

Wishing You a Mindful New Year

This school year, I've undertaken the goal of teaching mindfulness based strategies at Seaman, as well as becoming more mindful myself. As we start the New Year, I'd like to share with you some information about mindfulness that might inspire you to do the same. Mindfulness, sometimes explained as "living in the moment", is a state of active, intentional attention to the present. It is paying attention in a particular way, on purpose, in the present moment, and without judgment. Mindfulness is not about trying to improve yourself or get anywhere else. It's simply a matter of realizing where you already are and immersing yourself in the here and now. Instead of letting your life go by without living it, you awaken to every experience. When you experience mindful moments, you become totally engrossed in what you are doing so that you appreciate and savor every second.

I've personally found the practice of mindfulness very rewarding. It costs nothing and it can be done anywhere, with very little effort. It feels good intrinsically. It has increased my ability to be patient, and has given me a greater sense of calmness, inner peace, and happiness. Although these are my subjective reports, it has also been supported by research. The cultivation of mindfulness has roots in Buddhism, but Jon Kabat-Zinn helped to bring the practice of mindfulness into the mainstream, demonstrating that mindfulness can bring improvements in both physiological and psychological symptoms. Scientific research suggests that mindfulness-based therapies have helped people with chronic pain, anxiety, and depression. It has been used to treat heart disease, lower blood pressure, improve sleep, and alleviate gastrointestinal difficulties. There have been studies that linked mindfulness to a better functioning immune system. Other studies on mindfulness training suggest that being "present" has been shown to help with concentration, emotional balance, increased compassion for others, stronger impulse control, and resiliency in the face of challenges. Studies show that when subjects took a few minutes each day to actively savor something they usually hurried through, like eating a meal or walking, they began to experience more joy and happiness, and fewer depressive symptoms.

There are several techniques that I have been practicing that are at the core of mindfulness that you may wish to try. One such practice is using your breath to ground yourself in the here and now. Various times throughout the day I pause and focus on my breathing. This is called mindful or conscious breathing. Our breathing goes on all the time, but mostly it's unconscious. Not only does focusing on breathing bring you into present moment awareness, but it naturally calms the body. Specifically, diaphragmatic breathing is best for oxygenating the blood and calming the mind. And, it is physiologically impossible to hold tensions when you breathe deeply. Breathing is the bridge between your body and your mind. If you learn to regulate your breathing, you can regulate your mind and emotions as well. Simply stated, breathe better, and you will live better. As many of you know, at Seaman, all students and faculty begin "peaceful breathing" at the start of the day, as we end morning announcements. Additionally, many teachers are incorporating times throughout the day to continue this practice of deep breathing.

Another very important basis for mindfulness is learning to stop your ruminating thoughts - quieting the chatter. The mind is constantly racing with thoughts that eventually drive your feelings and actions. For this practice, see if you can notice what you're thinking that's getting in the way of focusing on your present moment experience. Don't attach any judgment to it. Don't get upset with yourself for having any of your thoughts, just acknowledge it, as if you were an observer of your thoughts, and let it go. For example, the other day I was taking a "Barre" fitness class. I caught myself being concerned with what I must look like to others as I was in various body contortions. My thoughts were racing with questions about how I must look, what others were thinking, and if I was even completing the exercises correctly. As a former ballet dancer, I also started to feel a little sad, thinking that the stretches I was previously able to do with ease were now taking considerably more effort. Once I caught myself overthinking, I acknowledged it, and let it go. Instead, I focused on the sensations I was feeling, the music, and the way I was breathing into the stretch, which resulted in a much more enjoyable experience than it would have been if I hadn't quieted my mind. A worried mind is a major barrier to experiencing mindful moments.

Most people, myself included, can fall into the trap of going on autopilot because we pay little attention to the things we do every day. We become "mindless" and miss our present experiences. In order to be more mindful, experts suggest that you approach every single moment as a new journey in order to experience every detail of the moment. This is sometimes called "beginner's mind", because even though you've been down that same route before, you are trying to see it with new eyes. If you think about it, almost everything is different each time. People you pass on the street will be different, patterns of lights on a building will be different, the way the sun/moon looks in the sky will change regularly, and even the feelings and sensations you experience each moment will feel different. So when I'm eating, I try to savor the taste in my mouth. When showering, I try to enjoy the feeling of the water on my body. When walking outside, I try to enjoy the feeling of the sun or wind on my skin. Each and every time is a new experience.

Since I've started my own mindfulness practice, I've found that certain phrases help bring me back to the foundation of present moment awareness. For example, sometimes if I find my attention wandering, I say to myself, "aware...awake...here...now" and it immediately brings me back to the present moment. One thing I also find myself saying more often is "this too shall pass." While this phrase is often used to help one understand that pain and suffering is not forever, I've used it to savor happy moments as well. If I say to myself "this too shall pass", I find myself more appreciative of the moment because I know that once that moment is gone, it will never happen exactly the same again. I've also been using "it is what it is" as a reminder to acknowledge and accept the present moment without judgment. One last phrase I just started using is "forgive and invite". When we get caught in an obstacle, we can "forgive" ourselves for the time gone by, investigate the obstacle to learn from it, and invite ourselves to begin again, because as soon as one moment ends, another begins.

I am currently training the first graders at Seaman in mindfulness strategies through the Mind-Up curriculum. They are learning these strategies at an early age to foster attentional skills, self-regulation, resiliency, interpersonal skills, and coping skills. They start by learning about the parts of the brain responsible for mindful behavior and the parts of the brain that take over when they are on autopilot. They have been practicing “Mindful Me” strategies such as mindful breathing, mindful listening, mindful looking, mindful tasting, and mindful movement. After the foundation is laid, they will use mindfulness to enhance perspective taking skills, gratitude, and mindful actions to others. I have received so much positive feedback from the children and they are picking up quickly and enthusiastically.

If you are wondering where and when you can start practicing mindfulness, the answer is pretty much anywhere, anytime. Pick a particular activity and set a particular amount of time when you're going to practice. There's really no limit to the different activities that can become opportunities to practice and cultivate mindfulness. It could be a particular sport you enjoy, listening to music, taking a shower, having your first cup of coffee, or simply just taking a walk. Gently pay attention to the sensations in your body. Note your sense perceptions, your emotions, and your thoughts as they come and go. Feel the pressure on your feet while you are walking, notice the smells in the air that surround you, listen to the sounds that are present, notice what you are seeing, attend to what you are tasting, and notice what is occurring in your conscious mind. Notice when you hang on to a feeling or thought. Try and let it go. The great thing about this practice is that if you are having trouble, just forgive yourself and start again.

So I'm wishing all of you a Mindful New Year. May you wake up and become aware of being alive. May you live your life with ongoing mindful moments. Let your life become an adventure in noticing. The more you notice, the more you see, and the more excitement you feel. You can work mindfully, exercise mindfully, parent mindfully, and even eat mindfully. A good quote to remember is, “Slow down and enjoy life. It's not only the scenery you miss by going too fast - you also miss the sense of where you are going and why.” If you don't enjoy each meal, each walk, each moment, you miss out on most of your life. Mindfulness itself is easy, but living a mindful life takes effort. Hope this post inspires you to live more mindfully, one moment at a time.

Happy New Year

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