

# Winter Mindfulness

**“Mindfulness means paying attention in a particular way;**

**On purpose,  
in the present moment, and  
nonjudgmentally”**

**Jon Kabat-Zinn**

There are not many occupations that produce as much chronic stress as teaching. The frenetic and non-stop pace of a school year can wear us out. By November most of us are tired, and can't imagine how we can ever make it to the Christmas break. Of course, we love what we do, so we work hard to deal with the stressors so that we get things done and are there for our students when they need us.

As we settle in for January and the rest of the school year, consider giving some of your energy to being more mindful in your life. As the definition above indicates, part of mindfulness is about being present. What exactly does 'being present' mean? It means paying attention – to when we are worrying about the future (anxiety), regretting things from the past, or being caught in our own habitual patterns that we do without even noticing. When we pay attention, on purpose, to our tendencies to do these things, we give ourselves a chance to stop them in mid track – and refocus on right now. There is abundant research on the health benefits of mindfulness – science has proven that the more we work on being present and mindful, the better we feel. For details see [www.mindbodystressreduction.com/HealthBenefits.htm](http://www.mindbodystressreduction.com/HealthBenefits.htm)

Refocusing on the present takes practice. It is a skill to be learned. The more you try to remain present, the better you get at catching yourself not being present. This also requires you to be easy on yourself along the way. This is the 'nonjudgement' mentioned in Jon Kabat-Zinn's definition above. When you notice you are off on a thinking tangent, give yourself a mental pat on the back for catching it, and refocus on the present moment. Try not to spend time beating yourself up over not being present enough. In fact, try not spending too much time beating yourself up about most things. We can never improve by repeatedly telling ourselves how incompetent we are. Accept where you are, and start from there.

**Try this in your class:** When you have a moment in your class when you are not up front teaching a lesson, take 5 deep belly breaths. Focus on the 'in' and 'out' so that you are present. No one will see you doing this. Next, notice how your mind tries to move to 'what's next' or 'what just happened'. Catch yourself, bring yourself back, and put the focus on right now. Then, turn your attention to your students - be

present with them and help them with their work. You may find that you are more attentive and present – without the distractions of your thoughts.

“The only willful choice one has is the quality of attention one gives to a thought at any moment.”

**Jeff Schwartz and Sharon Begley**

## **What does being mindful look like in your school or classroom?**

- Making a concerted effort to focus on being completely present – being fully available for your students/staff – as opposed to be ‘partly’ there.
- Teaching your students how calm down, breath and relax; incorporate this practice into your daily routine with them – for more on this see [www.mindfulschools.org/](http://www.mindfulschools.org/)
- Stopping to ask a colleague how they are doing, without hoping that they give a ‘quick’ answer. Truly listen to what they say – they will appreciate it.
- When stressed, taking 5 deep belly breaths to reduce your anxiety – see [www.relaxationresponse.org/steps/](http://www.relaxationresponse.org/steps/)
- Being compassionate with your students and colleagues – which may require you to look beyond past hurts and focus on the fact that people make mistakes, just like you do
- Noticing when you are engaged in a habit you don’t want – and committing to change one part of it – see <http://zenhabits.net/>
- Working to be easier on yourself if things don’t go perfectly – use a long-range perspective to help see that, in the grand scheme of things, this isn’t worth getting caught up on.
- Trying not to get caught in the gossip of the school – focus on what you can do something about, and let the rest go.
- Noticing the people who zap your energy and develop a strategy on how to deal with them – see <http://zenhabits.net/negative/>
- Simplifying your daily lesson, focusing on the basics and clearing away some ‘clutter’ that can cause stress.
- Trying something new today – noticing your comfort zone and regularly going out of it. ‘Failure’ comes with this approach, but don’t shy away from failing. As Robert F. Kennedy said, “Only those who dare to fail greatly can ever achieve greatly.”
- Reflecting on your balance between work and home – is it where you want it to be? What is one thing you could change?