



QUIET MINDS

Mindfulness is the mental technique in vogue. Now schools are using it as an aid to concentration and calm.

Samantha Laurie puts theory and practice in the spotlight

The faculty of bringing back a wandering attention, observed the father of American psychology, William James, "is the very root of good judgment, character and will. An education which should improve this faculty would be the education par excellence."

But can attention be trained? Can you quieten not just the external jabber of modern life but the continuous internal dialogue – the overthinking, the rumination, the constant scanning for problems for which our attention is evolutionarily programmed? Moreover, can you persuade a class of cynical teenagers that the stress-reducing, concentration-boosting promise of such training begins with sitting still and being quiet?

Richard Burnett is convinced of it. He is co-founder of *Mindfulness in Schools*, which brings a programme known as .b into a classroom setting.

"Our mental health and happiness are profoundly shaped by what we do with our attention," he explains.

"Yet for good survival reasons our attention constantly looks for what's wrong, raising our stress levels, latching onto problems, spinning stories and interpretations of what we think might be happening.

"Spending a few minutes each day with our attention focused on sensing rather than thinking is hugely beneficial.

"We teach children English, maths and so on, but not the best use of the lens through which all that learning is filtered – their attention."

Mindfulness, should you have missed the numerous references in the press, social media and even, recently, in parliament, uses breathing exercises found in meditation and yoga to teach participants

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to be present in the moment, rather than allow their minds to spin off. The aim is to be more aware of thoughts and feelings so that, instead of being overwhelmed by them, you can manage them better. Exercises are simple: feeling

the ground beneath your feet; eating a raisin while wholly absorbed in the taste, smell, texture; breathing in for a count of 7 and out for 11. Regularity is key: on the .b course students text each other .b as a reminder to 'Stop, Breathe and Be'.

Whilst .b, like most of what is on offer in schools, is meticulously secularized, its roots are in Buddhism. Indeed, the practice may never have left obscurity, had it not been taken up 40 years ago as a treatment for chronic pain by an American scientist, Jon Kabat-Zinn. In research, it began to reveal impressive results: a team from Oxford led trials into mindfulness as treatment for depression. They found that it halved the rate of relapse – evidence that has now led the *National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence* to recommend that



an eight-week course of mindfulness-based cognitive therapy be offered on the NHS for sufferers of depression.

These findings are backed up by neuroscience. In studies, participants on mindfulness courses showed physical changes in the brain: the

density of the amygdala – an area known to have a role in anxiety and stress – was reduced. By contrast, the amount of grey matter in the part of the brain associated with attention, empathy and memory increased.

The promise of less stress and better decision-making has brought endorsements from sport (Jonny Wilkinson), business (*Google*, *Apple*, *Ebay* all offer it to staff) and the US military. In schools, *Hampton* and *Charterhouse* are among those to include it on the curriculum for 14-15 year olds. Schools Minister, David Laws, recently told MPs that the Government was "very interested" in promoting the idea in all schools. Even in church circles, the subject is now on the debating table.

But can children really be persuaded? Much depends on the teacher, believes Mariette Jansen, a Kingston therapist who runs workshops for kids and teens. Fun and concrete results are key. Recently Mariette showed a group of young cricketers how a short period spent focusing on their breathing improved their aim.

The challenge, she says, is to do it regularly. It feels like you're doing nothing, so it's easy to forget to do. But it is precisely this 'stillness' that perhaps offers most to schools: the chance for a few minutes of quiet contemplation.

At *St James Senior Boys School* in Ashted, which draws heavily on Eastern philosophy for its ethos, school life stops for 10 minutes twice daily, as the 365 boys 'fall still'.

"Being silent and still is just something natural that we've forgotten about as we rush around like madmen," says headmaster, David Brazier. "You can get hung up about it at a conceptual level or you can just appreciate the calm."



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