

A Guided Meditation for School Leaders (AUDIO)

Meditation's not all “woo-woo.” It can be a powerful tool for cultivating calm and clearheadedness.


Meena Srinivasan

Now more than ever, school and district leaders are being called to navigate incredible complexity and uncertainty in their day-to-day work. It's likely that most leaders



BONUS AUDIO!

[Listen now to this guided meditation for educators, recorded by the author.](#)



are feeling stressed and overwhelmed with all that they are holding right now—and that’s perfectly normal.

When such feelings arise, our amygdala—the part of our brain that is primarily associated with regulating our emotional processes—is activated to protect us from immediate threat. When this happens, our “fight-flight-or-freeze” response takes over, giving us less access to the empathetic, creative, and analytical parts of our brain—those that are typically the most essential to our role as leaders.

Practicing meditation can be a tremendous resource in calming our amygdala, reducing anxiety, and increasing our ability to listen to and understand the perspectives of others. Meditation can be vital in strengthening our capacity as leaders to take a step back, see the big picture, and make better decisions. It can also increase our sense of self-compassion, which leads to greater resilience and ability to care for ourselves and others.

Clarifying Definitions

Meditation is a term that is used frequently but often without context or a clear definition. As a meditation

teacher, I define meditation as “any mind-body practice that intentionally cultivates awareness and positive qualities of being, including openness, curiosity, empathy, and kindness.”

Meditation is simply a means to develop these capacities. When practiced in secular settings, meditation does not seek to promote or impede one’s religious beliefs but rather cultivate our individual and collective well-being. There are many types of meditation—including those that focus on expanding your awareness, cultivating peace, opening your heart, and calming your mind. Some of the most popular types of meditation include visualization, loving-kindness, and breath awareness.

Mindfulness is a popular term that is often used interchangeably with meditation. But while their applications are intertwined, there is a clear distinction between the two. Meditation is a formal practice, something you schedule and engage in exclusively—without (the illusion of) multitasking. By contrast, mindfulness is the quality of awareness that we can bring to each moment by being fully present. We can exercise mindfulness *anytime*,

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Just 12 minutes of meditation five or more days a week can result in measurable improvements in our attention and working memory.

anywhere, and with anyone. I define mindfulness as “paying attention to our inner and outer life as it unfolds while being grounded in our body so that our mind can settle, and we can cultivate a curious, open-hearted presence and awareness of our interconnection with all life.” Our meditation practice can help us strengthen our mindfulness muscle, so we have greater capacity to be mindful throughout the day.

At the organization I lead, Transformative Educational Leadership, school and district leaders engage in meditation and other embodiment practices to cultivate the inner change needed to lead outer change in their communities. For example, school leaders have described how meditation practices helped them become aware of their own habits and attitudes, especially around race, and bring empathy and a clear focus on equity into their decision-making.

Every day, education leaders face a myriad of systemic challenges that [cannot be solved by applying the same ways of thinking and reacting](#). Meditation practices can help leaders to not only find more calm but also develop new ways of seeing and responding to these challenges.

Starting a Meditation Practice

While meditation has the potential to promote well-being and strengthen your leadership, starting anything new can feel daunting. Here are three tips to help ease you in.

1

Meditate first thing in the morning! Instead of starting your day checking email or reading the news, which can immediately [activate your stress](#), start your day with meditation to cultivate centeredness and calm. Find a meditation

practice that works for you: If you need a place to begin, listen to the [eight-minute guided breath-awareness meditation](#) that accompanies this article. I recorded it specifically for educators to take the time to release stress and nourish their own well-being before they attend to others (as they are wired to do). *An important note:* Breath isn’t always a neutral anchor for meditation. If focusing on your breathing agitates you in any way, try other anchors like listening to sounds or focusing on a part of your body that feels neutral or pleasant.

2

Begin your meetings with a few moments (or minutes) of meditation. Since Transformative Educational Leadership’s inception, every time we gather as a staff or community we begin with an “arriving and centering” practice. This acknowledges that we are all coming from different places and may need a transition from the thoughts and energies we carried in. An arriving and centering practice may simply be one person guiding a few minutes of silent reflection where all are invited to find a comfortable position and notice the sensations in their body or thoughts that are arising as they breathe. Taking this short time-out helps connect our mind and bodies so we can be present and engaged with each other for the work ahead.

3

Start small and be consistent. Don’t set out to meditate for 30 minutes on your first attempt at practicing. The key isn’t length but consistency. Neuroscientist and Peak Mind author Amishi Jha and her research team have demonstrated that just 12 minutes of meditation five or more days a


Meditation has helped school leaders bring awareness, empathy, and equity into decision-making.



week can result in measurable improvements in our attention and working memory.

Need motivation? Practicing meditation in community with colleagues can support a routine. At one school where I worked, several educators gathered weekly to meditate together; a similar opportunity was offered to staff during my time as a central office administrator.

Finally, while meditation has countless benefits in and of itself, practicing it as an education leader is ultimately in service of K–12 systems. Calm and clearheaded leaders are better equipped

to support truly equitable, just, healthy, connected, and thriving learning communities. 

Meena Srinivasan is one of *Mindful Magazine's* 2022 Ten Powerful Women of the Mindfulness Movement. She is also the founding executive director of Transformative Educational Leadership. Prior to this role, she spent five years working in partnership with CASEL to implement SEL systemwide in the Oakland Unified School District. Srinivasan is the author of several books, including *Integrating SEL Into Every Classroom* (Norton Professional Books, 2021). Follow her on [Twitter](#).