

Why do we have a mindfulness strategy at Corsham School?

**Katie Norton,
Head of PSHEe**

The Corsham School

Mindfulness programmes normally offer attentional training alongside the cultivation of certain attitudes towards experience (such as curiosity and acceptance). Mindfulness is a skill and a process: 'paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgementally' (Jon Kabat-Zinn). So, for example, I might bring my attention now to the movement of fingers typing, body posture and eyes focusing on the marks of the page, while also being aware of thoughts forming into words.

Mindfulness is becoming a bit of a buzz word. But at its simplest, it is the body and mind fully inhabiting the present moment – not worrying about the past or fretting over the future. That this kind of state can lead to greater well-being is a well-established belief.

Mindfulness could be described as non-cognitive in the sense that it views physical and emotional aspects of our experience as equally valid to cognition. Yet it is perhaps better known as 'metacognition' as it also helps us to view all experience – physical sensations, emotions, thoughts and behaviours – from a slightly elevated, observer's point of view.

For example, in one mindfulness lesson a group of students were worried about the upcoming sports day. As they explored this further, they were able to observe their thoughts – 'people are going to laugh at me', or 'I'm going to fall over'; body sensations (tightening muscles and heat); emotions (fear and worry); and likely behaviours, such as shouting at people or forgetting kit. Through such an awareness activity, participants can learn to self-regulate better. They start to understand that they don't have to follow the habitual reactions that these thoughts and feelings can lead to, and have freedom to make other behaviour choices, thus lessening reactivity.

Mindfulness at Corsham

The Corsham School (TCS) started offering mindfulness courses to students in 2012. Students are taught the '.b' programme (short for 'stop, breathe and be') which has been adapted for teenagers by the Mindfulness in Schools Project (MiSP).

After a successful pilot, delivering the eight-week course through fortnightly PSHE lessons to year 9, it was rolled out to other key stages. Now all students take the course in year 9; KS4 can take after-school refreshers in the build-up to exams; and KS5 can elect to take it as an option as part of their 'enrichment' curriculum. A version of the adult mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) courses is offered after school to staff; those who have completed the course meet weekly to refresh and discuss their practice.

These different strands of training form part of the 'mindfulness strategy'. The strategy's aim is to promote mental and physical well-being, to enhance teaching and learning, and to reduce the pressures all of us involved in education can experience, over and above the normal stresses of daily life.

Why does TCS have a mindfulness strategy?

(i) To reduce stress and difficulty

A little stress is necessary in life: good stress ('eu', in the mindfulness vocabulary) motivates us to get up in the morning and get things done; it helps us to create, achieve and move forward.

However, there is a point where people move from feeling energised and motivated to feeling overwhelmed by expectations, workload or commitments. This is the kind of stress that can prevent both staff and students from achieving their potential.

Schools across the UK are reporting more instances of poor emotional and mental health, including rises in specific issues such as self-harm and depression. The Corsham School's leadership team has always valued social and emotional learning programmes that enhance a student's mental and emotional health, so mindfulness training fitted in well with the existing culture of caring for young people's well-being.

The '.b' and mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) programmes discuss the psycho-physiological impacts of long-term stress and offers participants strategies and skills to deal with current stressors in their lives. Recent large-scale research into the '.b' programme showed that students who trained in mindfulness reported lower stress and fewer depressive symptoms (Kuyken et al., 2013).

(ii) To improve teaching and learning

It is known that mental attitude has an impact on how well learners learn. Inevitably, if students are distressed and unable to cope they can't access learning opportunities at school.

Deleterious stress levels impair executive functions in the brain such as focused attention or emotional control, however mindfulness courses train participants to notice stress reactions and 'respond rather than react' to them. So instead of automatically clicking into unproductive behaviour (over-worrying, becoming aggressive or disengaging), young people have the freedom to choose more creative responses.

Studies report that training in mindfulness in schools can help students concentrate and learn better (Semple et al., 2010). For example, one high-achieving student at TCS who experiences anxiety reflected 10 months after taking the course: 'I use the .b strategies in times of high stress: for example, if I get a bad mark, I will use the thought bus to carry the worry away and replace it with "maybe next time".' Instead of over-worrying about the 'bad mark', she is able to put her thoughts about it into perspective and refocus on the task in hand.

Equally, the school's mindfulness strategy recognises that staff well-being is a vital resource and must also be a priority. The courses offered to school staff allow them to better deal with stress and difficulty in their working life. All staff who took the course in the summer term of 2014 reported positive outcomes. This was a typical response from one participant: 'I am much more positive and much better able to cope with daily stresses and anxieties.' Despite involving after-school commitments and requiring time for 'home practice', the waiting list for the next course is nearly full, so teachers value this training too.

Teachers practising mindfulness also has an impact on students. Teacher participants report that being calmer and using mindfulness skills has enabled them to be more 'present' with their students and to better meet their needs, as well as helping them to manage their own workload and deal with stress better. This then has a positive impact on teaching and learning in schools.

(iii) To increase well-being

Studies have shown that mindfulness training can allow young people to feel happier, calmer and more fulfilled (Kuyken et al., 2013), and also correlates well with positive emotion, popularity and friendship-extensiveness (Miners, 2008). Other studies report links between mindfulness and increased self-esteem, better sleep, more self-regulation and less impulsivity (Biegel et al, 2009; Saltzman and Goldin, 2008).

The school is aware however that there are occasions when a student's circumstances (such as recent trauma or a depressive episode) will mean that time for reflection and quiet isn't appropriate.

The school's mindfulness strategy has now led to two members of staff being trained in '.b' in order to teach all year 9s, as well as a number of staff taking the adult courses. Eventually, we hope to have more trained '.b' teachers and to be able to offer it to other groups in the school community, such as parents and governors.

Mindfulness training isn't a panacea for adolescent mental health issues and it can't remove the stressors inherent in the education system or in daily life. But it is something that can create more ease, space and freedom during a school day as well as invaluable life skills. As one year 9 student put it: it can be 'a life medicine'.