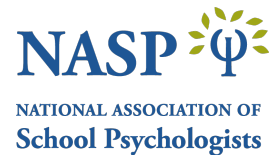


Communiqué

HANDOUTS

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Frequently Asked Questions to Consider When Implementing Mindfulness Based Interventions in Schools

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Editor's Note: Many handouts are fully formatted for distribution and available for downloading on the NASP website (<http://www.nasponline.org>).

The concept of mindfulness has become increasingly popular across a variety of contexts related to school climate (e.g., educator self-care, discipline) and student well-being (e.g., coping with stress and anxiety). As popularity grows, it becomes increasingly important for school teams to evaluate mindfulness-based interventions in the context of their school community and consider how mindfulness fits with current school initiatives. The following frequently asked questions will assist educators as they consider adopting mindfulness-based interventions (MBI).

What is the definition of mindfulness?

Mindfulness is most often defined as “paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally” (Kabat-Zinn, 1994, p. 4) or as the process of noticing new things and drawing novel distinctions, which keeps us situated in the present (Langer, 1989). Both definitions include two key features: self-regulation of attention and an attitude of acceptance to the current experience (Felver et al., 2013). Self-regulation of attention refers to the ability to purposefully attend to elements of one's thoughts, sensations, and emotions while ignoring others. The second component, acceptance, implies an attitude of curiosity and flexibility to these experiences. Mindfulness practices are built on the idea that one can distance oneself from experiences in a way that is characterized as inquisitive and nonjudgmental. The outcome is the cultivation of an attitude of acceptance and curiosity to one's present experience.

What is the difference between social-emotional learning and mindfulness?

According to the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, social–emotional learning (SEL) focuses on the teaching of skills needed to build student competencies and beliefs necessary to manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions. In SEL, the focus is on learning skills. In mindfulness, the focus is on awareness of thoughts and emotions. The two work together. Mindfulness helps students to regulate their emotions in all types of situations in order to apply SEL skills when needed.

What are the elements of a typical mindfulness program/intervention?

Based on a recent meta-analytic review of MBIs in schools, Zenner, Hermleben-Kurz, & Walach (2014) identified the following most often used components in programs to facilitate mindfulness: breath awareness, working with thoughts and emotions, psychoeducation, awareness of the senses and practices of daily life, group discussion, body-scan, kindness practices, home practice, body-practices (like yoga), and additional materials. Most programs use multiple components, with observation of breath, psychoeducation, and group exercises as the primary practices to facilitate mindfulness (Zenner, Hermleben-Kurz, & Walach, 2014).

What does the research say about the effects of MBIs with youth?

To date, two meta-analytic reviews have been completed to assess the effects of MBIs with youth. In general, there are small to moderate effect sizes. Zenner, Hermleben-Kurz, & Walach (2014) grouped the outcome measures used to determine effect into five domains: cognitive performance, emotional problems, stress/coping, resilience, and third party ratings (e.g., parent and teacher questionnaires related to aggression, social skills, well-being, or attention). Results were strongest in relation to cognitive performance and resilience to stress.

What does the research say about who benefits most from MBIs?

A second recent review of MBIs with youth, completed by Zoogman et al. (2014), revealed small to moderate effect sizes on psychological symptoms compared to other active alternative treatments and more so for studies drawn from clinical samples compared to nonclinical samples. Research suggest that mindfulness interventions seem to have the greatest effect in reducing emotional problems (anxiety levels and posttraumatic symptoms) and increasing coping of the neediest kids, such as those coping with chronic stress (Ortiz & Sibinga, 2017).

Are there any identified risks in using MBIs with students?

According to Resnick (2017), researchers generally agree that MBIs are harmless. However, schools should consider the small number of studies that identified potential negative effects of mindfulness when developing a program. Students suffering from a recent trauma may not benefit, as avoiding thoughts and feelings associated with an event may be part of an individual's ability to cope.

Educators should be sensitive to student readiness to face trauma. Other students may not enjoy mindfulness exercises, especially those that bring up negative emotions. Unpleasant reactions such as agitation, anxiety, discomfort, or confusion are commonly reported during formal mindfulness exercises. Although working with difficult emotions is central to mindfulness, some students might not be willing or able to engage in the activities.

How can schools embed MBIs into existing multitiered systems of support?

MBIs can be embedded into a school's existing multitiered system of support. School-wide expectations that include mindfulness practices will help all students develop self-regulation (awareness of thoughts and emotions), which will have an impact on whether or not social-emotional skills are used when students need them. In the classroom, practices such as breath awareness, working with thoughts and emotions, and body practices can help students identify *when* they need to apply learned social-emotional skills. As mindfulness practices become more universally applied, schools can intensify and individualize supports for those students who need additional practice and prompting.

What resources can a district/school use to select an MBI?

When considering the implementation of an MBI in a school, it is recommended that teams refer to the critical questions outlined in the Hexagon Tool, found here:

<http://implementation.fpg.unc.edu/sites/implementation.fpg.unc.edu/files/resources/NIRN-Education-TheHexagonTool.pdf>. Conversations about student needs, fit with current initiatives, resource availability, evidence, readiness for replication, and capacity to implement are necessary during the early stages of implementation.

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Websites

Learning to Breathe: <http://learningtobreathe.org>

Mindful Schools (K–12): www.mindfulschools.org

Mindfulness in Schools Project: <https://mindfulnessinschools.org>

MindUP (PreK–8): www.thehawnfoundation.org

Still Quiet Place (K–12): www.stillquietplace.com

Stressed Teens (13–18 y/o): www.stressedteens.com

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