

Mindfulness is a powerful way to find the wisdom already inside them and it can offer teenagers and adolescents coping strategies for managing stressful situations and transform difficult relationships, which can be of lasting benefit by restoring their health and balance. It can free them from those difficult thoughts about the past or the future and teaches them how to live in the ‘present’ moment in a non-judgmental way, to explore their values and develop a sense of purpose. Some of the benefits offered by practising **mindfulness** are:

- It helps their ability to focus and pay attention, which can help with school pressure
- It teaches them to deal with life situations in a less emotionally reactive way
- It teaches effective strategies for making better choices
- It helps to increase their kindness and compassion for themselves and others
- It teaches them skills for self-care
- It teaches inner resilience and how to regain control, which aids self-regulation
- It can reduce the anxiety of trying to ‘fit in’
- It improves sleep and the immune system

How to get our teenagers to ‘buy-in’ to practising mindfulness

Teenagers are probably not the first thing to come to mind when we think of **mindfulness**, but strong evidence proves that it can be enormously beneficial in helping them cultivate empathy, as well as giving increased ability to concentrate and to control impulses – assisting them in the challenges of adolescence. But how do we convince our teenagers the value of slowing down, putting down their mobile and playstation etc., and simply focusing on their breathing?!

Five ways to encourage our teenagers to get started:

1. **Set the example** – we need to practise **mindfulness** ourselves to show adolescents the benefits. It’s clearly not possible at all times to be absolute models of **mindful** calm and serenity, but we should show them how we manage stress by responding, instead of reacting, to difficult situations. Our teenagers need to see us using **mindfulness** before they will take it seriously – let them see us paying attention and handling challenges well – we can’t have road-rage one minute and then ask them to be more **mindful** when someone does something to upset them!
2. **What’s in it for them?** – Teenagers may question how **mindfulness** can relate to their busy lives and we can explain to them how studies prove that students who meditate before an exam perform better than those who don’t and that it improves concentration. **Mindfulness** has also been shown to reduce anxiety, stress and depression.
3. **Teach them about their brain** – adolescents are fascinated with how their brain works and we can explain how **mindfulness** instruction is like having the owner’s manual for the brain – showing how the thinking part of the brain (pre-frontal cortex) can help to process the basic emotion of the ‘mammalian’ part of the brain (the amygdala). This enables them to make better decisions by utilising a **mindful** pause, thus giving a skilful response rather than an unthinking reaction. **Mindfulness** is training for their brains and has been shown to increase the size of the part of the brain that deals with self-awareness and compassion. Their experiences can transform their brains, just as physical exercise transforms their bodies.
4. **Teach them about their mind** – all our minds are constantly jumping around from one thought to the other and teenagers are just the same. We can explain to them that during stressful moments, most of the anxiety is ‘in their heads’ and that most of the stress comes from our worrying mind ‘running away’ with all the worst possible outcomes; *‘I’m going to fail the exam...my parents will be disappointed...I won’t get into university...I’ll never get the job I want...etc. etc.’* But by practising **mindfulness** they can be helped to understand that this is just chatter in their mind – not reality – just worry, anxiety and baseless projection. **Mindfulness** can teach teenagers to be more aware of their thoughts and to label them as just ‘worrying thoughts’, so they can then acknowledge their anxiety, without becoming dragged down by the negative thoughts it creates.
5. **There’s an app for that!** – yes, it does seem a little counter-intuitive suggesting apps when we have asked them to put down their phones, but we do perhaps need to work with the society in which they are growing up and there are numerous apps for practising **mindfulness**. Some suggestions are; the *Insight Meditation Timer*, which shows all the locations in the world where people are meditating; the *Stop, Breathe and Think*, which suggests suitable guided meditations for how the user feels at that moment; and *Smiling mind*, which is specifically designed with adolescents in mind.

How to live more in the ‘present’ moment – with mindfulness and more joy and gratitude

Once our teenager has ‘bought in’ to the concept of **mindfulness** they need to learn to pay close attention to each moment and begin to see the small wonders of life around them, Maybe the sky is a wonderful blue, or their best friend’s smile warms their heart. There are wonders everywhere and they need to learn to be ‘present’ and recognise them. A simple start would be to just pay close attention to how it feels to breathe – the cool air entering their lungs, like a glass of cool water on a hot day. Even during stressful times, this simple attention to their breath can be a small moment of joy – feeling grateful that their lungs are working and there is air to breathe.

Paying close attention to each moment, they will start to see the small wonders of life. Maybe the sky is a fabulous shade of blue today. Maybe their best friend’s smile warms their heart. There are wonders in every moment, just waiting for them to be present and recognize them. Maybe if they pay close attention, it feels good just to breathe. The cool air entering their lungs—how wonderful that can feel, like a glass of cool water on a hot day! Even when things are stressful in their life, this very breath can be a small moment of joy. Just by paying attention to their breath, they can feel grateful to be alive, grateful that their lungs are working and that they have air to breathe.

They do need to be aware though to not get too attached to whatever they are enjoying and try to hold on to happy moments, wishing every moment could be the same. This is not what **mindfulness** is about – clearly not every moment in life can be happy and wishing for things to be different in more difficult times will only increase their suffering.

Through **mindfulness**, they can just breathe in and enjoy the moment and then breathe out and let go, with no need to hang on to anything. Each breath in brings a new moment and maybe something new to enjoy and **mindfulness** can be practised in this way at anytime and anywhere.

A simple mindfulness exercise for a teenager to begin recognising pleasant events

1. Try to pay attention over a few days to any small pleasant moments and when it is noticed, smile and allow a pleasant emotion such as happiness or gratitude to arise.
2. Feeling a pleasant emotion is like having a best friend visit – recognise the emotion, enjoy it whilst it lasts and then let go.
3. There is no need to hold on to the happiness – just as forcing a friend to stay any longer than they want.
4. Just breathe in again, smile again and bring the mind and heart to the next moment, whenever it happens.
5. It can help to use this small phrase silently: Breathing in – this is a pleasant moment. Breathing out – smile. Feel the pleasant moment. Smile again.

Simple informal mindfulness

Like most of us, teenagers are usually trying to do a few things at the same time – checking their mobile whilst eating, texting whilst walking etc., and whilst this multi-tasking may seem efficient, it doesn’t generally make us more productive and will, most likely, add to our stress. Informal **mindfulness** is just doing one thing at a time, with full awareness. There are many daily activities that can be used for **mindfulness** practise, such as; brushing teeth; walking to class; getting dressed; walking the dog; cleaning the bedroom; playing a sport or musical instrument etc.

Our teenager should choose at least one activity to practise informal **mindfulness** in the week and then firstly, before beginning, they should stop for a moment, take a few **mindful** breaths and notice what is happening at that exact moment. Then, they should begin the activity treating it as the most important thing in the world and tune into their senses; *‘What does this thing that you’re doing look like? What does it smell like? What does it sound like? What does it feel like?’* There’s no need to rush or try to do three things at once – just let go of all the extra stress – doing just one thing at a time, with **mindfulness**, is enough. When walking, just walk; when eating, just eat; when brushing teeth, just brush – putting 100 per cent of attention to whichever activity as much as possible. Continue to breathe mindfully and whenever the mind wanders just take note of where it went – maybe it started to think about all the things that need doing – and then just come back to the breath. They shouldn’t judge themselves if their mind wanders – they’re not doing anything wrong – just noticing that their mind has wandered is being **mindful**.

Once the activity is finished, they should take three more breaths and return to the ‘present’ moment, again and again.

They can silently say a few guiding words if it helps to stay present, such as *‘Breathing in, I am walking. Breathing out, I smile. Walking...Smiling’*

By practising informal **mindfulness** in this way they will notice more of the pleasant experiences all around them. For example, when walking the dog, if they focus on the ‘present’ instead of worrying about school tomorrow, they will notice the warm sun and cool breeze on their cheeks. They will see the dog running through the leaves, smell the flowers and hear the birdsong – all of their senses will be alive and focused on the ‘present’ moment.

Some reflections from teenagers on mindfulness:

‘I have learned to stop dwelling in the past. The past is the past, it will never change’

‘I am more rested and more confident – 8 weeks ago I wouldn’t have spoken to anyone’

‘I have learned ways to manage stress and anger, without resorting to violence’

‘I am less judgmental, less stressed, happier with myself, more honest, more caring and kinder’

I am a better thinker, a better friend, a better learner, and have allowed myself to care about the careless’

Standard education addresses the intellect of our youth, but we pay little attention to developing the virtues and strengths of character that are vital for leading a happy and meaningful life. Recent studies in neuroscience have shown that just as we can learn a skill such as playing tennis through conscious practice, we can equally develop the positive qualities of our mind through similar practice. We can consciously cultivate our wellbeing, our strengths of character, our capacities for compassion, courage, kindness, confidence and wisdom. **Mindfulness** can give teenagers the ability to live consciously, to access these inner qualities and to nourish the positive aspect of their hearts and minds, giving them the skills to live a rewarding and fulfilling life.