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“Check Yourself”: Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction for Teachers of Students With Challenging Behaviors

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Abstract

In this article, we open with a discussion of stress and its potential impact on the teaching profession. We then follow with an empirical rationale for and steps in the implementation of potentially promising mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) interventions for teachers, particularly teachers of students with emotional and behavioral disorders. Body scan, calm breathing, focused attention, and relaxation are highlighted. A list of resources for further use of MBSR is included.

Keywords

mindfulness, behavior(s), emotional disturbance, disorders/disabilities, practices, efficacy/effectiveness, programs/practices

In many professions, when someone is feeling stressed at work that person can take a break, step out of the room, get some fresh air, or even vent to a colleague. This is seldom an option for classroom teachers and particularly for teachers of students with challenging behaviors. Teacher stress is typically defined as physical and psychological negative responses, such as anger or depression, to events pertaining to a teacher’s job as a result of an imbalance between risk and protective factors (Prilleltensky, Neff, & Bessell, 2016). Numerous teachers can attest to the chaos that ensues when a teacher steps out of the room or even turns his or her back to the class. In a national survey on teacher stress, daily frustration with discipline and student behavior problems was identified as a cause of stress leading to feelings of inadequacy, exhaustion, and a loss of idealism and self-efficacy (Richards, 2012).

The causes of teacher stress have been well documented in the literature. Results from various studies have indicated that teachers experience substantial job-related stress because they have to deal with student behavioral and emotional problems that interfere with teaching (Robertson & Dunsmuir, 2013). According to Konstantopoulos (2014), adding to stress levels are policy initiatives including the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (2004) that have created ambitious standards for student performance and teacher evaluation. Although the intent of such policy changes is commendable, there is clearly a heavy burden

placed on teachers associated with the demands of teaching (Fleming, Mackrain, & LeBuffe, 2013).

Teacher Stress and Its Consequences

The effects of teacher stress have been known for decades (Prilleltensky et al., 2016). Teacher stress has been linked to high levels of teacher attrition, teachers' reduced feelings of self-efficacy and job satisfaction, and impairments in their physical and emotional health (Collie, Shapka, & Perry, 2012). The impact of stress also decreases teachers' ability to maintain student engagement and achievement (Shernoff, Mehta, Atkins, Torf, & Spencer, 2011). Researchers have identified factors associated with teacher stress and burnout. These factors include low self-efficacy, job dissatisfaction, lack of administrative support, overall negative school climate, attrition, burnout, and negative teacher–student interactions (Collie et al., 2012; Richards, 2012).

Given these mounting stressors, it is easy to see how teachers can respond to student challenging behavior in an aversive, reactive manner that contributes to a toxic cycle of continued challenging behavior. This is sometimes described as a transactional model because the students are influencing the teacher's behavior as the teacher influences the students' behavior (Sutherland & Oswald, 2005). When teachers are in a reactive mode, they tend to resort to using even more hasty and punitive strategies. Over time, the classroom climate worsens, and the likelihood of student problem behavior increases (Mitchell & Bradshaw, 2013). In comparison with the general population, special education teachers are at greater risk of experiencing psychological burnout, depression (Jurado, Gurpegui, Moreno, & de Dios Luna, 1998), physical health problems including sleep deprivation, and other issues related to the central nervous system (de Souza, de Sousa, Belísio, & Macêdo de Azevedo, 2012) and job dissatisfaction.

All of these negative results can also serve as precipitating factors for teachers leaving the profession and adding to the critical shortages of special education teachers nationally (Dee & Goldhaber, 2017). According to Dillon (2007), almost one third of new special education teachers leave the profession after 3 years in the field. Fore, Martin, and Bender (2002) conducted a synthesis of scholarly studies and suggested that stress levels and feelings of burnout were more acute for special education teachers.

Brunsting, Sreckovic, and Lane (2014) indicated that stress is intensified for teachers of students who engage in chronic challenging behavior or are identified as having emotional and behavioral disorders (EBD). Teachers of students with EBD quit their jobs in higher proportions compared with other special education positions (Aderaa & Bullock, 2010). The reasons teachers of students with EBD decide to leave their jobs have been attributed mainly to stressors within or outside the classroom. Stressors within the classroom include teaching to diverse skill levels and abilities among students and challenging and out-of-control behaviors

(Brunsting et al., 2014). Stressors outside the classroom include lack of collaboration and lack of parental involvement (Aderaa & Bullock, 2010).

As teachers increasingly encounter stressors inside and outside their classrooms, job-related stress levels compound while the ability to cope decreases (Prilleltensky et al., 2016). Research indicates that teachers have developed positive, protective coping strategies such as a support system of family and friends, a sense of humor, and times of solitude (Richards, 2012). Although a strong support network and times of solitude are valuable strategies, they are difficult or impossible to access during classroom learning time. Clearly more strategies are necessary, particularly those that can be used in an immediate, in situ context.

What is Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction?

The primary purpose of this discussion article is to introduce a potentially useful collection of interventions designed to proactively deal with stress known as mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR). MBSR can be defined as when a person purposefully pays attention and is aware of his/her surroundings, emotions, thoughts, and how the body feels (Kabat-Zinn, 2013). Its purpose has been to “change our relationship with stressful thoughts and events” (Gold et al., 2010, p. 185). MBSR has a strong research base that has linked the intervention with practitioners reportedly benefiting by experiencing less negative reaction to stressful situations and more empathy and compassion (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). This cognitive approach also has clear biological evidence. Previous research has demonstrated that three areas of the brain are positively affected, as indicated by increases in alpha and theta brain wave activity, by the use of MBSR including the amygdala, hippocampus, and prefrontal cortex (Chiesa & Serretti, 2010). These three areas identify and regulate emotions, are critical to learning and memory, and increase the ability to make wise decisions (Moore, Gruber, Derose, & Malinowski, 2012). Mindfulness is designed to allow an individual to focus his or her attention on increasing cognitive appraisal of a stressful situation while decreasing emotional reactivity to the same situation (Chiesa & Serretti, 2010). Mindfulness interventions have been implemented in school settings and have led to improvements in a variety of areas (Jennings, Frank, Snowberg, Coccia, & Greenberg, 2013; Roeser et al., 2013).

The core components of MBSR include stress reduction techniques such as the use of a body scan, calm breathing, intentional focus on the present moment, guided imagery, and nonjudgmental observation of experiences (Jennings et al., 2013; Singh, Lancioni, Winton, Karazsia, & Singh, 2013). Researchers have also evaluated interventions that are designed to address specific teacher concerns, including the use of yoga to increase awareness of body or compassion-building exercises aimed at increasing empathy and improving teacher–student relationships (Harris, Jennings, Katz, Abenavoli, & Greenberg, 2015). It is still too early to evaluate the effectiveness of tying a specific MBSR intervention to a specific personal concern, however. Researchers are unsure how individual components of MBSR strategies produce desired outcomes (Hwang, Bartlett, Greben, & Hand, 2017). Therefore, caution is urged as participants make particular choices about which MBSR intervention is selected.

Evidence Supporting MBSR for Reducing Teacher Stress

In the MBSR literature, there is an accumulating evidence base for the efficacy of mindfulness interventions with a broad range of adult populations. There is not, however, a sufficient body of positive findings in the area of teacher reduction of stress to identify the collection of interventions as evidence-based practice (Council for Exceptional Children, 2014). That is particularly true for teachers of students with EBD.

To date, there have been several recent literature reviews assessing the efficacy of MBSR (Hwang et al., 2017; Lomas, Medina, Ivtzan, Rupprecht, & Eiroa Orosa, 2017). The literature reviews indicated positive effects of mindfulness-based interventions including gains in self-compassion, teachers' well-being, motivation, and mindfulness-related skills such as observation and nonjudgment. Lomas and colleagues (2017) evaluated 153 empirical studies with 16 of these studies focused on teachers. Although there was heterogeneity within the findings, positive outcomes related to well-being, relationships, and resilience were reported. Results for the impact of MBSR on depression and burnout were less clear. Hwang and colleagues (2017) evaluated 16 studies that focused specifically on the use of mindfulness-based interventions with teachers. Summative conclusions of this review of research indicated that MBSR positively affected teacher well-being and resilience. Hwang and colleagues (2017) noted, though, that the lack of overall quality in the study designs prevented MBSR from being deemed an evidence-based practice.

In consideration of specific studies on the use of MBSR with teachers, mindfulness has been taught to preschool teachers (Singh et al., 2013), elementary teachers (Jennings et al., 2013), and high school teachers (Cook et al., 2017; Frank, Reibel, Broderick, Cantrell, & Metz, 2015). Results of the studies investigating MBSR with teachers have been positive in several areas. Researchers were able to show that MBSR increased teachers' ability to manage stress and respond less reactively to student behaviors (Cook et al., 2017). Teacher self-efficacy in classroom organization and classroom management skills improved (Jennings et al., 2013; Meiklejohn et al., 2012). Increases in positive teacher–student interactions, student compliance, and student learning have been noted (Cook et al., 2017; Frank et al., 2015; Singh et al., 2013). Significant improvements in sleep quality have been found (Frank et al., 2015; Jennings et al., 2013). Increases in teacher-focused attention and working memory capacity, self-compassion, as well as lower levels of occupational stress and burnout, depression, and anxiety have been recognized (Hwang et al., 2017; Lomas et al., 2017; Roeser et al., 2013).

In these studies, teachers also found MBSR to be highly acceptable, appropriate, and effective, indicating that they would continue to use MBSR practices after the research ended. Teachers noted that MBSR practices were acceptable because they experienced increases in perceived well-being. Improvements in student learning were also reported. Teachers further experienced being less frustrated to student maladaptive behavior (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Jennings,

Snowberg, Coccia, & Greenberg, 2011; Meiklejohn et al., 2012). These gains in personal benefits have a “top-down” or “indirect approach” subsequently leading to changes in student behavior such as increased academic engagement, motivation to learn, and prosocial behaviors (Jennings et al., 2013).

MBSR Steps: Body Scan, Breathing, Focused Attention, and Relaxation

In practice, MBSR interventions typically involve a combination of the following core components of setting an intention, use of a body scan, focused attention on the breath, and focused attention on thoughts and feelings (Hwang et al., 2017; Lomas et al., 2017). These core components have been included in MBSR interventions that have specifically addressed increasing teachers’ ability to manage stress, motivation, observation, and nonjudgment (Hwang et al., 2017). These sequential steps used to practice an MBSR strategy can be seen in Figure 1.

Steps	At the end of each session, check each completed step.
1. Set an intention (goal) for the session.	□
2. Body scan: Sitting in seats with hands on laps, shoulders, elbows, and hips aligned.	□
3. Focus attention on the sensations of the breath associated with the body.	□
4. Use attention to observe thoughts and feelings.	□

Figure 1. Mindfulness session checklist.

Step 1: Set an Intention

The first step in mindfulness practice is to set an intention or goal before the session. Examples of setting an intention may be to decrease anxiety, pay more attention, improve an attitude, or change a perception toward someone. Hwang and colleagues (2017) showed that the intention of the practice was influential in determining the outcomes or benefits received. Thus, the goal of a session will be highly individualized. For example, if a teacher adopts mindfulness to reduce stress, specifically high blood pressure, a reduction in blood pressure levels will be the goal of the mindfulness session (Shapiro, Carlson, Astin, & Freedman, 2006).

Tip for setting an intention

The goal of a session is not to empty the mind or stop thinking. A realistic intention might be to simply relax and pay attention to thoughts and emotions for the length of the session (e.g., 10 min). Over time, periods of relaxation will occur more frequently (Gelles, 2017).

Step 2: Scan the Body

The second step in the mindfulness training is to scan the body (Hwang et al., 2017; Singh et al., 2013). As seen in Figure 2, the expectation is that a participant's spine is upright and vertical, that the person sits in his or her seat with palms facing upward on his or her lap where the crease of the stomach meets the legs, and that the shoulder blades are in alignment with the elbows and hip bones.



Figure 2. Proper posture for meditation.

Note. <https://www.wikihow.com/Sit-During-Meditation>.

Scanning typically includes increasing awareness of and giving close attention to sensations as they happen in the body. Scanning includes paying attention to the fluctuating sensations that arise in different parts of the body. Teachers can start with feeling the sensations of the contact of the soles of the feet with the floor. Participants then scan up to the calves, thighs, and buttocks. Pay attention to the buttocks contacting the seat. Next, scan from the shoulders, up the neck, move across the face, and over to the ears. Feel the nose, eyelids, and scalp (Shapiro et al., 2006; Singh et al., 2013).

Tip for body scan

With practice, there will be an increase in awareness of new sensations. Some of the feelings might be pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. For example, there may be a new awareness of a sensation of a tight chest. Whatever the sensation is, just note it. There may be an impulse to move to relieve real pain, which is fine (Singh et al., 2013).

Step 3: Focused Attention on the Breath

Participants are taught to have a focused attention on the breath and its associations with different areas of the body (Frank et al., 2015; Hwang et al., 2017; Moore et al., 2012). Participants are to breathe and feel the sensation of the lower abdomen expand and contract. Mindfulness practices suggest that it is common to experience a feeling of expansion like a rubber tire around the lower belly. Participants next are taught to breathe and feel the upper abdomen, then the chest, and finally the air moving in and out of the nostrils (Gold et al., 2010).

Tip for focusing the attention on the breath

Practitioners note that during meditation, it is common for the mind to roam. When the mind wanders, they suggest that participants let go of thoughts and bring the attention to the breath, attending to each inhalation and exhalation.

Step 4: Focused Attention on Thoughts and Feelings

Practitioners teach participants to use attention to observe thoughts and feelings (Hwang et al., 2017; Kabat-Zinn, 2013). Paying attention involves suspending judgment and observing the thoughts and feelings as they occur in the mind. With practice, practitioners advise that there will be fewer thoughts about the past and future and more focus on the present moment (Gelles, 2017).

Tip for creating a focused attention on thoughts and feelings

Invariably, the mind will wander, according to practitioners. They advise participants to not feel badly about this occurrence. Practitioners note that what is important when mind wandering occurs is a positive response. They suggest that participants simply acknowledge the thoughts without ascribing too much judgment to them and then resume meditation activities (Gelles, 2017).

Final Thoughts

Teachers frequently address challenging classroom behaviors on a daily basis. They are forced to make hundreds of decisions every day as they attempt to display self-control in the face of a wide range of stressors. Teachers need supportive practices to help them relax and refocus in the midst of a chaotic environment. MBSR is one promising strategy that has potential to decrease teacher stress levels while also decreasing reactive responses to student misbehavior

(Roeser et al., 2013). Mindfulness is a simple and effective practice that can help teachers self-regulate their thoughts and feelings. The effective use of mindful strategies allows teachers to have a different and more positive relationship with their thoughts and feelings (Gelles, 2017). With continued effective use, we believe that a teacher increases his or her ability to observe thoughts nonjudgmentally and become more detached. It is believed that detachment leads to a calmer internal state and increased feeling of mental well-being (Shapiro et al., 2006).

Although researchers have yet to determine an optimal length of time for an MBSR session, Moore and colleagues (2012) found that a minimum of 10 min of daily meditation practice was enough to see improvement in participants' self-regulation. Moore and colleagues (2012) also suggested that there is a connection between increases in time and greater benefits. Researchers encourage teachers to cultivate mindfulness skills and knowledge in their everyday lives both inside and outside the classroom. At home, teachers may practice mindfulness upon waking or as soon as they get home as a way to de-stress. Practicing mindfulness before bed may well improve sleep quality (Winbush, Gross, & Kreitzer, 2007). Best times during the school day to practice mindfulness may include the beginning of the school day before the students arrive, during lunchtime, or during a planning period.

Researchers believe that when teachers are less reactive and cope more effectively, they conserve physical and mental energies that are then available to effectively manage, motivate, and teach students (Hwang et al., 2017). Finally, when teachers cultivate and display self-regulation skills, they become role models for the types of skills and attitudes that students in the 21st century need to be successful in school and life. For more information on resources detailing mindfulness and mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR), see Table 1.

Journal

Mindfulness

www.springer.com/psychology/cognitive+psychology/journal/12671

Magazine

Mindful

www.mindful.org/magazine/

Books

Kabat-Zinn, J. (2013). *Full Catastrophe Living: Using the Wisdom of Your Body and Mind to Face Stress, Pain, and Illness*. New York, NY: Bantam.

Rechtschaffen, D. (2014). *The Way of Mindful Education: Cultivating Well-Being in Teachers and Students*. New York, NY: W. W. Norton.

Video/Audio

15-min MBSR

<https://youtu.be/8v45WSuAeYI>

MBSR focus on present moment

<https://youtu.be/WHU2sjyD5MM>

MBSR body scan

<https://youtu.be/m713YdTEhb4>

UCLA Mindful Research Center

www.marc.ucla.edu/mindful-meditations

Websites

CARE

<https://createforeducation.org>

Jon Kabat-Zinn

www.mindfulnesscds.com

Table 1. Resources for Learning More About Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction Interventions.

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