



THE KINDNESS INSTITUTE

MINDFULNESS & STRESS REDUCTION INTENSIVE PROGRAMME APRIL–MAY 2017, AUCKLAND GIRLS GRAMMAR SCHOOL, YEAR 11 GLOBAL THINKING CLASS

PROGRAMME EVALUATION

Executive Summary

The Kindness Institute delivered a mindfulness and yoga programme at Auckland Girls Grammar School during April to May 2017. The primary participants in the programme were the students in the Year 11 Global Thinking Class and the secondary participants were the class teachers as explained below. The evaluation also revealed that a further group, the family and friends of students, also benefited from the programme through the students teaching what they had learnt.

The mindfulness and yoga project was delivered over eight weeks to students in four classes with a total of 65 students participating. The content of the program is based on world leading models in mindfulness and stress reduction education and covers a range of topics including mindful communication, forgiveness, being kind and compassionate, mental health and self-love.

100% of the students reported that they found the program beneficial and that it had helped them feel more calm and relaxed. Very high percentages (ranging from 90-98%) of the students also reported that the other seven program outcomes had been achieved. The key themes arising from students' responses in the open feedback section of the post-program questionnaire were:

1. Increases in calmness and ability to manage stress / anger
2. Increased ability to focus
3. Increased kindness to others
4. Increased kindness to self / self love
5. Increased sense of connection and improved relationships
6. Improved ability to communicate / mindful communication
7. Increased ability to forgive

For example, one student stated:

“This course of mindfulness has really helped me when I become stressed out. The breathing techniques help me to stay calm when I get worked up or really stressed. I can use the things taught for my life, like handling tough situations with my parents and calming myself through school work and exams. You should definitely come back as it has benefited me and for you to do that for others would be awesome.”

All of the class teachers also reported that the students had benefited and that they would like more students to do the programme. One teacher described the range of positive impacts the program had had on the participants:

“They are more settled and focused, have greater respect for each other. They should be more teachable in their next class, they say they are more relaxed and less anxious.”

What is Mindfulness?

Mindfulness is the practice of giving our full, open-hearted attention to what is immediately occurring, physically and mentally; within and around us.

This involves:

- intentional focus on immediate experience
- being curious, open and accepting of that experience

When we are mindful we enhance our ability to appreciate life’s beauty, and to respond to life’s challenges in considered rather than reactive ways.

Over time, and with repeated practice, mindfulness (as a state experienced from time to time) develops into a more sustainable way of being (a trait) that could be described as the balance of body and mind in accordance with situation and circumstance.

The calmness and clarity that result from practicing mindfulness provide an important foundation for learning while fostering social and emotional wellbeing.

Benefits of Mindfulness Practice

Among adults, mindfulness is effective for reducing symptoms of stress, anxiety and depression (Goyal, et al. 2014; Hoffman, et al. 2010). Some studies have also shown positive brain changes in areas responsible for attention, sensory processing, learning and memory, and empathy and compassion following 8 weeks of mindfulness training (Hölzel, et al. 2011). In long term practitioners, brain activity associated with increased feelings of spaciousness and a sense of coherence has been observed, even when the practitioner is not formally meditating (Lutz, et al. 2004).

Why teach mindfulness to children and young people?

Childhood mental health difficulties tend to predict adult mental illness (Britton et al., 2014). Experiencing mental illness while young has also shown to significantly increase the risk of substance abuse, suicide attempt, educational underachievement, unemployment, and early parenthood (Fergusson & Woodward, 2002). Finally, suicide, an indicator of a population’s mental health, continues to be a significant cause of death amongst young people in New Zealand (MSD, 2008). Thus, there is a clear impetus to develop strategies that foster wellbeing among children and young people (Bernay, Graham, Devcich, Rix & Rubie Davies, 2016).

As well as catering to academic needs, schools are increasingly being called on to address student well-being. As part of a broader shift towards early prevention of mental illness, recent decades have seen the rise of school-based programs that teach children and young people how to regulate emotion, and manage conflict and stress. A number of these programs are based on teaching children and young people to become more aware of their thoughts, emotions and actions through mindfulness-based techniques.

International research shows that teaching mindfulness to children and young people has a range of benefits that are best summarized as building resilience and boosting of cognitive performance (Zenner, Herrleben-Kurz and Walach 2014). Local research investigating the benefits of the Mental Health Foundation's Pause, Breathe, Smile: Mindfulness in Schools program (PBS) has shown increases in calmness, self-regulation, self-awareness, the forming of positive relationships between peers, an increased ability to resolve conflict and statistically significant increases in wellbeing (Rix and Bernay 2014; Bernay, Graham, Devcich, Rix and Rubie-Davies 2016).

From a mental health promotion perspective, it is considered best practice to instill healthy behaviours in the early and younger years of life that will provide the best opportunity to develop the skills necessary to navigate life's challenges and grow as healthy, flourishing adults.

Among teenagers, teaching mindfulness has been shown to improve:

1. mental health
2. wellbeing
3. mood
4. self-esteem
5. self-regulation
6. positive behavior and learning (Weare 2013)

This report outlines the structure of the programme, the evaluation methodology and the outcomes of the evaluation.

Structure of the program

The program has been developed with long term outcomes in mind and is based on world leading models in mindfulness and stress reduction education. The model is inspired by Jon Kabat Zinn's mindfulness stress reduction program, The Work of Byron Katie and Holistic Life Foundations (HLF) successful model in delivering outcomes for youth living in urban poverty and suffering PTSD. HLF is researched by John Hopkins Medical School, Penn State and is supported by Harvard Medical School. The Kindness Institute Director has trained under their leadership and the program facilitators are specialist in this field.

The program was delivered over eight weeks and included the following sessions:

Week 1 - Introduction to basic principles & connection: Creating a safe space based on community, engagement and support. Introduction to basic principles of mindfulness, stress, breath, mind and movement. Learning about being present & how to bring this into our lives.

Week 2 - The breath: Exploring how our breath can manage our emotions and support us in challenging situations. Learning how to use our breath to it's full extent. Learning how our actions impact our wellbeing.

Week 3 - Movement & knowing my own strength: Applying our new breathing tools to movement. Along with the development of physical strength, we explore building inner strength and resilience. Exploring the idea that strength is not only about power, but also about flexibility and balance.

Week 5 - A calmer mind: Developing tools to help calm distracting thoughts. Exploring the brain and its ability to focus. Learning to focus in the midst of chaos.

Week 6 – Mindful Communication: Developing tools to communicate with calm, focus and empathy. Understanding how to connect with others and diffuse challenging situations. Learning how to mindfully listen and respond, rather than react.

What makes me happy: Recognising our feelings and emotions. Exploring our own happiness. Identifying what makes us feel happy and supported.

Forgiveness: Learning how to forgive ourselves and others through korero, reflection and mindfulness meditation.

Our mental health is our wealth: Defining and understanding stress & self-love. Learning to self-regulate our emotions through mindfulness and yoga. Exploring actions we can take to reduce our own stress.

Being Kind & Compassionate: Learning to develop kindness & compassion for ourselves & others. Developing gratitude for ourselves & others. Sharing reflection and thoughts together.

The last class included emotional check in, course review, mindful breathing and meditation, students teaching the group, mindful jars and gratitude circle.

As each class included student lead reflection, this allowed us to develop & grow the program in partnership with the students, They did not receive all of these classes in this order, as classes were based on their needs. Some of the modules below were taught as combined classes although forgiveness always on its own.

Educational Concepts

Through yoga, mindfulness, korero and a 'training the trainer' model, the program content included developing present moment awareness, mental and physical strength and flexibility, awareness of the breath, the senses, focus, compassion, kindness, gratitude, conflict resolution and stress management tools.

A main focus of our kaupapa is training the trainer; our youth are empowered to teach mindfulness, yoga & stress management to each other in each class and outside of class, to their community. This model has been hugely successful & has seen our work having a much wider impact, with rangatahi consistently teaching whanau & friends these transformative tools.

Certain concepts remain the same and are reinforced by our facilitators and through the peer to peer teaching in each class i.e mindful breathing and self love.

Evaluation methodology

The evaluation process consisted of evaluation and reflection during the course and post program questionnaires made up of short yes/no questions and a section for open feedback. This approach allowed for the program to be assessed based on both the intended outcomes from the program as well as identifying any other outcomes individual students had experienced. Teachers also completed a post program questionnaire. Not all students completed the pre-program questionnaire. This data has not been analysed as it could not be determined whether it was a representative sample.

Feedback received through the post-program questionnaires was recorded and collated and a simple thematic analysis of the open feedback was conducted to ascertain the common themes that emerged from the interview data.

Post Program Surveys

All 68 students who participated in the program completed a post-program survey. Students were asked to respond to the statements in the left column of the table below. The percentage of positive responses is set out in the right hand column.

I would like to do this program again	95%
I have found this project beneficial	100%
This program has helped me feel less stressed	98%
This program has helped me understand how to manage challenges	93%
This program has helped me feel more calm/relaxed	100%
This program has helped me feel more focused	90%
This program has helped me understand how to communicate mindfully	93%
This program has helped me develop kindness	96%
This program has helped me feel more positive	95%

Teachers were asked to respond to the following statements:

- The students have benefited
- I've seen positive changes in the students
- I would like more students to do this

All three teachers who provided feedback responded affirmatively to each statement.

Key themes from open responses

The specific feedback from the students and teachers clustered around a number of inter-related themes that reflected previous research:

1. Increases in calmness and ability to manage stress / anger
2. Increased ability to focus
3. Increased kindness to others
4. Increased kindness to self / self love
5. Increased sense of connection and improved relationships
6. Improved ability to communicate / mindful communication
7. Increased ability to forgive

Theme one: Increases in calmness and ability to manage stress / anger

Students reported that the program assisted them to deal with the stresses of school and at home and helped them to stay calm when in difficult situations. For example, students reported:

- “The programme has helped me because I had been very stressed lately from school work and the programme taught me to breathe in a certain way. Now I use the breathing for when I’m feeling really stressed and feel like giving up because it helps me stay calm and try not to worry about everything but spend more time planning and getting things done.”
- “This course of mindfulness has really helped me when I become stressed out. The breathing techniques help me to stay calm when I get worked up or really stressed. I can use the things

taught for my life, like handling tough situations with my parents and calming myself through school work and exams. You should definitely come back as it has benefited me and for you to do that for others would be awesome.”

- “This programme is very helpful to us as we are at the age of being stressed with school a lot.”
- “This programme has helped me to control my anger and my problems with worrying about everything. When I get angry, which is really easily I took the breathing techniques I learnt and inhaled and exhaled. I will be forever grateful for what I have learnt.”

Teachers also reported these benefits. For example, a teacher reported:

- “It has been excellent for the students to exercise some stillness and meditate in a very busy and sometimes chaotic environment.”

Theme two: Increased ability to focus

Students reported that the program assisted them to focus and avoid distractions. For example, students reported:

- “It has really helped me to sleep better and to handle my daily stress and anxiety. I think it has helped me reduce my depression and be able to focus more.”
- “This helped me focus more on my breathing and that the breath can do more things than just breathing.”
- “I believe the this programme is also beneficial to those who need something in their lives to be more active as we live in a world where technology distracts our minds from being present.”

Teachers also reported these benefits. For example, a teacher observed:

- “They are more settled and focused, have greater respect for each other. Should be more teachable in their next class, they say they are more relaxed and less anxious.”

Theme three: Increased kindness to others

Students reported that they had learned to be kinder to others. For example, students reported:

- “I think I have become a better person from this programme. I’ve learnt to love and be kind not only to others but to myself.”
- “This course has taught me many life lessons such as love and kindness, forgiveness and the true nature of our breathing.”

Theme four - Increased kindness to self / self-love

Students reported that they had also learnt to be kinder to themselves and to love and appreciate themselves more. For example:

- “This programme has helped me a lot with my emotions and learning how to get rid of unnecessary feelings that may discriminate me. I’ve gained the strength to walk away from negativity. I appreciate those around me more and those who appreciate me for me.”
- “I have learnt to love myself and put myself before others, before I used to always put myself last and doubt myself.”
- “From this course I have learnt to be more kind to myself and that has really helped me as usually when I have a lot of assignments due I doubt myself and tell myself I can’t do it.”
- “I will try to be kinder to myself and not be so hard on myself. To be aware that I can’t perfect everything. If i am kinder to myself i will likely be kinder to others.”

Theme four: Increased sense of connection and improved relationships

Students reported that the program had helped them to open up with others including their parents and to improve their relationships. For example:

- “This programme has helped me to calm myself in bad situations I've also learnt new breathing techniques and have taught a couple of people. I've also been able to open up and be honest with my parents in a difficult conversation.”
- “I have learnt to communicate mindfully and listen (actually listen) to what the other person is saying. Normally I'm always the one to talk. It was weird at first but now I can use it more often effectively. I used it with my mum and it was awkward at first but it became good and helped me to create a deeper bond with her.”

Teachers also reported that participating in the program had improved their relationships with their students:

- “Great for trust and relationships and hopefully something that they can carry on with.”
- “I have enjoyed sharing this with them and it has encouraged me to continue to practice meditation and yoga.”
- “Wonderful for me - has helped me manage teacher stress and building trust and relationships with students.”

Theme six: Improved ability to communicate / mindful communication

Students reported that they had learnt how to communicate more mindfully with others. For example:

- “In this programme I have enjoyed the meditations we have done, these meditations have helped me relax more and to believe in myself. This has helped me feel calm and communicate more mindfully to others and myself.”
- “This class has taught me a lot especially about communication skills as I find it hard to express my feelings.”
- “This programme has helped me a lot, i have learnt to control my breathing which is important as the breathe is our superpower. I've also learnt to communicate with others better and how to deal with difficult conversations.”

Teachers also reported the same benefit:

- “I have remembered how important the breath is for good health and power. Also for patience, I have improved my communication.”

Theme seven: Increased ability to forgive

Students reported that they had both learnt about the importance of forgiveness and how to forgive. For example:

- “This course has helped me through a lot of things and has given me new ways of how i can handle things more easily and effectively like the forgiveness meditation where we were able to learn that if we forgive we would be happier.”
- “This programme helped me to realise that I hadn't forgiven myself before and helped me let go of things that have been holding me back for a while now.”

- “I've learned to forgive even though it is hard, it's the right thing to do. I've also learnt to be grateful and not take things for granted. Most of all I learnt how to breathe properly and that the breath is our stress response.”
- “The forgiveness part really helped as i have felt that for a long time there is an anger built up inside me and this course helped me to get rid of it. This course was the only time during my week that I felt truly relaxed and not worried about anything.”

Other observations

A number of students reported that their view of yoga and mindfulness had changed as a result of the course. For example:

- “In the beginning I didn't think too much of it, but as the weeks went on I noticed that i was taking things in from each class and applying it to my life.”
- “I was really skeptical at first since my Dad is into this yoga, mindfulness thing but I was glad that I could open myself up and realize that I could really learn from it if I applied myself.”

Many students also reported that they had taught others what they had learnt thereby increasing the number of people who received the benefit of the program:

- “I've taught the breath to my friends who sometimes experience anxiety attacks and it has helped them improve how to handle situations under pressure.”
- “I've taught my parents the breathing. It's really helped because they're stressed all the time.”

Summary of impact

The program demonstrated a number of benefits for high school students practicing mindfulness and yoga. In the pre program questionnaire all of the students identified that they needed help dealing with stress and that they were stressed between some of the time and all the time. At the conclusion of the programme 98% of the students stated that the program had helped them feel less stressed and 100% stated that it had helped them feel more calm or relaxed.

The teachers' observations also suggested that mindfulness and yoga contributed to increased experiences of calmness, respect, connection and focus for participants as well as improving communication skills and relationships. These initial findings are consistent with previous research conducted by Rix and Bernay (2014) showing the benefits of teaching mindfulness to younger people in New Zealand.

Although the students were the central focus of the programme, we also discovered that the programme also benefited a wider range of people including class teachers as well as the friends and family of the students.

Conclusion

With ongoing participation in mindfulness and yoga, we speculate that a deepening of the themes highlighted in this report would be observed. We also speculate that an increase in calmness, kindness, respect and connection has potential to reduce conflict situations, as well as the stress and anxiety facing young people as they progress through their education teenage years. We also speculate that ongoing participation in this program will lead to increased positive relationships, ability to forgive, calmness and focus in and outside of the classroom.

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