

**Mindfulness based stress management for year 12 students**  
**Anne Crossan September 2004**

‘Mindfulness means paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally’<sup>1</sup>.

Over the past few years I have seen an increasing number of students who are suffering from anxiety and mood disorders and who feel overwhelmed by the demands made upon them both at school and in life in general. This adversely affects their emotional wellbeing and mental health. It is not necessarily an issue that will be resolved with the completion of year 12. They needed life long skills and tools to deal with the perceived levels of stress that they were experiencing.

In 2002 I attended an international conference on Child and Adolescent Mental Health and went to a 20 minute session on ‘Mindfulness’. It seemed not only that it had something to offer the students I was seeing but I was also attracted to the concepts being presented and it brought together a lot of the reading I had been doing since the early 90’s.

The presenter of the session invited anyone who was interested in further information on his research on Mindfulness to leave their email address. As a result of this I travelled to Virginia USA in 2002 and attended a week long Mindfulness training programme at a State Psychiatric Hospital. The hospital was being used as a trial for introducing Mindfulness concepts to staff in the hope of improving the quality of life for inpatients and at the same time increasing job satisfaction of staff. During this week we were introduced to the concepts of Mindfulness and also its use in a clinical setting. After this week I established a mindfulness practice of my own and also incorporated it into my clinical work.

In 2003 I offered a ‘Mindfulness based stress Management’ course as an elective in our year 12 Lifeskills programme. I was competing with Ten Pin bowling, Swimming, First Aid, Aerobics, Golf, Career Planning and a number of other physical activities. I had 18 enrol in the first course out of a possible 150 students. At that stage Life Skills electives were for 2 x 40minute periods twice per week for 5 weeks. During 2003 I had approximately 130 students complete the course.

The format of the programme has evolved as I have evaluated the course after the completion of each group. It has also changed as this year, 2004, the Lifeskills programme has only 2 x 40minute periods per week with an average of 6 weeks duration.

Each session starts with breathing exercises which are yoga based and these are followed by a 5 minute sitting meditation. The last 20 minutes of the class consists of a guided meditation which comes from a selection of CD’s that I have collected over the past couple of years. This leaves about 30 – 40 minutes for the introduction of ideas and concepts surrounding mindfulness and discussion of these ideas.

‘Mindfulness.....has to do with refining our capacities for paying attention, for sustained and penetrative awareness, and for emergent insight that is beyond thought but can be articulated through thought.’<sup>2</sup>

The sessions cover the following topics

- What is mindfulness – the idea of being, not doing and observing our thoughts in a non-judgemental manner.
- The value of stress as a motivator and performance enhancer. The Stress Cycle.<sup>3</sup>
- How do you develop a practice of Mindfulness
- How does it fit with your own individual spirituality
- Daniel Goleman’s<sup>4</sup> work on ‘Emotional Hijack’ and how we often react not respond to a situation based on past experience or future expectation not what is happening right now in the moment. The value of responding not reacting.
- Martin Seligman’s<sup>5</sup> Learned Optimism, Attributional Styles and Learned Helplessness
- Flight/Fright response to perceived stressed in daily life. The Ancestral and the Rational Brain<sup>6</sup> and the Monkey Mind.
- The 7 Attitudinal Foundations of Mindfulness Practice as contained in Kabat-Zinn’s ‘Full Catastrophy Living’<sup>7</sup>
- Changing the way we think about a situation can lead to a change in outcome
- A trip to have lunch at a venue outside the school. Usually to a venue that the students would not have previously visited.
- The last session is usually held outdoors in the school ground and includes a picnic where each member of the group contributes some item of food, a meditation and general discussion.

Each group presents different dynamics and these dynamics largely determine the format of the group and how the material is introduced. I have found that some groups embrace the ideas of mindfulness and are eager to discuss and explore, whilst others find the concepts difficult to relate to and are therefore far more difficult to engage.

My aim is to encourage students to feel they can have some effect on their stress level by changing some of their behaviour and attitude and the use of mindfulness techniques to quiet their mind and change the patterns of activity within their brain to given them a calmer approach to their daily life. Even if they have difficulty engaging in the practice it may leave them with some thoughts and ideas which they can revisit later in life.

Students are encouraged to develop a daily meditation practice of their own for between 10 and 20 minutes and although it is likely that only a few will develop this practice many say they benefit from the meditations used during the sessions especially those students who were involved in the twice weekly sessions.

‘Mindfulness practice provides an opportunity to walk along the path of your own life with your eyes open, awake instead of half unconscious, responding consciously in the world instead of reacting automatically, mindlessly. The end result is subtly different from the other way of living in that we know that we are walking a path, that we are following a way, that we are awake and aware.....if you are facing the stress in your life mindfully, you cannot fail in your responses to it. Just being aware of it is a powerful response, one that changes everything and opens up new options for growth and for doing.....Even confusion and despair and agitation can be creative. We can work with them if we are willing to be in the present from moment to moment with awareness.’<sup>8</sup>

1. Kabat-Zinn ‘Wherever you go there you are’ Hyperion New York 1994 p4
2. Segal, Zindel, Williams, J. Mark, Teasdale, John ‘Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy for Depression’ The Guilford Press New York 2002. pVIII
3. Gawler, Ian ‘Peace of Mind’ Hill of Content 1978. p28
4. Goleman Daniel ‘Working with Emotional Intelligence’ Bloomsbury Publishing 1998
5. Seligman, Martin ‘Learned Optimism’ Random House Australia 1991
6. Jacobs, Gregg ‘The Ancestral mind’ Viking Penguin New York 2003
7. Kabat-Zinn Jon ‘Full Catastrophe Living’ Dell Publishing New York 1991 p31-40
8. Kabat-Zinn Jon ‘Full Catastrophe Living’ Dell Publishing New York 1991 p442

