try a little bit longer practice. We're going to sit in the same mindful posture as before, and we're still using sound as an "Anchor." This is what I mean by "anchor": Just like an anchor keeps a boat from just floating around anywhere, in mindfulness we use an anchor as a thing upon which to focus our attention. So, I'm going to start with the bell again, only this time, after you can't hear the bell anymore, pay attention to the other sounds you hear. The sounds may be loud or soft, near or far...
- 4) (Ring the bell, allow a pause once it's faded) Notice what you hear. See if you can still feel your body sitting, your feet on the floor, your hands even as you hear sounds. Try to follow a sound from beginning to end. See if you can still notice your breath inside your body while you're listening. Are the sounds near or far?. Notice if the sounds evoke any feelings or thoughts? Do you find any sounds pleasant or unpleasant? Or just neutral?
- 5) In a moment I'm going to ring the bell again to signal the end of our practice. When you can't hear the bell anymore you can open your eyes slowly and let the light back in.
- 6) Does anyone want to share what that was like for them? Any questions?
- 7) Congratulations for trying something new! (Invite them to try it on their own sometime.)

The “Have You Ever...” List

Ask the students to raise their hands if they have ever...

- Said something you wished you could later take back?
- Done something you later regretted?
- Felt angry or out of control?
- Felt nervous about an exam, performance or something like that?
- Been in a bad mood but you weren't sure why?
- Been accidentally spaced out when a teacher called on you?
- Had a hard time focusing on something important, even though you wanted to?
- Felt like you needed a break and wanted everyone to just leave you alone?
- Had trouble falling asleep because your mind kept racing?
- Had feelings that you couldn't identify or figure out where they came from?
- Felt disconnected from your friends, family or even yourself?

***Note:** Other formal practices include kindness toward others, mindful walking, mindfulness of eating and even mindful talking and listening!*