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School Stress: 3 Mindful Practices for Calm, Focused and Happy Teens

CONCERNED PARENTS / BY [JULIE](#) November 11th, 2016 / 0

This is the 12th post in our weekly fall School Stress series, a back-to-school toolkit for parents on how to best navigate their teen's stress and anxiety — explored in our documentary *BREAKING POINTS* [<http://www.drugfree.org/breakingpoints/>].

We're delighted to have Cheryl Vigder Brause as our guest blogger this week. Cheryl is a writer, speaker and the co-founder and executive director of *2bpresent* [<http://www.2bpresent.com/>]. Cheryl has extensive experience teaching mindfulness to adults, teens, and children in businesses, organizations and schools.



Saying good night to my daughter has changed over the years. Gone are the days when I would snuggle with her in bed reading bedtime stories, then turn off the lights and watch her peacefully drift off to sleep.

Now, I go to sleep long before my 14 year old. With hours of homework each night, she is often up late trying to get it all done. When I go to say good night, I often notice her shoulders are raised and tense. I remember asking her a few weeks ago if she was okay, and she tearfully explained that she didn't know how she could possibly get all of her schoolwork done. I could see and feel her stress. Her body tense with anxiety, her mind racing, my heart breaking. Then, in her exhaustion and stress, she said that she would never get into a good college so why even try. She was just fourteen, at the beginning of her freshman year, and already feeling overwhelmed.

The Epidemic of Teenage Stress

Stress among teens [<http://www.drugfree.org/school-stress-healthy-stress-vs-red-flag-stress/>] is reaching epidemic proportions. This excessive, prolonged stress affects their bodies and their brains. Researchers at the [Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University](http://developingchild.harvard.edu/) [<http://developingchild.harvard.edu/>] found that when toxic stress is triggered continually over a period of time it can have a cumulative toll on an individual's physical and mental health — for a lifetime.

As the mother of two teenagers and one pre-teen, and as a mindfulness teacher working with teens, I see every day the tremendous stress our teenagers experience in their young lives. I often ask the teens I work with to make a list of what stresses them out. [Homework, school and college admissions](http://www.drugfree.org/breakingpoints/) [<http://www.drugfree.org/breakingpoints/>] are always at the top of the list. Now, they have added a new stressor to their list — their cellphones— as they are admitting that their compulsion to check their devices, and the added pressure that comes with that constant connectivity, is distracting and anxiety provoking.

This overload of schoolwork, the pressure to succeed in an extremely competitive culture and their constant connectivity leaves our teenagers with no time or ability to disconnect from their peers, to relax and unwind or to connect with their families.

As a result, we are seeing record levels of [anxiety](http://www.drugfree.org/school-stress-7-tips-help-college-student-manage-anxiety/) [<http://www.drugfree.org/school-stress-7-tips-help-college-student-manage-anxiety/>], depression, insomnia, attention disorders and even suicide among our teens. Studies also show that teens are turning to unhealthy coping mechanisms like [drugs and alcohol](http://www.drugfree.org/school-stress-stimulant-abuse-kids-know-parents-dont/) [<http://www.drugfree.org/school-stress-stimulant-abuse-kids-know-parents-dont/>], to tune out or avoid the discomfort of their anxiety. There is a critical need for parents and children to learn skills that will not only [help them cope with this stress](http://www.drugfree.org/school-stress-10-ways-parents-can-help-kids-manage-stress/) [<http://www.drugfree.org/school-stress-10-ways-parents-can-help-kids-manage-stress/>], but will also help them thrive.



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Mindfulness: A Brain Changer

Mindfulness is mentioned everywhere these days and for good reason. Scientists are now discovering that we can actually change the structure and function of our brains through mental training. Much like bicep curls strengthen your arm muscles, mindfulness practices strengthen your brain in ways that can improve cognitive function, emotional regulation and overall well-being. Large corporations, like Google and Aetna, are catching on and now offer mindfulness as part of their workplace health and wellness programs.

Professional athletes, like LeBron James, use mindfulness to strengthen their mental game. And schools around the country are integrating mindfulness into classrooms to help children develop emotional regulation, focused attention and resilience.

Since the introduction of [Mindfulness Based Stressed Reduction programs at the University of Massachusetts Hospital](http://www.umassmed.edu/cfm/research/mbsr-research/) over 35 years ago, scientists have been studying the physical and psychological benefits of mindfulness practices and have found that mindfulness can:

- Lower stress
- Increase one's ability to manage challenging emotions
- Improve sleep patterns [<http://www.drugfree.org/school-stress-teen-needs-good-nights-sleep/>]
- Increase focus and concentration
- Cultivate empathy and compassion
- Improve academic performance
- Increase positivity and optimism
- Decrease anxiety and depression

What is Mindfulness?

Mindfulness is the practice of intentionally paying attention to what you are experiencing in the present moment, without judging that experience. Mindfulness helps us become aware of our emotions, physical sensations and thoughts, with a sense of interest and curiosity.

For most people, much of our time and mental energy is spent thinking about the past or worrying about the future. For example, I can have an argument with my daughter in the morning, and then carry that along with me throughout my day, continuously replaying those events in my mind and reliving those unpleasant feelings all day long. These thoughts take me away from my present moment experience, distract me from what I am doing and are the source of stress and anxiety.

When we bring our attention to what is actually happening in this moment, we no longer fall prey to the grip of our own stressful thoughts. We can then be present to experience all of the joys in our day as they happen, which we are often too busy and too distracted to notice. And we can experience life's challenges without becoming overwhelmed by them. This is a radical shift in how we pay attention and an incredibly beneficial way to lower stress, foster positivity and retake control of our own attention.

Three Mindful Practices for Calm, Focus, and Happiness

So, how do we practice mindfulness? Here are three mindfulness practices you can do each day that will help you feel calmer, more focused and happier. Parents should try these for themselves to lower parental stress and share them with your children. Remember being mindful takes practice: Just like learning to play an instrument or hit a baseball, there is a learning curve here. Keep practicing mindfulness each day and you'll see the benefits unfold.

One Minute of Mindfulness

At the start of each day, and periodically throughout the day, try this:

1. Check in with your body. Notice how your body feels right now and see if there are any places in your body where you are carrying tightness or tension. Check out your shoulders, neck, jaw, face and hands and notice what you feel there. Is there any tightness, tingling or tension?
2. Check in with your breath. Take a slow, deep inhale and try to breathe into those areas where you feel tightness or tension. As you exhale, allow your body to

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Balloon Breathing

1. Breathing in through your nose, slowly inhale and imagine your lungs are like a balloon filling fully with air.
2. Once your lungs are completely full, pause for a moment, and then slowly let the air out of your lungs, as if you imagine you are fully and completely deflating your balloon.
3. Repeat this three more times, then notice how you feel.

Feet on the Floor

1. First thing in the morning and periodically throughout your day, stop and simply notice the feeling of your feet firmly planted on the ground.
2. Stop and take three breaths, focusing your full attention on how that breath feels as it moves in and out of your body.
3. Draw your attention once again to your feet and notice how they feel firmly planted on the ground.
4. Recognize that you are here and you're doing okay.
5. Now you're centered and focused, and ready to continue on your way.

How I Use Mindfulness with My Kids

I often tell my children that I cannot take away the challenges they will face in their life, but I can teach them tools to change how they respond to those challenges. Mindfulness has helped me face difficult situations and challenging people, and it has helped me slow down so that I can be present to enjoy those precious moments that I don't want to be too busy to miss.

My daughter still stays up late doing homework, but now when I go into her room at night, I often see her stopping to take long, deep breaths. She knows how to recognize her feelings of stress, and how to use mindfulness to relax her mind and her body. She is learning tools to sit with discomfort, to confront life's challenges and to rely on her inner strength to thrive in a demanding world. We even enjoy breathing together, which is a moment I stop to savor.

KEY TAKEAWAYS:

- Mindfulness has been found to help lower stress, manage emotions, improve sleep, increase focus and concentration, cultivate empathy, improve academic performance, increase positivity and decrease anxiety and depression.
- Show your teen some exercises that help bring attention to what is actually happening in the moment.
- If you are feeling overwhelmed or have a question about your child's drug or alcohol use, call our toll-free Helpline [<http://www.drugfree.org/get-help/helpline/>] where you can speak with a trained and caring, master's-level support specialist at 1-855-DRUGFREE [<http://www.drugfree.org/get-help/helpline/>] (1-855-378-4373).
- If your teen is experiencing anxiety, depression, insomnia, attention disorders or suicide, seek out professional help.

We are grateful to Cheryl Vigder Brause for sharing her insights and tips with us. To learn more, visit [2bpresent](http://www.2bpresent.com) [<http://www.2bpresent.com>].

Bring BREAKING POINTS to Your Community



Host a screening of BREAKING POINTS

[<http://www.drugfree.org/breakingpoints/#purchase>], a documentary film that takes on the issue of study drugs and how they intersect with school stress.

The package includes a Screening Guide with discussion questions and other bonus materials.

PURCHASE A SCREENING PACKAGE TODAY [<http://www.drugfree.org/breakingpoints/#purchase>]

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