

SELF-CARE and STRESS REDUCTION

Self-Care is critical for your and your child’s well-being.

If you do not get enough **sleep**, your brains will be foggy.

If you do not eat **nutritious food**, you will feel sluggish and tired.

**Exercise** can help you feel energized and focused, as well as healthier and fit. **Connection with family and friends** provides the support you both need for daily living.

**Time management** can help you feel more organized.

**Relaxation** **and play** are essential.

To be a mentally and physically healthy, you must make time for yourself as the parent. Neither you or your child will gain the benefit of these self-care activities, however, if you have stressful thoughts.

The human mind is a gift which allows us to plan, organize, analyze, remember, calculate and other activities. Often, however, it causes us suffering. A research study at Harvard found that the adult mind wanders about half the time (we don’t know about kids). While daydreaming can be wonderful, science shows that when the mind wanders, we are usually less happy, focusing on unresolved issues or worries. Our minds wander the most when we are under stress.

Mindfulness is a practice to pay attention to the here and now with *kindness, openness and curiosity*. You will learn to let go of your distracted thinking and refocus your attention on the present in a nonjudgmental way. It does not require the elimination of thoughts; you will always have thoughts. It is a practice to notice your thinking and to redirect your thoughts to your chosen focus.

Scientific studies of mindfulness suggest that in adults it can:

* Reduce stress and the hormones involved in stress, such as cortisol.
* Improve immune system functioning.
* Improve memory.
* Decrease anxiety and depression.
* Increase gray matter in areas of the brain associated with self-awareness, decision-making, judgment, memory, body sensation, and impulse control.
* Decrease reactivity to unpleasant situations and events, allowing us to respond more skillfully.

There are fewer scientific studies with children, but studies show that mindfulness can:

* Reduce stress.
* Improve attention and focus.
* Reduce anxiety.
* Improve behavior at school.

Who is doing it? Mindfulness is currently being offered in over 20% of American companies. It is also being offered in medical Institutions, schools, and the U.S. military.

Some resources. Most people take classes to learn mindfulness online or in person. You can also find apps to guide you. The Veteran’s Administration has released a free app, Mindfulness Coach. Other popular apps for adults include 10% Happier, Calm, Breathe, Insight Timer and Headspace. Popular apps for kids are Stop, Breathe & Think Kids and The Mindfulness App.

A Few Practices: Below are some basic practices you and your child can use to release stress and to train your mind to focus on the present moment. We suggest that you do them together!

**First, get into a mindful body (feet flat on the floor, hands resting in lap, spine erect, eyes closed or gazing downward softly without focusing in).** Choose one of these practices:

TAKING 3 -6 LONG SLOW-DEEP BREATHS (engages your system of rest and digest):

* + Get in your mindful body.
  + Plan to keep your mind focused on this practice and if it wanders, return it.
  + Take 3-6 long, slow deep breaths in through the nose all the way to the belly and out through the nose or mouth until you can’t push air out any longer. It can be helpful to use the breathing count 3-2-5. Inhale through the nose for 3. Hold for 2. Blow out of the nose or mouth for 5.

Do this practice any time of day to relax the body, lower blood pressure, facilitate digestion, and

feel calmer.

FOLLOWING YOUR BREATH USING A NOTING PRACTICE to stay focused

* + Get in your mindful body.
  + Notice your breathing happening naturally. Pick the place—nose, chest or belly—where the breath feels most pleasant or easiest to follow.
  + Begin to count your breaths 1-10 (inhale, exhale, 1; inhale, exhale 2) and then start back at 1.
  + When your mind wanders, silently say “thinking” and return to counting your breaths.

LISTENING MINDFULLY

* + Get into your mindful body.
  + Focus your attention on listening to sounds from outside, inside, or within your body.
  + Don’t search for sounds, just listen as they come and go…and to moments of silence.
  + Your mind will label (*bird, gurgling, talking*); instead, listen to the bare essence of the

sounds (hear what the sounds sound like).

When your mind wanders, silently say “thinking” and return your focus to listening.

USING STOP when STRESSED

* + Stop what you are doing and go within.
  + Take a deep breath or several deep breaths.
  + Observe what your body, mind, and emotional body are feeling. They provide a wealth of information. What do you need?
  + Proceed by taking care of your body, mind, or emotional body.

USING MINDFUL AWARENESS through DAILY ACTIVITIES

* Driving (keep your mind in the car through sensory experience and when it drifts return)
* Showering or Bathing (stay with the sensory experiences and when mind drifts, return it)
* Eating (stay with sensory experience and savor)
* Washing dishes (stay with sensory experience)
* Walking (keep your mind where your feet are through your senses)

**More ADVANCED PRACTICES:**

**Dealing with Difficult Thinking & Challenging Emotions.**

Difficult Thinking. Scientists do not know how many thoughts we have daily, but various neuroscience labs estimate 20,000-70,000. Most thoughts flow through our heads and leave. Some thoughts are triggered by the environment. A pain, hormonal changes, or body sensations can also trigger thoughts. Many thoughts are repetitive (*what’s for dinner?*).

Sometimes we choose where to focus our minds, such as reading a book, but often we do not stay on focus. Thoughts come from our habitual conditioning and are not personal. *You are not your thoughts!*

Several decades ago, doctors did not ask patients if they were exercising. Now, we know that cardio and strength training is important for good physical health. More recently, scientists understand that the mind can be trained for better mental and physical health. We can use the mind for positive activities, yet, we also have thoughts that make us feel anxious, unworthy, worried, or depressed. Those thoughts and feelings manifest in the body. It’s important to see which thoughts cause us suffering and to let them go.

When we practice, we observe many types of thoughts, including patterns of **bias and cognitive distortion**. With kids, we call this “stinkin’ thinkin’!!!”

***All or nothing thinking*** (using words like *always, never, everyone, nobody*). Examples: *nobody likes me. I’ll never get to play in the game. Everyone else’s parents let them do it.*

***Overgeneralizing*** (*he didn’t sit with me at lunch* turns into *he doesn’t like me)*.

***Labeling*** (*he didn’t ask me to be on the team* turns into *he’s mean*).

***Reading minds*** (*they think I’m stupid*) or ***predicting the future*** (*I’m going to fail this test*).

***Magnifying the negative*** (three people said you did a good job; one was critical; you focus on the one).

***Minimizing the positive*** (*they are just saying that to be nice*).

***Catastrophizing*** (imagine the worst possible outcome).

***Personalizing*** (*Sally didn’t talk to me at school* turns into *she’s mad at me*. Maybe she’s upset about something and doesn’t want to talk).

***Blaming*** (*he made me mad*). Nobody can make you mad. We have a choice in our response.

**Using *shoulds, oughts and musts***. (everyone’s are different and you likely didn’t choose yours).

These thoughts come from beliefs that often conflict with reality. Some people will use thought replacement (change the thought to another thought), but mindfulness has been found to be more effective in some studies. A few suggestions for beginners:

1. Noticing Thoughts instead of Being Caught in Them.
2. Remembering that you don’t choose many of your thoughts. *You are not your thoughts*.
3. Asking *Can I know it’s true?*

Challenging Emotions: Bring loving kindness and compassion to yourself

You didn’t choose your emotions. You are not your emotions. Name them to tame them!

Speak to yourself as you would a good friend, saying these silently in your mind:

*I am overwhelmed. This would be hard for anyone.*

*May I be gentle with myself. May my stress be eased.*

*I am going through a lot right now. May I feel comforted in this challenging time.*

*May I accept myself just as I am, perfectly imperfect, like everyone else.*

*I make mistakes; everyone does. Mistakes are learning experiences.*

*May I speak to myself like I would a good friend, with kindness and compassion.*

*May I find moments of happiness, laughter and joy in my day.*

*May I remember that this, too, shall pass.*

*May I remember that there are people who care about me and want to be supportive.*

*May I remember that there are millions of people who have the same feeling for the same reason. I am*

*not alone.*

**For further information or classes, contact:**

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