

# “Take a deep breath and count to three...”

Students and teachers share how being in the present moment has enriched their lives

## Eye pillows and lavender oil

China Nanjing International School, China

“To me, mindfulness is when you relax without falling asleep and without thinking about yourself,” says Middle Years Programme (MYP) student Nohemi from Nanjing International School, China. “I find it relaxing and your mind kind of opens up,” adds classmate Freja.

Neila Steele, a Primary Years Programme (PYP) grade 5 ELL (English Language Learner) teacher and certified yoga instructor, practices mindfulness with students and offers yoga. Her ‘balloon breath’ exercises help get PYP students settled during transition time.

“As a teacher, mindfulness is about bringing awareness to the present, where you stop multitasking and instead focus on the moment,” she says.

Steele also practices mindful eating, mindful walking and mindful ‘body scans’ with older students. As students lie on the floor with their eyes closed, they have the option to use eye pillows and put lavender oil on their temples. “They love it,” she says. “At first they didn’t realize we were practicing mindfulness until we started using the language – that we’re living in the moment and letting our thoughts float away.”

Students are also encouraged to reflect on negative emotions by naming their ‘monster’. “They connect to their sensations and emotions, identifying thoughts that are unkind to themselves and others,” says Steele.

Due to its popularity, during the recent MYP exams, 60 students signed up for a mindfulness session. They have also been using their strategies at home. “Mindfulness helps them to be more creative,” says Steele.

She encourages fellow teachers to try mindfulness and realize the multitude of benefits for themselves.



## Maintain health and handle stress

France International School of Paris, France

“Mindfulness helped to distract me from trying to remember stuff for the exams, which was probably stressing me out more than the actual exam!” said one student at the International School of Paris (ISP). “It helped me relax and forget all the stress and imagine that I was the only one in the room,” said another. “It helped me to calm down and focus my thoughts.”

ISP uses a range of mindfulness techniques, integrating them into the curriculum and classroom teaching. Students are taught breathing techniques and have been offered yoga to help maintain health and handle stress. At the start of MYP internal exams, students were read a two-minute ‘relaxation script’ to help focus and calm them. Now, 98 per cent of students surveyed have requested that it be used in the IB Diploma Programme (DP) exams.

DP students set up a ‘Balance’ club as part of a Creativity, Activity, Service (CAS) project and it provided support for the IB Learner Profile attribute, which can be difficult to maintain during the DP years. “Students invited local specialists in different health professions to share ideas about how to maintain balance in their emotional, physical and academic lives,” says Tim Logan, ISP Vice Principal for Student Wellbeing.

A wellbeing team (consisting of homeroom teachers, mentors, a counselor, nurse, and heads of grade) supports students by teaching the skills needed to emotionally and academically regulate themselves.

Mindfulness has enriched teachers’ experience in the classroom, too. “It’s reinvigorated their development of new techniques and enhanced learning,” adds Logan.

### Mindfulness increases...

- ↑ Attention and focus
- ↑ Confidence and willingness to take risks with learning
- ↑ Self-awareness and a feeling of empathy towards others
- ↑ Connection to others

### Mindfulness reduces...

- ↓ Stress
- ↓ Anxiety
- ↓ Disengagement, distraction and disruption
- ↓ Anger



## Quiet time outdoors

High Meadows School, Georgia, US

"Mindfulness in the classroom is encouraging students to recognize how they're feeling in the present moment, be aware of what's happening around them and share their main goal for the day," says PYP Coordinator Kathryn McElvaney from High Meadows School, Georgia, US. "We often get ourselves wrapped up in the past or worried about the future, so we talk about staying in the present moment."

To promote mindfulness, students take their classrooms outside. "Teachers will incorporate the outdoors in some aspect of learning every day. Quiet time in the fresh air is a good way to bring you back to the present moment and minimize stress," adds McElvaney.

Students work with school counselor Sue Amacker to recognize the 'power of the breath', which means conscious breathing. Mentors help students explore their feelings when they are stressed, and they are offered meditation.

Amacker says: "Mindfulness is critical to social emotional learning. It calms us when we are angry, sad or frustrated. Being mindful helps our youngest students process difficult emotions they aren't familiar with, and it allows our older students to more fully experience the joy in life."

But mindfulness is not just for the students at High Meadows; teachers are offered yoga sessions every week. "It's a great way for them to slow down. When we are looking after our own wellbeing, we are doing well for our students. We need to model that wellness back to them."



Students at High Meadows School practice yoga

### 15-minute Body Scan

- 1 Lie on back with legs spread out in front and arms to the side, palms facing the ceiling.
- 2 Begin with a few deep breaths to get students into a calm state.
- 3 Ask students to bring attention to every part of their body. Slowly name them, part by part – eg. toes, ankles, calves, knees, lower back, abdomen, chest, shoulders, arms, hands, neck and head.
- 4 Ask if they can feel any tension in each body part, allowing it to soften as they bring attention to it.
- 5 End with a few deep breaths.

Try varying the length of this exercise

## Awareness of attention triggers

International School Ho Chi Minh City (ISHMC-AA), Vietnam

"For me, mindfulness is about trying to make students aware of their own attention triggers," says science teacher Jozef Bendik, who has taken what he learned as a DP teacher and now applies it at International School Ho Chi Minh City American Academy (ISHMC-AA). "Students reflect on why they might become disengaged and less interested in certain scientific topics by writing reflections in their journals."

Students at ISHMC-AA used to frequently memorize and recite facts for quizzes and tests. But Bendik has changed this with mindfulness techniques. "I help them realize that thinking precedes understanding. They have to think about what they are learning and how that will help their understanding," he says.

Student Lisa Nguyen says: "I can learn about what I'm best at, control myself and avoid stress."

It was a challenge at first. Students didn't understand what Bendik was trying to do. They found it difficult to distinguish the differences between thinking, understanding and memorizing, but the results have been invaluable.

"It was a whole new skill for them," he says. "Now, they find that learning is more effective and they are more confident in their learning. Students are self-motivated and their learning has become faster and more effective."



Mindfulness exercises have been popular with students in Vietnam

## Positive education and gratitude

French International School Hong Kong

DP Assistant Examiner and language teacher at French International School Hong Kong, Nathalie Grobe, practices mindfulness for 20 minutes every day, with the help of an app called Headspace. It's allowed her to be more present and calm, listen more, talk less, and be more open. "Now, I don't let things build up," she says. "I use my breaks wisely by doing breathing exercises."

Grobe is studying mindfulness with Mindful Schools and has brought her new-found skills into the classroom: "I recently gave my first mindfulness session to my year 11 class. It went really well. Soon, I will offer lunchtime sessions with the help of meditation apps."

She is also currently completing continuing professional development (CPD) with the English School Foundation on positive education, which is a shift away from focusing on academic achievement and instead increases motivation and promotes wellbeing.

"I've visited a few schools, looking at the teaching of 'character strengths' and 'character education', which is linked to emotional learning," says Grobe.

"Mindfulness through positive education teaches students compassion, gratitude and kindness. We are encouraged to write gratitude letters to ourselves, and this helps us focus on the moment and be thankful for what we have."

"Practicing mindfulness helps students improve their time management skills as they can focus better," adds Grobe. "It also helps students recognize and process any difficult emotions they may experience."

### Balloon breaths

- 1 Sit down with legs crossed.
- 2 Place hands on belly and imagine a balloon inside.
- 3 Inhale, which inflates the belly (balloon).
- 4 Exhale to deflate the balloon.

Suitable for PYP students

(It's a good idea to use a balloon as a visual aid)



# 7 steps to improve teacher wellbeing

You might be great at caring for others, but what about looking after yourself?

## 1 Mindfulness begins at home

Mindfulness can help teachers manage the demands of teaching. "When I practiced mindfulness regularly, I was calmer, felt less flustered by student behaviour and took disruptive behaviour less personally. As I was more effective at managing behaviour, my classroom was calmer, and students were more engaged and learned better," says Professor Patricia Jennings, psychologist and author of *Mindfulness for Teachers: Simple Skills for Peace and Productivity in the Classroom*.

Mindful activities include walking, eating and meditation. Try going for a walk and paying attention to your surroundings. The main goal for all these activities is to bring your mind to the present moment and not stress about the future.

## 2 Go off-script

In Jennings' book, she discusses scripts: "A database of stored emotional memories that influence the way we think, feel and behave. Scripts are shortcuts; they enable us to react to a situation quickly and without thought," she writes.

Jennings says that many scripts are formed during our childhood, as this is mostly when we learn what is deemed 'appropriate' behaviour.

But scripts can cause problems. When we project a past problem on to a present situation, this causes worry, anxiety and stress. For example, you may assume that a student's bad behaviour is intentional when it's more likely the result of something going



on outside of school.

Being mindfully aware can help you recognize and disengage from scripts when they arise, reducing negative emotion.

## 3 Take care of yourself

"Teachers need to take care of themselves by getting enough sleep, exercise and rest, and by doing activities they find fun," says Jennings.

Consider yoga. It boosts physical and mental wellbeing and can improve sleep, and concentration. You learn how to clear the mind through breathing and yoga poses (try the sun salutation, above), which are designed to reduce the effects of stress on the body.

And if you don't have time to work out or go for a walk, conscious breathing counts as an exercise: "Three mindful breaths can calm the nervous system and help teachers get back on track if they are starting to notice themselves getting stressed, anxious or frustrated," says Jennings.

See page 12 for this exercise.

### Exercise

#### How to change negative thinking

- 1 Find a quiet space →
- 2 Close your eyes and take a few deep breaths until you feel relaxed →
- 3 Reflect on a problem that is currently worrying you →
- 4 Imagine a positive outcome for about one minute →
- 5 Stop and notice how this feels in the body



Teacher workloads can be stressful – so try to take a break from the classroom

mindfulness and wellbeing

## 4 Take a break

Know when to stop. The greatest pressure comes from ourselves. Making time for family and hobbies contributes to happiness. And, if the workload is too much, don't be afraid to delegate, where possible.

### Exercise

#### Recognizing emotions

This can be done five minutes before a class

- 1 Find a quiet space where you won't be disturbed
- ↓
- 2 Close your eyes and breathe deeply
- ↓
- 3 Notice how you feel
- ↓
- 4 Name the emotion
- ↓
- 5 Ask yourself what prompted it and investigate the emotion by asking: "How am I feeling physically?" "How intense is this emotion?"
- ↓
- 6 To release the emotion, exhale deeply and imagine the emotion leaving your body.



## 6 Start a 'feel-good' jar

Every time you receive a compliment from friends, family, students and parents, write it down and put it in a jar. You can draw on this positive encouragement whenever you feel it's all getting a bit too much.

## 5 Monitor your emotions

Stress manifests itself in physical ways. How do you know when you're overwhelmed, stressed or anxious? Signals may include tense shoulders, jaws and an increase in body temperature. These telltale signs may be accompanied by irritability, lack of sleep and loss of appetite. "When teachers start noticing these things, I encourage them to calm themselves by taking three deep

***"When teachers start noticing signs of stress, I encourage them to calm themselves by taking three deep breaths"***

breaths, or to do a grounding exercise," says Jennings (see page 12 for this exercise).

Recognizing your triggers will help you choose how you react to a potentially stressful or challenging situation in the future.

#### Brain dump

- 1 Draw a circle and inside, write 'control'
- ↓
- 2 Draw another around it and write 'influence' in the second ring
- ↓
- 3 Draw a third circle around the other two and name this 'no control'
- ↓
- 4 Write the things you can control in the centre, things you can influence in the next ring and things over which you have no control in the outer ring. This will help you plan what you can influence and think of solutions and ways forward, while helping you realize what you cannot control.



### Exercise

## 7

#### Ask for help

Finally, if you feel you've tried everything, but still feel stressed, ask for help. Whether that's from a colleague, manager or a doctor. Stress doesn't have to be part of everyday life. High levels over long periods of time can be seriously bad for health.

