



MIND HOW YOU LEARN

The practice of mindfulness is catching on as schools introduce .b as a tool for coping with stress, finds **Sally Jones**

‘I was anorexic,’ admits Emma, a bright teenager from a top West Country boarding school with everything going for her, but who has found the pressures of modern day teenage life too hard to bear.

‘There was massive pressure at my school to be amazing at everything. You were expected to get lots of A*s, be good at sport, look skinny, be in the cool gang and have loads of friends on Facebook. At times, I felt exhilarated – when I’d lost a couple of pounds or got a good mark or played well in a hockey match. But sometimes, for no reason, I was utterly miserable and thought people were ganging up on me or laughing at me behind my back. Everyone thought I was fine. On the surface I suppose I had it all, but often I felt my head was going to burst and I couldn’t concentrate. I got terrified before exams because there was so much riding on them.’

Emma’s school introduced her to the practice of mindfulness and she believes that this helped her to cope better and to put the anorexia behind her. ‘I still get panicky days, but I’m no longer obsessed with food. I’ve got a technique that helps me stay calm and enjoy good times as well as deal with bad ones.’

Emma (not her real name) is one of thousands of youngsters struggling with the demands of an increasingly pressurised and competitive society. Stress and anxiety-related conditions such as eating disorders, depression and self-harming are rising steeply, particularly among teenagers and almost a third – an estimated 32.3 per cent – of young people aged between 15 and 25 have at least one psychiatric condition. Students at high-achieving independent schools face particular pressures, often triggered by their own exacting standards; anxieties about exam results, career uncertainties and an exaggerated sense of parental expectations.

Partly as a response to this devastating rise in psychiatric disturbance, growing numbers of schools are adopting the mental discipline of mindfulness. The technique of meditation and breathing exercises is designed to help students unclutter their brains, respond more skilfully to negative thoughts and emotions, and focus calmly on the present.

Tonbridge housemaster Richard Burnett, Chris Cullen a former Hampton School teacher

and Charterhouse master Chris O’Neill pioneered the practice in schools in Britain, co-founding the Mindfulness in Schools project in 2007 in collaboration with world-renowned academics including Mark Williams, former Professor of Clinical Psychology at Oxford University and Director of the Oxford Mindfulness Centre. Although originating in Buddhist meditative techniques, the practice is used as a tool to boost mental welfare.

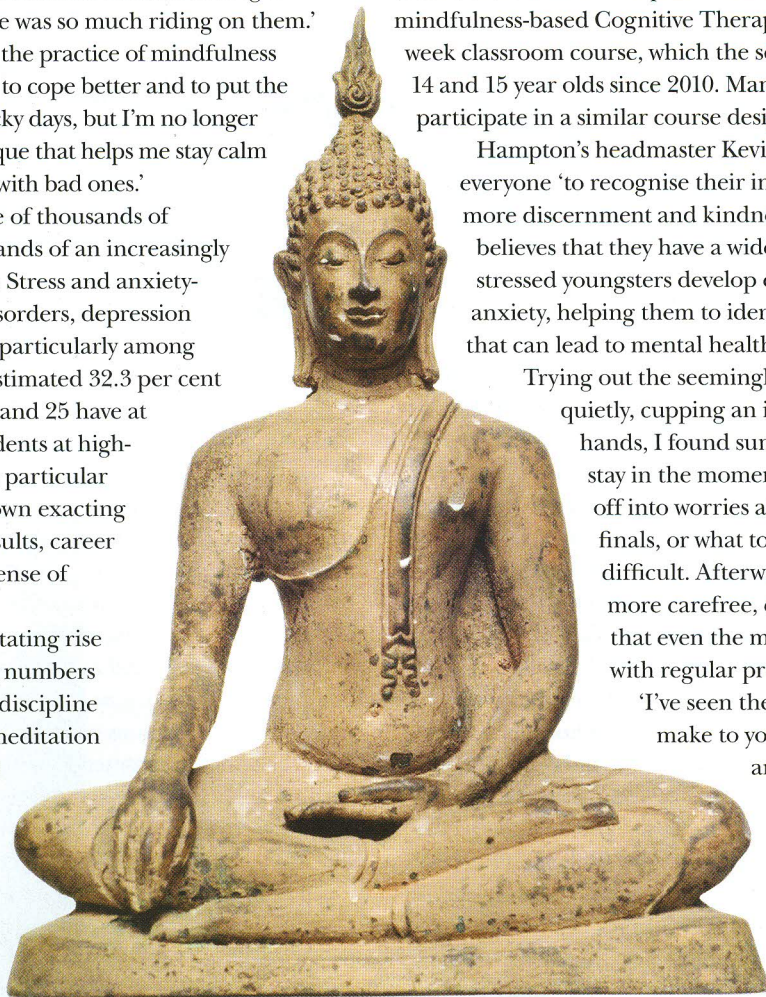
‘This is not about converting people to Buddhism,’ explained Professor Williams, ‘but showing there is scientific evidence that these practices are useful. So why deny them from being used?’

The Mindfulness in Schools’ founders aimed to design a course that would resonate with adolescents, via a programme known as .b (dot-B, shorthand for ‘stop and breathe’) based on the principles of mindfulness-based Cognitive Therapy; .b is the kernel of an eight-week classroom course, which the schools have taught to all of their 14 and 15 year olds since 2010. Many Hampton School staff opt to participate in a similar course designed for teachers.

Hampton’s headmaster Kevin Knibbs says the sessions help everyone ‘to recognise their inner critic and balance this with more discernment and kindness towards themselves.’ He believes that they have a widespread application in helping stressed youngsters develop concentration skills and combat anxiety, helping them to identify certain ‘corrosive’ mindsets that can lead to mental health problems.

Trying out the seemingly simple exercises, sitting quietly, cupping an imaginary ball between my hands, I found summoning the focus needed to stay in the moment and prevent my mind drifting off into worries about my daughter’s forthcoming finals, or what to cook for supper, surprisingly difficult. Afterwards, however, I felt lighter and more carefree, encouraged by the assurance that even the most driven multi-tasker improves with regular practice.

‘I’ve seen the difference mindfulness can make to young people in a whole range of areas,’ said Richard Burnett. The key word is ‘possibilities’: some young people find it helps with anxiety and stress, others with music and sport and still more with the rollercoaster of teenage existence. We created .b specifically to





Hampton School takes a lesson in mindfulness

engage adolescents in the classroom context. Schoolchildren are, in effect, conscripts, so when a group of 30 adolescents tumbles into your classroom on a wet Tuesday morning how do you engage them in something requiring them to sit still in silence for long periods?

'It has immediate impact but it's important not to see it as a panacea for all ills; it's a commonsense mental technique that can be widely applied. We're delighted that it's also being used in difficult state schools, pupil referral units and even in a young offenders' institution,' says Burnett.

The idea has caught on, attracting the attention of Schools Minister David Laws and influential educationalists such as Dr Anthony Seldon, master of Wellington College, and Lucy Elphinstone, headmistress of Francis Holland School, who insist that mindfulness is already proving a vital tool in boosting the mental health of pupils and staff.

Wellington College, where mindfulness had already been part of its Well-Being curriculum since 2006, has been highly influential in promoting the practice, recently staging a conference on Schools Mindfulness at Loughborough University. Its programme for students and staff involves two-minute periods of silent reflection each day, and pupils aged 13 to 15 also have a weekly 15-minute stillness

session. Ian Morris, Wellington's head of Well-Being, Philosophy and Religion, runs more detailed, intensive courses for Year 9s and upwards, including mindful breathing and even the popular option of mindfully eating a jelly baby.

'Some social health classes focus pessimistically on emphasising to pupils that the world is a bad place and full of things that will kill them,' he observed sardonically, 'and yes, we teach our students about drugs, alcohol and sexual health – but these are all minority problems and I am convinced that we should direct our greatest energy into learning how to live well as a human being – and in this school.'

Practitioner Dr Mariette Jansen has taught mindfulness at numerous organisations including the American School in Surrey and is convinced the practice has immediate, provable benefits.

'I worked with a boys' cricket team who were rowdy and chatty beforehand and all over the place mentally,' she recalled, 'so I asked them to try to throw a cricket ball through a V-shaped space between two tree branches and almost none of them managed it. Then we did some very simple one-nostril breathing and centring exercises, which they found fun. They tried again – and all but one did it perfectly.'

'I was coaching a boy at rugby,' said Burnett, 'and he'd get so



USEFUL CONTACTS

Mindfulness In Schools project:
mindfulnessinschools.org

Mindfulness practitioner Dr Mariette Jansen:
stressfreecoaching.co.uk

Among the schools offering mindfulness courses are:

Benenden School
 Charterhouse School
 Tonbridge School
 Christ's Hospital School,
 Horsham
 Fettes College
 Francis Holland School
 Hampton School
 King Edward VI High School
 for Girls, Birmingham
 Marymount International
 School
 Oundle School runs classes
 in Alexander Technique,
 incorporating some
 Mindfulness practices.
 South Hampstead
 High School
 The American School
 in England
 Wellington College
 Wycombe Abbey School

The following have recently introduced it or are preparing to include it in their curriculum:

Bedales
 Brighton and Hove
 High School
 Felsted Prep
 Notting Hill and Ealing
 High School
 St Mary's, Calne



A Francis Holland pupil practises a mindfulness technique

angry you'd see the red mist descend and I'd have to send him off. Mindfulness sessions helped him to control his rage and he was never sent off again. English rugby player Jonny Wilkinson has described mindfulness as his secret weapon. It's what he's doing when he plants his feet on the floor and shifts his attention to his breathing before taking a place-kick – usually with spectacular results.'

Mindfulness advocates entirely refute charges that it is a 'hippy-dippy' New Age pursuit, convinced that apart from promoting calmness, it boosts youngsters' academic and sporting performance and helps budding musicians and actors to excel on stage. Many independent schools regard it as a crucial tool for building resilience in a demanding world.

Former GB and England hockey international Sarah Blanks, who teaches at the highly academic King Edward's High School (KEHS) for Girls, Birmingham, researched the practice and found compelling parallels with her sporting career.

'Even when I was a top British hockey player, pitting myself against other outstanding sportswomen, I didn't always feel worthy or good about myself,' she admitted, 'but in high-level sport, you're taught to use positive psychology, breath control and mental focus to stay in the moment, concentrate on the next three seconds and banish negative voices in your head so you perform to your full potential. When I discovered mindfulness, I totally got it as it has many of the same elements.

'At KEHS our girls are often high-achieving in several areas; sport, music and art, as well as academically. Many know their parents have made sacrifices to send them here and put themselves under huge pressure. Teenagers today are never far from Facebook and Twitter, which brings extra stress and for some girls who've never failed at anything in their lives, fear of failure can be crippling.

'We acknowledge that stress is inevitable and can't be ignored, so discuss with the girls how to manage it. Exercise is wonderful, of course, and we've always offered yoga but we've recently included mindfulness in our Personal Decision-Making curriculum. We have a quiet room always available where girls and staff can relax and meditate, focussing on being 'in the moment', being present and not worrying about past or future events and it's already paying dividends.'

'Girls are particularly prone to anxiety and stress, exacerbated by the internet,' agrees Lucy Elphinstone of Francis Holland School. 'Concentration is hard nowadays. Most pupils no longer read deeply but skim-read as they're multi-tasking and often distracted. When girls get together they can really wind each other up too; the sisterhood can be really brutish, bitchy and unkind, hunting in packs and seeking the approval of their peers. Likes on Facebook can loom really large and most girls need the validation of their friends.'

We're an Anglican foundation and prayer and stillness are part of what we do, but when we introduced mindfulness last September we saw almost instant results. The core .b practice known as FOFBOC (Feet on Floor, Bum on Chair) can be taught in 30 minutes and is great for calming and centering you. Many teachers start lessons with it to help the girls feel calm and in control of their environment.'

Burnett insists that mindfulness is not just a quick-fix. 'There's a lot of excitement about it at the moment but it's important to practise it and that takes many years. If it's merely regarded as something that can be taught by anyone to anyone, it will pass as a fad, but if teachers really learn it properly themselves and are prepared to spend 20 to 30 minutes of their madly busy day simply sitting quietly and consciously training the 'muscle' of their attention and then passing that skill on to others, it will have tremendous impact on school communities.' ■