Trending

LNP B ALSO INSIDE: PUZZLES & COMICS

HEALTH

Mindfulness matters

Everyone from troubled youths to executives learning to use yoga and meditation to control emotion and increase focus

RICHARD HERTZLER/STAFF PHOTOS

Teenagers at the Lancaster County Youth Intervention Center take a course in mindfulness as part of their summer school session. Overseeing the class are Christen Coscia, left, and Wynne Kinder. Yoga instructor Jonina Turzi, left, shows

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A dozen tattooed and cross-armed teenage boys shuffle into the nondescript chapel at the Lancaster County Youth Intervention Center.

Operating against a backdrop of two-way radio chatter and fluorescent lighting but speaking in hushed tones, Wynne Kinder and Christen Coscia greet each by name.

The instructors with Wellness Works in Schools aim to encourage troubled and neglected kids to open their minds, let go of their pain, and start making better choices. Though they may not tell them this, they want to help the teens develop internal tools they might use to regulate emotions.

And the instructors likely won't refer to this eight-week course as mindfulness, though it most certainly is.

Mindfulness — a state of focused awareness on feelings, thoughts and physical sensations — seems to be everywhere these days.

Touted by celebrities and made part of the workday at companies like Google, the ancient practice has finally found acceptance in pop culture.

But an audience in lockup isn't necessarily receptive to "touchy-feely" language, Kinder says.

"I tell them, 'If it feels awkward, you're doing it right,' " she says. "We're trying to get you out of your head, to notice what your body wants you to do."

Practicing yoga

Dressed in scrubs and orange socks, a few of the boys crack their knuckles. Others yawn, then yawn again and again (and lose focus long enough to complain about their beds). A few who've completed the program before even try a standing balance pose.

No one dares tells them they're practicing yoga.

These physical movements, Kinder explains, are all ways to connect the mind and body. In this setting, as in many of the classrooms Wellness Works visits during the school year, a body-first approach begins the journey toward mindfulness.

Kids are naturally more interested in moving and less interested in talking or thinking about how they feel in response to a certain stimuli.

Many adults benefit from a quiet, mind-first technique.

Varied paths

The paths to mindfulness are as varied as the people who practice: yogis, entrepreneurs, professional athletes, overeaters and cancer warriors among them. Local mindfulness devotees use breathing exercises, "grounding" techniques, guided meditation and even ultra-slow walking routines to pursue focus.

The secret to opening the mind isn't in a specific pose, mantras or even daily practice.

"It doesn't have to be that complicated," says Casey Dixon, a Lititz-based life coach who recommends a range of mindfulness exercises to her corporate clients.

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Mindfulness

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"It's a way of being in the present moment and being aware of, keyed into the environment around you."

Help for ADD

For one executive at a large, local nonprofit organization, mindfulness has been the difference between surviving and thriving since being diagnosed with attention deficit disorder in 2009. (The man asked that his name be withheld because of the stigma associated with ADD.)

Although he'd tried meditation and yoga multiple times for more than a decade, he says he never had the right guidance to make the effort worthwhile.

In 2012, determined to avoid taking medicine to decrease his symptoms, he renewed his commitment to daily practice. He began sitting on his couch with his hands resting in his lap, eyes closed, counting each in and out breath for about five minutes a day.

When the seated pose felt too rigid, he abandoned the pose instead of his larger quest. Now he wakes up around 4:30 a.m. and spends 20 quiet minutes on a rectangular zabuton cushion.

"It (mindfulness) has helped with my sleep and my anxiety," he says.

Around the same time, he also met Dixon, who had begun offering services to adults with attention-deficit disorders. Dixon shared research that helped him see how being mindful throughout his day could help him function better at work.

An investment

"What the research is showing is that mindfulness really benefits everybody," Dixon says. "I'm looking at executive function of the brain: how we resist distractions and make decisions."

In the spring she worked with Kinder to develop Mindfullyadd.com, a website that provides guided mindfulness approaches and scientific articles demonstrating its effectiveness.

Though the idea of taking time out of hectic day to simply sit and still the mind might seem counterproductive, she says her clients see it as an investment.

She wants people to build mindfulness into their lifestyle, whether focusing on their hands on the steering wheel during a long commute or taking a quick moment to check in before a major meeting.

A believer

Very much a believer these days, Kinder was once hesitant to devote time to mindfulness, even as she recommended it to others.

Her parents — mom Midge, a former special education teacher, and dad Rick, a retired corporate marketing exec, had begun their own practices years before.

They taught Mindful Yoga until launching Wellness Works in Schools in 2001.

By that time, Wynne Kinder, too, had learned to incorporate mindful techniques to help with the stress and frustrations of teaching, first at Lancaster Country Day and then at Washington Elementary School in Lancaster city.

Today, she combines walking, yoga and mindfulness techniques to help with compassion fatigue. After the Friday session at the Intervention Center, she sits in her car quietly for 15 minutes, envisioning energy leaving her shoulders and imagining a bubble that keeps out some of the pain she's witnessed.

"If you didn't revive or rebound, you'd just carry that hurt and anger with you," she says, adding that the negativity can color other interactions.

More compassionate

For those who go into mindfulness with a long-term goal — some just want to calm themselves for a single moment — it's often to be kinder, more compassionate.

That outlook colors the work the Kinders are doing, particularly when they head into high-poverty school districts or classrooms for autistic and emotionally disturbed children.

The program is curriculum-driven but adjusted for age and ability. Instructors might begin by clapping out a rhythm on their lap and seeing who claps along. They might strike a vibratone with a mallet, and ask older kids to stay with the sound for as long as they can hear it.

'60 Minutes'

Rick Kinder trained under Jon Kabat-Zinn, whose mindfulness-based stress reduction programs drew the interest of "60 Minutes" correspondent Anderson Cooper last year. Kabat-Zinn's programs are in use at more than 700 medical centers worldwide, where they are intended to reduce pain and illness over a lifetime.

Following his approach, "we go to where the pain is greatest," Rick Kinder says.

They strive to effect change in a nonjudgmental way: when first trying mindfulness, thoughts often wander. People see that as failure. The idea is to bring the focus back to a chosen element and start again.

The Kinders' programs have reached more than 7,000 students and 1,000-plus teachers.

Wynne Kinder says she does it for the ones who learn that in the next moment, the next month or the next year, they can look inside themselves and figure out what they truly need.

She tells the story of a student who realized his stomach aches — triggered by friends whose presence often led to trouble — should be a signal to carefully consider his actions.

Hard to quantify

Bryan Hubbard, program coordinator at the Youth Intervention Center, acknowledges it's hard to quantify the effects of the program. But the center is now in its eighth year with Wellness Works, and 97 percent of students who've participated say they would recommend it to others their age.

After 45 years of practicing yoga and mindfulness, Midge Kinder is still impressed with the colorful language people, especially children, associate with mindful experiences.

One girl described feeling less darkness inside. A fourth-grade boy pondered aloud whether his experience was real.

"If you felt it, it's yours," she told him. "And if it's yours, it's real."