

Mindfulness as Self-Care Strategy for Emerging Adults



The transitional years from adolescence to adulthood are filled with possibility and uncertainty, optimism and stress. Research has shown that the process of identity development that begins with puberty and ends with “becoming adult” extends beyond adolescence into and through an individual’s twenties in developed nations like the United States today. The development of young people during these years, which is sometimes referred to as the period of “Emerging Adulthood,” has been described as a period of instability: young people move often and experiment with different career options and romantic partners, as well as different ways to manage the responsibilities and life stresses associated with becoming adult.¹ Emerging adulthood can be one of the healthiest physical times in the lifecourse, and we know that the brain, especially the higher mental functions such as impulse control, planning, perspective taking, and problem-solving associated with the prefrontal cortex (PFC), are still developing in profound ways during these years.²

THE MILLENNIAL GENERATION

This current generation of young people (born between 1980 and 1999), sometimes called the Millennial Generation, is also rather unique from prior ones given the wide-ranging economic, technological and social changes within which they have come of age. Evidence shows that Millennials have grown up being profoundly affected by historical events such as 9/11; the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan; large-scale changes such as the internet and the advent of

social media; changes in marriage patterns; and changes in work due to the economic recession.³ Young people today are history’s first “always connected” generation, and many report sleeping at night with their cell phones next to them to “stay connected” to their virtual worlds.⁴ Young people also experience less pressure to conform to perceived adult roles such as marriage and parenthood as quickly, due to changing gender expectations, an increased value placed on personal freedom, and different economic needs than previous generations; and they tend to move out of their parents’ homes, and in with romantic partners, and back home again, before marriage.^{1,4}

FEELING “IN-BETWEEN”

Not surprisingly, the existential feeling of these years, as described by young people themselves, is one of being “in-between”: no longer children or adolescents, but not yet fully identified with adult roles and responsibilities regarding a career path, financial independence, the formation of stable romantic partnerships, marriage, and parenthood.¹ Research suggests that this feeling of being “in-between” among young people, and the normative life changes associated with it, can engender not only a sense of optimism and possibility, but also uncertainty, fear, anxiety and depression, and recourse to alcohol and drugs as a stress management strategy.⁵ This is especially true for some young adults as they leave their parents’ homes and the social support and social control that such homes often afford. Managing the identity concerns of this period, when so much in the world is also changing rapidly as well, has

given rise to a concern about both the physical and mental health of young people during the transition to adulthood today.⁶

ATTENDING TO THE BODY-MIND

In an effort to provide young people with a new set of mindsets and skillsets that (a) foster their healthy identity development; (b) help them to reduce stress and cultivate well-being; and (c) capitalize on the plasticity of the brain (especially the prefrontal cortex, or PFC) to environmental inputs during these years, a new field of science around mindfulness training – contemplative science and education – has developed.⁷ Contemplative science, broadly construed, is a recently emerging, trans-disciplinary effort by scientists, philosophers, and meditation practitioners from mainly Buddhist contemplative traditions to derive a new understanding of the mind/body system and its potential for transformation in the directions of health and well-being through engagement in contemplative practices like mindfulness, meditation and yoga.⁸

Contemplative science is grounded in the concept of neuroplasticity, the notion that the brain is designed to change in response to experience and training of various kinds.⁹ Similar to work on the development of expertise, contemplative practices such as meditation and yoga are conceptualized as specialized forms of mental and physical training that, when engaged in for extended periods of time under the guidance of more-expert others, lead to the development of particular skills and dispositions at the psychological and neural levels of analysis.⁸ Research evidence is beginning to document how sustained engagement with contemplative practices among adults can foster the development of mindful awareness and focused attention; healthy emotion regulation and well-being; empathy and compassion for others; and improved physical health due to decreased emotional reactivity.⁸

At the center of this new field of science and related set of human services is an ancient mental training technique first developed by Buddha called “mindfulness” of somatic and mental experience. Kabat-Zinn¹⁰ defined mindfulness as “paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally” (p.4). As such, mindfulness can be understood as “a threefold attentional skillset,” including: (a) the ability to sustain attention intentionally on present moment experience; (b) the ability to perceive the present moment in a calm and clear manner; and (c) the willingness to experience each moment just as it is, without emotional reactions or conceptual elaborations or judgments.¹¹

Mindfulness is traditionally taught through structured contemplative practices in which attention is focused intentionally and non-judgmentally on present-moment somatic and mental experience in the form of bodily sensations, feelings, mental images, and thoughts.¹¹ Such practices can include body scans, in which participants focus their attention progressively throughout the body to bring awareness to somatic experience; meditation on the breath to develop focused attention; and meditation on present-moment experience to bring awareness to the body, feelings, images, and thoughts and to develop insight

and a non-reactive, non-judgmental orientation to all facets of present-moment experience.¹²

Mindfulness meditation heightens awareness of the mind-body as an organic whole that can be looked to with openness and curiosity for feedback about one’s current mental state under given conditions. This feedback, in turn, once one is aware of it, can be used to make conscious and intentional, rather than non-conscious and reactive, choices about how to behave in a given situation. Mindfulness training involves (a) learning basic skills such as relaxing through breathing and a one-pointed focus on the breath or some other object (e.g., external sounds) that create physiological rest in the body; and (b) “noting and labeling” of mental and somatic experiences – a process of identifying the nature of experience (e.g., feeling, sensation, thought, image) without reacting to or conceptually elaborating on this experience. Noting and labeling is known to confer psychological distance between highly arousing cognitive, emotional and physical experiences and our reactions to them. This psychological distance, which really amounts to time, allows one to respond volitionally rather than to react emotionally to what is occurring in the present moment.

In essence, mindfulness increases awareness of somatic and mental experience, and uses that heightened awareness in the service of stress reduction, self-knowledge, and the self-regulation of behavior. The purposes of engaging in mindfulness practice are especially well-suited to the kinds of developmental challenges and opportunities confronting young people in that mindfulness practices help to (a) alleviate suffering due to unpleasant physical and emotional experiences; (b) enhance well-being physically and emotionally in a non-toxic way; (c) facilitate self-knowledge and self-clarification; (d) regulate behavior in the service of accomplishing desired long-term life goals; and (e) foster a spirit of compassion and service to others.¹¹

FOUR STEPS TO TENDING THE BODY-MIND

In a course I teach at Portland State University for undergraduates, we rely on a basic four-step primer in mindfulness practice. These four steps are based on basic mindfulness teachings and research findings:

(1) Just Breathe (2) Be Here Now (3) Let Go (4) Begin Again

The first step in mindfulness training, “Just Breathe,” is about stopping, breathing, and calming down before deciding what to do. Research shows that stopping and taking a few deep breaths, with a slight elongation of the out-breath, is a trustworthy way of calming our fight-flight arousal system (e.g., amygdala) and clearing our minds (e.g., PFC) so we can think more clearly when stressed out. This slows down emotionally reactive behavior. A singular focus on natural flow of the in-breath and the out-breath is a key form of mindfulness training used to develop “one-pointed, focused attention.” The practice of following the breath coming in and going out at its natural pace is an excellent place to begin the practice of mindfulness.¹²

The second step is “Be Here Now.” By breathing, and relaxing the body and the mind, we can enter into the present moment and exist therein – instead of ruminat-

ing on the past or planning for the future always, being in the present moment with whatever is happening turns out to be an important means of self-awareness and self-regulation. We learn not to become over-engaged with experience or to suppress or avoid certain experiences. We become more aware of our body sensations, our senses, our feelings, our thoughts, and the imagery in our minds. It's simple, but not easy to practice.¹² The importance of being here now, in the present, cannot be over-estimated given that here, now, is where our life is unfolding, forever and always. It is here, now, that we can make choices that make a difference in what happens next. Using the breath as our guide and anchor, we can always find our way back to the now and ask ourselves, what is happening right now and how might I respond to this specific moment in my life after I calm down?

The third step is to "Let Go." One of the insights of mindfulness meditators is that much of our stress is caused by unnecessary worry, rumination and anxiety.¹² There is a beautiful teaching by a Buddhist teacher called Shantidevi who wrote: "If a problem can be solved, why be unhappy? And if it cannot be solved, what is the use of being unhappy?" We might ask ourselves in any moment of upset or stress, after breathing, what kinds of expectations, desires, and fears might I be able to let go of in this moment to

to use that awareness in compassionate ways for growth of self and one's relationships is the path of mindfulness. The goal in practicing mindfulness, no matter what happens, is to continually "begin again" without self-judgments or emotional reactions. In this way, over time, expertise in understanding, accepting, and regulating our own minds and bodies results. As the great poet Rumi put it:

*Come, come, whoever you are.
Wanderer, worshiper, lover of leaving.
It doesn't matter.
Ours is not a caravan of despair.
Come, even if you have broken your
vows a thousand times.
Come yet again, come, come.*

CONCLUSIONS

The transitional years from adolescence to adulthood are filled with possibility and uncertainty. The project of creating a coherent identity en route to becoming adult is inherently stressful. This developmental task is even more stressful given the economic, social and technological changes characteristic of our times. It may seem anachronistic in such a global, interconnected age to propose

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reduce the stress I am putting on myself unnecessarily? The classic example my students report is of being caught in traffic. They apply the practice to this situation and realize that to get upset about a situation that they cannot change is unhelpful and unnecessary. Letting go can be a liberating act.

Finally, and perhaps the most important of the steps is number four, "Begin Again." Mindfulness practice is not about performance or focusing on the breath or the mind in a perfectly performed manner. Rather, mindfulness is about trying again and again to be here now, to stay calm, to enter the present moment calmly and clearly, and to let go of unnecessary psychological burdens so we can see ourselves and each other more clearly. During mindfulness practices, our minds wander; we become distracted, we get caught up in the very feelings and thoughts we are trying to notice and label quietly, in a dispassionate way. This is the practice. We are not trying to stop the mind – indeed, we cannot! This is not the goal. Rather, we are trying to befriend and familiarize ourselves with our bodies and minds, to develop a new relationship full of self-compassion with them. We do this by starting again after distractions during the practice and by assuming a gentle attitude towards ourselves. The effort to know oneself and



that young people learn ancient training techniques to come to know their bodies and their minds better as they move towards full adult status. And yet, what modern science is revealing is that the stress inherent in 21st century life requires a commitment of time to self-care and personal development. As Gandhi put it, we must become the change we wish to see in the world: If we wish for a world that is kinder, wiser and more compassionate, then there is no better place to start than with ourselves. Evidence is beginning to show that mindfulness practice can assist adults young and old in this regard.

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FURTHER INFORMATION

Practical Resources:

- » www.basicmindfulness.org
- » www.umassmed.edu/cfm
- » Kabat-Zinn, J. (1994). *Wherever you go, there you are: Mindfulness meditation in everyday life*. New York: Hyperion.

Research Resources:

- » www.mindandlife.org
- » www.investigatinghealthyminds.org
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