

Eight Tips for Fostering Mindfulness in Teenagers by Patrick Cook-Deegan

When I walked in to teach my first mindfulness class at a charter high school in Oakland, no one seemed interested. One student was sleeping in his chair; a few kids were messing around in the classroom.

Everyone looked at me like I was in the wrong place. I was nervous and not really sure what I would do. So I just started talking about stress. I asked students if they ever felt stressed, what they do when they are stressed, and asked each of them to share an experience about the last time they were stressed and how they dealt with it.

That was the right move. After teaching more than 20 10-week introductory mindfulness courses at five different high schools over the past few years, I have learned one main lesson: You have to make mindfulness class relevant to the daily lives of students. Sports, relationships, parents, teachers, friends—if you can relate it to what the students are experiencing and they understand how it can actually be useful in their lives, you start to grab their attention. It took a few classes before we even started practicing mindfulness, because I had to first make a connection with the students—and then I had to explain why they might want to learn mindfulness.

Here are eight more lessons I've learned.

1. Scale it down

Classes that are smaller than 12 people are very different from class sizes of 12 or more, for the students in smaller groups are much more willing to share.

Studies of the relationship between learning and classroom size show that students perceive smaller classes as being able to foster a greater sense of belonging and togetherness, tighter relations with teachers, and more classroom participation. Classes of 12 or more are much less intimate and a bit more like typical classroom teaching.

But you can create more intimacy even with a bigger class. It helps to divide activities into small groups, or do more pair-sharing.

Of all the factors listed here, I firmly believe that class size is the most important in terms of determining what you teach and how you teach it. If you can, keep the class small.

2. Foster intrinsic motivation

If students are voluntarily taking the course, it means they actually want to be there. And this means that you have to do less work to convince them of why it is important; they are already bought in to a certain extent.

However, most of the classes I taught were compulsory. The key for teaching compulsory classes is explaining to students why you are teaching them mindfulness. Take the time to explain how this is different from other classes—no grades, no homework, more interpersonal.

Most of school and life for adolescents is extrinsically motivated. But one of the most significant differences between mindfulness classes and normal classes is that there is no external motivation to perform—the rewards are all intrinsic.

Research shows that when teachers take the time to explain the meaningfulness of what they are teaching their students are often more intrinsically motivated. The result is happier, less anxious students who are more willing to learn. This is the environment you want to set for your mindfulness classes, even if they are compulsory.

3. Start with older students

Freshman and first-semester sophomores have a lot of goofy energy and need more discipline. Doing shorter experiential exercises, like games and pair-sharing, with them is helpful. If younger students are in a larger group, then you have to move more quickly. But it is simply very difficult for the younger students to go as deep or to focus for as long.

I prefer teaching mindfulness to students starting at the end of sophomore year—and then to juniors and seniors. There is not so much goofing around when you try to do the exercises, and the relational mindfulness practices go much deeper.

4. Meet at least once a week

Meeting at least once a week is important. At some schools, we've needed to take two-week breaks, and I've found that it really disrupts the flow of the class. At one school, the schedule only permitted meeting once every ten school days. That was not working at all because there was no consistency, and it was more difficult to build up the necessary trust.

The best format is to meet with the same students twice a week—that allows for you to build up a more steady relationship with the students. And it's better to teach an introductory class over a condensed, shorter period of time.

5. Hold 9-12 classes

I would say the absolute minimum classes would be nine (one intro, and eight full classes). However, I prefer 12 classes. The more I get to know the students, and the more conversation that we have, the deeper and more engaged the students get into the curriculum.

6. Teach in the middle of the morning

The best time to teach mindfulness is mid-morning.

Teaching first period can be tough because the students are not yet awake—and, in fact, studies show that teenagers at about age 14 learn less in the morning, thanks to shifts in their bodies. The afternoon can be tricky because students are exhausted, or they have a lot of pent up energy. If I teach right after lunch, I usually have the students

lay down and rest for a few minutes before we start the class.

If it is the last class of the day, I often spend more time doing exercises and almost always go outside.

7. Consider the advantages of outside and in-house teachers

I have always taught as an outside teacher, someone who goes into a school specifically to teach mindfulness classes. This has a few advantages:

It means I am new to the students and they do not have preconceived notions about who I am;

I am just the mindfulness teacher; I do not have to transition from teaching chemistry to mindfulness;

I have more energy to teach since I teach a limited number of classes.

Being an in-house teacher also has advantages. You already know the students and hopefully have trust built up. The students will know your behavior—teenagers are very perceptive—so if you are teaching mindfulness to teens you have to embody this at school even when you are not teaching mindfulness classes. In fact, that is likely how they will learn the most and decide if they are even willing to take it seriously.

8. Remember that you are planting seeds

Every time I finished a 10-week mindfulness class, I would wonder if it was helpful at all. Did the students get it? Are these 10 hours going to change their lives? Was I doing a good job?

Sometimes there would be direct results, like when a student would tell me how practicing something from the class changed one of her relationships or made him less angry.

But at the end of the day, I would remember: 10 hours is not much time. I am just planting seeds. If I taught students lacrosse or piano for 10 hours, I would not expect it to change their lives. But I would remember that some students can take away valuable life skills—and others, later in life, may remember something they used in class to pursue other contemplative practices or dive deeper into mindfulness.

If you can open the eyes of a student to living a more whole, introspective life with an introductory mindfulness class, that is an incredibly powerful thing.

More Tips For Teaching Mindfulness

Go outside: This makes it seem different from other classes—something more relaxed and special. If I do stay in the classroom, I always form a circle to make it feel more intimate. I invite students to take their shoes off and get comfortable.

Tell stories: I heard feedback from one student that the stories are what builds trust. If you tell a story or two per class, then this will help them remember what you are trying to

teach that day.

Trust before exercises: Meditation feels risky. If you do not have the trust of the students then they will not really engage with the exercises. This may take a few classes—and it's better to build up trust first and then dive in.

Talk less, do more: Teens love to talk about themselves. The more that you act like a facilitator (which is easier with smaller class sizes), the better. I found that the classical lecturing really tuned my students out and they are way more engaged when they are being asked to participate verbally and in hands-on activities.

Activities=engaged students: Students sit around all day being lectured at. So the more activities, the better. This can be classic mindfulness exercises like seated or eating meditations, but can also include more fun games and exercises focusing on attention and listening.

Make it relevant: The bottom line is that if you do not make mindfulness relevant to the lives of teenagers outside the class, they are not going to be engaged. So you must relate it to sports, parents, grades, friends, and other issues they deal with day to day.

Give special help to students with learning disabilities or anxieties: These students tend to have shorter attention spans. For them, make the experiential activities shorter and do more of them sprinkled throughout classes.

Focus on the interested students: You have to accept that not all the kids are going to be 100 percent engaged all the time. If you spend all of your energy trying to engage the students that are just not into it (or any other class for that matter), you can lose focus on the 50 percent who are really into it and want to get a lot out of the class.
