

The Cultivation of Mindfulness-Based Stress-Reduction Practices Within Public Education Policy

By Anthony Pantaleno, Ph.D.

OK, let me just get something out of the way up front in case you'd like to skip this article and peruse something more to your liking in our top-shelf Newsletter. After a thirty-five year career in School Psychology, after spending precious time as a student of notable colleagues such as Albert Ellis, Marsha Linehan, Jon Kabat-Zinn and others, I have come to the conclusion that within the next generations of school-based mental health practitioners, we will see that the practices of mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) will become the unifying theory for all of what we do. There – I said it. Read on if you dare!

The practical side of me has always known that School Psychologists have played a key role in the assessment and identification process of identifying children and systems in need of special education and related supports. We are much-needed in this role as the most highly qualified experts on the scene in public education. However, if a future NYS Governor is successful in removing us as standing members of CSE's as has been the annual drill we have come to expect, where will we set up shop then? If our red and white Block Design cubes and our fancy software that spins out pages of statistics become obsolete, will School Psychology find a room for rent in the house of education?

There's no need to rehash my views on MBSR or the background on how a not-so-streetwise boy from Brooklyn found his way onto a meditation mat in the middle of a Long Island high school surrounded by teens and their teachers. Anyone interested can go to my web page at www.drpanaleno.com and read those articles there if you like.

My goal in this article is to convey just how far and how FAST the practice of mindfulness has come since the introduction of the model in the late 1970s at the University of Massachusetts Medical School. If you want to see the literal origins of mindfulness in the western world -courtesy of our friends at YouTube, please visit their web site at www.youtube.com and in the search box – type in the phrase: Healing and the Mind. This video was originally part of a PBS series by the same name hosted by none other than respected journalist Bill Moyers. It documents the start of why and how mindfulness found a footing in the good old USA after a conspicuous absence of 2500 years as practiced in the eastern part of the world. The first reason is just that – it's eastern, it did not emerge from the halls of western medical journals or from some other revered source that we have been brainwashed to accept. It does not involve a set of practices that can be mastered in a one or two-day workshop from one of the dozens of private inservice education companies or a book that promises "twelve easy steps to mindfulness" that can be hawked on late-night TV infomercials. AND IT DOESN'T REQUIRE YOU TO PURCHASE ANYTHING!! How un-American can all of this mindfulness mumbo-jumbo be - especially if you can practice it for free? A trusted friend and mentor, Dr. Peter Kanaris, current chair of the NYSPA Public Education Committee has taught all of us that good psychological practice is not for the few to own. It is a precious gift to be given away. As the poster in my

favorite Chinese takeout restaurant reminds me every Friday night: "Yesterday is history, tomorrow a mystery, today is a gift – that's why they call it the present."

The present. The present moment. It truly is all we have. In our world of "doing" and multi-tasking where the American ideal has come to mean fixing what is broken and doing five things at once, we

have lost our ability to dwell in the present moment. Just ask any child or adolescent to put down their I-phone and sit quietly with you in silence for five minutes. For the vast majority of our children – they cannot do it and would probably be crawling out their skins by the second minute. Not that I knock the technology that has come to make our lives so much easier. I rely on my Garmin as much as any of us born without spatial neurons. It's just that in our zeal as a society to do more, at a faster speed, and to look to digital technology for answers to all things, we have left behind the process of teaching about how our minds work, and how our senses and our interior space is a trusted friend that has become nothing more than a memory. It is up to the next generations of school-based mental health practitioners to reclaim this territory, to spread the good news and the science of neuroplasticity, and to look at the underlying contemplative traditions of our world as the path that can unify our psychological theories and our daily work of healing human misery.

Uh-oh – he said the “C” word – contemplative!! Burn the heretic! We all know what THAT means!! Didn't this guy ever hear about the constitutional separation of church and state? As I write this piece, the Supreme Court in California is contemplating a case which seeks to ban the teaching of yoga in the schools as a religious practice. The fear-mongering of conservative groups is setting the stage to caution all of those meditative do-gooders to stay OUT of the public schools. Well let me be the first to say that we are here to stay – not out of a religious mission to bring prayer and spirituality into the classroom – but to teach students, teachers, administrators, and parents that we are in the possession of powerful, non-sectarian knowledge that can transform how human beings manage anxiety, depression, rage, guilt and hatred.

I sat a few weeks ago with a sweet, crew-cutted and freckled nine-year-old boy in my office. He explained that he had been asked to come in to learn how to manage the stress that was keeping him awake at night and interfering with his ability to live a normal life. When I asked him to tell me the three things he most worried about, he went on to talk about a fear of being bombed by North Korea, a story which I knew had been in the headlines recently. But he then went on to stop this veteran psychologist dead in his tracks when he said, “Next week, I have to take the ELAs (a NYS standardized test allegedly measuring skill mastery in reading and math). What if I don't do well? What if I go blank? What if I can't finish in time? His mind was like a waterfall of anxious thoughts. I can hear Big Al, as they used to call Albert Ellis, saying to me: “Help him *cherchez* the should...teach him to prefer to do well but not demand to do well... help him see that his catastrophic style will do him in if he cannot let it go”. Hey Al – I will teach him all of those things just as you taught me, but at this moment, I just asked this small, shuddering child to close his eyes and breathe very slowly with me for a few minutes, asking him to focus on the air going into his nostrils and s-l-o-w-l-y exiting his mouth. I wanted him to see that we could “be” with his mind's demons without having to “do” anything about them. I wanted to talk less, let him experience non-cognitive space, and to know that he had the power to visit this quiet space as often as he liked. I taught him that afternoon that if he practiced this on a daily basis, his mind would find another barstool to peddle its propaganda. After a few minutes,

he opened his eyes and said, “that felt good.” Mission accomplished. Welcome to mindfulness. No need to visit the mountains of Tibet. No need for doctoral mastery and lots of tests to qualify us as experts. Just a moment of silence, a shifting of the perceptual plane out of the thinking mind and the world of language and into our own interior. That's it! Now, after ten years of practice, I am just coming to learn that this meditative tradition requires a lifetime of practice. There is no such thing as a “good”

meditation or a “bad” meditation. Taking the time for the practice and then just moving on with my day IS all that is required.

For those who are non-believers in the power of meditation to have a measurable and quantitative impact on the lot of human suffering, just Google the phrase “mindfulness research” and visit any of a number of online research archives which will tell the story much better than I. Or take the time to check out the increased presence of workshops in various mindfulness applications at your next professional conference. If you dare, read the book published just last year by Ohio Congressman Tim Ryan, entitled, *A Mindful Nation: How a Simple Practice Can Help Us Reduce Stress, Improve Performance, and Recapture the American Dream*. Congressman Ryan now invites his colleagues to meditate with him in his chambers on a weekly basis - a simple but radical invitation which may change the next national political debate in ways we can only imagine. Lastly, pick up the April issue of the *APA Monitor* and peruse the headline story: “Alternative Techniques – Incorporating Complementary and Alternative Medicine into Psychology Practice.” You are in for a real treat if you read it.

Lesson learned? Meditation and mindfulness practice is here to stay. School psychologists – put down your test kits, get out into a classroom, and sit quietly with your elementary, middle schoolers, high schoolers, or ask for some time at a faculty meeting or PTA meeting to spread the good news. As the country embraces mindfulness practice within the halls of medicine, the military, the business world, and our home – the world of educating children, let us be the beacons of hope. Let us not just become a part of the politically correct rhetoric for improving educational standards. We need to revitalize ourselves first. One cannot think of teaching mindfulness without delving into the sauce and opening our hearts to what our role in the schools could be. I offer some practical places to begin, but let me assure you – becoming well-read in mindfulness will not take you to the heart of its practice. This is not a world that our graduate schools have prepared us for. Instead of juggling Annual Review schedules, writing reports that no one will probably ever read unless we face an impartial hearing, or spending MORE time trying to navigate IEP Direct – we as School Psychologists are being offered the chance to speak to the hearts of children, to let them know they are not alone in their fears of the challenges this world offers, to sit together with them and their teachers as one and to welcome anything that walks through the doors of our lives. We will teach them to sit with it, not run or get lost in rumination, until it passes ever so slowly and we can all get on less stressfully with the art of teaching reading, writing, and arithmetic. When we embrace this task with all our might, educational policy WILL shift, our roles WILL expand, and we WILL once again remember why it was that we chose this noble profession in the first place: to make a real difference in the lives of children.

Some suggestions for School Psychologists to get started on the path:

1. Do some basic reading in mindfulness, but don't spend TOO much time here. Consult my web page for basic suggested readings.
2. Take an eight-week MBSR course, the original course designed and taught by Jon Kabat Zinn, the “father” of mindfulness in 1979. This course is available in many university settings (U Penn in Philadelphia) or as near as your own back yard from our SCPA colleague Dr. Cheryl Kurash!
3. Sit in on a professional workshop which will expose you to some basic mindfulness practices – an eating meditation, breathing meditation, body scan, mindful walking, and the processing of how folks responded to these practices.

4. Get yourselves a set of mindfulness CDs or download any number of practices online and develop your own daily practice. The teacher first needs to become the student, to nourish what is called “beginner’s mind,” and to know first-hand the obstacles and challenges that first-time meditators will universally experience.
5. Learn to “observe” your mind for a few minutes each day. For me, this was the most difficult aspect of mindfulness to really get my arms around. The mind truly runs a multimedia show every moment of our lives. It is up to us whether we watch the show in a third-person, sort of disconnected way, or whether we get sucked into the story. Thoughts are not reality. They are the language-stuff of what our minds do. We can watch them as the clouds in the sky or the leaves in a stream. Non-reactivity is a teachable, but not easily-learned skill. It does have the power, however, to change EVERYTHING.
6. Be gentle with yourself. There are no mistakes to be made here, only improved understanding. Our own self-compassion will enable us to endure those times when we are tempted to just throw in the towel.
7. Chat with experienced meditators. Ask them how they got started, when they meditate, how often they meditate, what struggles they have had to endure, and why they continue to return to the practice.
8. Register for a yoga class with a friend and ask around for the best places to do so. Yoga is meditation through movement, and often appeals to those who find sitting on a cushion to be too restrictive. So many people practice yoga these days, and new learning is always more fun when you do it with a friend.
9. Check out some of the many curricula specifically and painstakingly designed to bring the science of meditation into the classroom without all of the Buddhist-sounding lingo (www.calmclassroom.com)
10. Be patient...this is gonna take some time...and welcome to our future....