



Mindfulness for Stressed Teens

School Programs Teach Healthy Coping Skills

by Erin Lehn

Teen stress levels often rival those of adults, concludes data collected by the American Psychological Association in 2017. This is especially true these days with the influx of social media expectations, political unrest and a global pandemic to contend with. Other daily pressures—such as relationship turmoil, bullying, academic challenges, unstable home lives and mood disorders—can add to the stressors. With all of these pressures, it's no wonder many teens often tune out and turn toward their devices, getting fixated on other people's lives or compulsively recording their own experiences, but not fully living them.

A wealth of research has demonstrated that one of the most beneficial ways to help teens navigate the ups and downs of these tumultuous years is through mindfulness education. A randomized clinical trial published in the *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology* in 2009 was one of the first studies that provided evidence of the effectiveness of mindfulness-based stress reduction treatment of adolescents. Since then, there has been no shortage of research findings proving its benefits.

“In a nutshell, mindfulness is about being keenly aware of your life, in the present, versus the automatic tendency to ruminate about the past or worry about the future,”

says Gina Biegel, CEO and founder of Stressed Teens, a Campbell, California, business that has been disseminating mindfulness-based programs tailored to adolescents since 2004. “It's noticing your thoughts, feelings and physical sensations in the present moment without harmful judgment.”

“Mindfulness is a practice in the art of aligning your energy, mindset and emotions,” says Tris Thorp, the San Diego-based author of *Healing Your Heart* and a Chopra Center-trained leadership coach. “When teens acquire the skills to better navigate what's happening in the moment, they'll have more opportunity available to them because they're calm, centered and grounded.”



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experience of what works in the classroom. They are also long-term mindfulness practitioners, giving them a unique perspective of how mindfulness can be used and taught effectively in school,” says Shackelford.

■ Implementing a school-wide approach. Stressed Teens offers online mindfulness-based groups and one-on-one therapy and coaching sessions for teens, as well as professional instructor certifications and the Whole-School Mindfulness-Centered Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) program. This approach, in which an entire school participates for a calendar year, is especially beneficial because everyone is going through the program at the same time. “Typically, schools complete two lessons per week to fit the curriculum into one semester or one lesson per week to spread learning over two semesters,” Biegel says.

While teens can learn and practice these techniques alone, a whole systems approach that involves the family, school and community has been shown to have the biggest impact. “A teenager with a mindfulness practice can have a beneficial effect on other members of the household. However, there needs to be support from every angle in a teen’s environment for it to be sustainable,” says Thorp. “There’s so much evidence-based research and measurables that demonstrate how impactful these programs are in schools and communities. There’s a clear reduction in acting out, reduced conflict, and more participation and engagement.”

“Think of the ripple effect of possible benefits if the whole community and systems a teen are in are also learning and practicing mindfulness,” says Biegel. “Mindfulness-based methods also include and affect positive human values like gratitude, kindness, generosity, self-care, compassion and acceptance. Youth, parents and educators can all benefit from that.”

For more information, including free mindfulness-based resources, visit [Stressed Teens.com](https://StressedTeens.com), MindfulnessInSchools.org and TrisThorp.com.

Erin Lehn is a frequent contributor to [Natural Awakenings magazine](https://NaturalAwakeningsMagazine.com).

10 Mindfulness Tips for Teens

1. Stop what you’re doing and count your breaths to 10.
2. Devote your awareness to more of the pleasant and beneficial moments in your day.
3. Accomplish only one task at a time. You will be more productive than if you split your attention to multiple tasks.
4. Start a daily gratitude journal. Each day, consider the big things you’re grateful for, like your family, friends, health or home. Also, don’t forget the little things you’re thankful for, such as a cup of coffee or a hug.
5. Get some form of exercise every day. Even a 15-minute walk can do wonders for the mind.
6. Spend time outdoors enjoying nature. Notice the power of grounding by paying attention to your feet on the ground.
7. Begin a daily mindfulness practice. Start with 10 minutes and work your way up.
8. Commit to a nourishing self-care routine with a caveat to set incremental goals you can accomplish. You do not have to overdo it.
9. Acknowledge the positive qualities of your family, friends and others in your inner circle. Let them know how much they mean to you. Let them know you see them and hear them.
10. Carve out daily enrichment time such as learning an instrument or creating artwork. Bring mindful attention, paying notice to your five senses, to anything you do in your daily life.

Tips courtesy of Gina Biegel, CEO and founder of Stressed Teens; Jem Shackelford, head of curricula for Mindfulness in Schools Project; and Tris Thorp, author and coach. For more helpful mindfulness tips, click on the Stressed Teens Toolbox link at StressedTeens.com, visit MindfulnessInSchools.org/freeresources/ and TrisThorp.com/blog/.

“The best moments come when a teen realizes their own wisdom, sees it emerge and is able to grow stronger as a result,” says Jem Shackelford, head of curricula for Mindfulness in Schools Project (MiSP), a leading nonprofit provider of mindfulness training for schools in the U.K. and internationally.

According to Biegel, a regular mindfulness-based practice helps rewire the brain when people focus on pleasant, beneficial and positive experiences. “For survival purposes, our brains are naturally wired to the negative, aka ‘negative selection bias,’” she says. “Thankfully, we can train our brains to be more tilted to the positive. In fact, just thinking of a positive memory for 12 seconds can create a benefit for your well-being.”

While there are multiple approaches to weaving mindfulness practices into a school setting, here are two highly effective practices.

■ Certifying teachers in mindfulness training so they can deliver the materials directly to their students. “MiSP curricula are produced by educators that have many years of