One of the students was so afraid he vomited in a school trash can. Hearing that, I felt the magnitude of the situation. This is not the world I grew up in, I thought. Back then, students prepared for fires, not school shooters.

A week before the trash can incident, teens at Wilson High School took part in a complete lock down drill. They learned where to hide in classrooms, protocols for locking up, and strategies for blocking entrance-ways with desks and bookshelves. After the drill, in the Mindful Studies classroom where I teach, students had an opportunity to talk about their experience. It was sobering to hear that, for many, this is their new normal.

Less than a week later — too soon for another drill — the call for lockdown blew again. It happened during first period and came as a shock to all. There were accounts of students coming into school late, being locked out of their classrooms and hiding under stairwells in fear. Some students who were taking a bathroom break hid in the stalls with trash cans as shields. Many cried. One teacher, after organizing a class huddle, stood by the barricaded door with a golf club.

That day, fortunately, the worst did not come to pass. There was no shooter; a substitute teacher accidentally set off the lock down alarm. The day ended peacefully, but it left me with an unsettling thought: in our culture, we’ve become so accustomed to an environment of fear and violence, it rarely occurs to us to consider and examine the cause. We turn our attention solely to survival.

I’m heartened that Wilson High School is taking a broader approach. In addition to the procedures Wilson conducts to ensure student safety (something every parent can feel good about), the school has partnered with our nonprofit, Peace in Schools, to launch a course designed to support the emotional and mental health of teens. The purpose is not only to prevent violence, but to give students the tools they need to deal with all manner of social, academic and personal stress. This course offers teens the opportunity to experience who they authentically are as they learn to consciously respond to life’s pressures, rather than merely react.

As of September, Wilson became the first public high school in the country to establish mindfulness as a for-credit elective discipline. Within weeks, Rosemary Anderson High School in Gresham became the second. Now, other area high schools are contacting Peace in Schools to explore Mindful Studies courses of their own.

Mindful Studies empowers teens through an array of complementary practices, including meditation, conscious and compassionate communication and mindful movement. The course enables young people to see themselves and each other with new eyes. With guidance and practice, teens learn to become more aware, without judgment, of their thoughts and feelings. They come to recognize self-critical thinking and move beyond it. By finding compassion for themselves through mindful practices, teens learn, in turn, to develop compassion for others. They build stronger, more connected relationships with peers and families.

While the practice of mindfulness can’t eliminate all of life’s pressures, it does enable young people to respond to those pressures in a way that supports their whole being. Learning to direct attention to the present moment makes it possible for teens to live life more fully and joyfully. That’s what Peace in Schools is about.

As a teacher of this practice, I’ve seen that feelings of isolation and alienation are common among teens. It is no coincidence that incidents of bullying, self-harm and violence are on the rise in many schools. Fostering self-acceptance and encouraging healthy relationships are essential aspects of our program. They are designed to assist teens in recognizing that they are not alone. Ultimately, that leads to safer schools and a more peaceful world.

Those interested in supporting mindfulness programs in schools, shelters and social service agencies can learn more at www.peaceinschools.org.

Caverly Morgan is the Founder and Lead Teacher at Peace in Schools, a Portland-based nonprofit organization.

Mindfulness Studies at School

November 28 to January 4
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Students participate in a relaxation exercise in Wilson High School’s new Mindful Studies classroom. Photo courtesy of the author.