

Mindfulness in Education

Benefits of whole-group mindfulness for general
and special education students

Erin Kreger M.A. CCC-SLP

What is Mindfulness?

- Mindfulness is...
 - paying attention in a particular way; on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally (Jon Kabat-Zinn)
 - a way of life incorporating attention, balance and compassion (Susan Kaiser-Greenland)

Goals of Mindfulness

- Self-awareness
- Emotion regulation
- Impulse control
- Attentional Stability

Mindfulness Practice

- Find a comfortable seated position
- Close your eyes, or lower them to look at your lap
- Mindful breathing

Mindfulness Practice Follow Up

- Did anyone experience any resistance or discomfort?
- What changed in the room during the practice?
- General impressions or thoughts about the practice?
- Normalization of the experience through discussion of similarities and differences

Neuroscience of Mindfulness

- Improved functioning of the following areas of the brain (Dr. Dan Siegel, “The Mindful Brain”)
 - Prefrontal Cortex (forehead): controls high-level functions such as emotional regulation and body modulation (anxiety levels)
 - Amygdala (center): regulates intense emotions and primitive fight/flight/freeze response; at the moment of identification of an emotion, the amygdala is deactivated
 - Hippocampus (center): storage and recall of memory, which may not be accessible during stress

Window of Tolerance

- Hyper-arousal Zone: increased sensations, flooded emotional reactivity, disorganized cognitive processing
- Optimal Arousal Zone: state where emotions can be tolerated and information integrated
- Hypo-arousal Zone: relative absence of sensation, numbing of emotions, disabled cognitive processing

Window of Tolerance

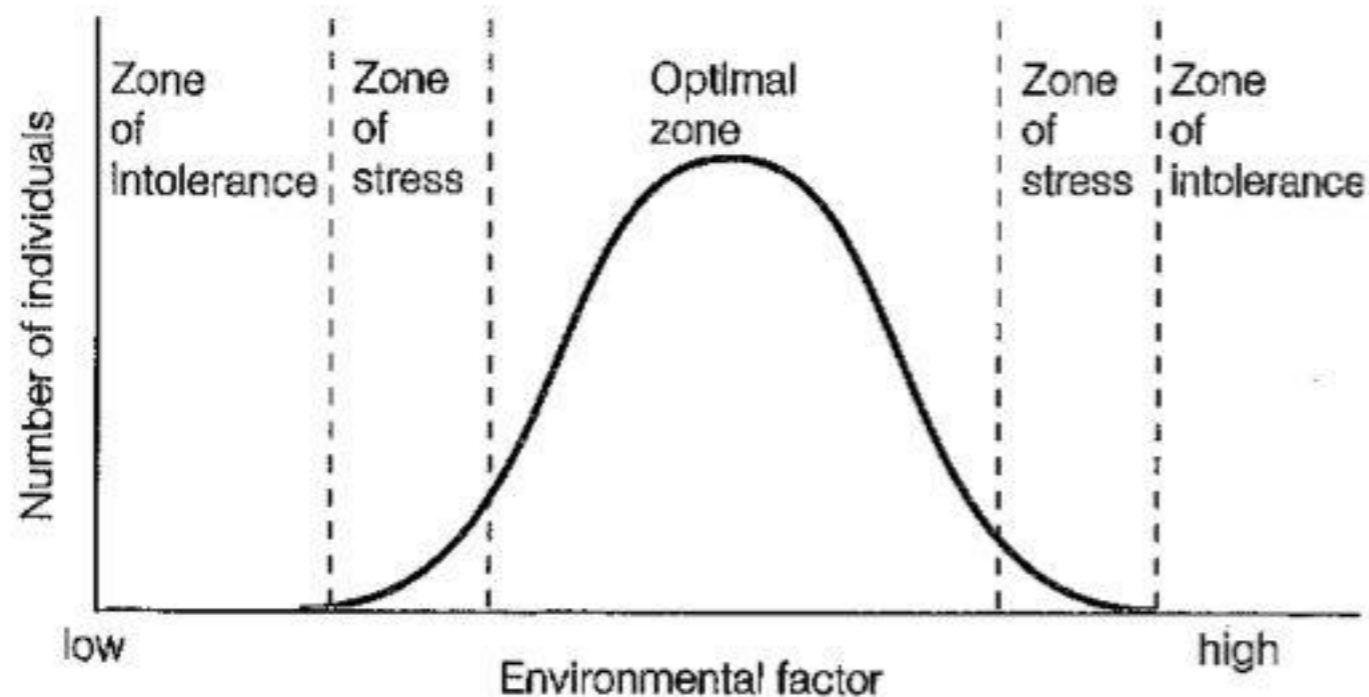


FIGURE 3.1 Shelford's law of tolerance. A plot of the number of individuals of a species as a function of some environmental factor (such as temperature) produces a bell-shaped curve that can be divided into various tolerance zones.

Areas of Benefit

- Attention: students are told to “focus,” but are not taught how
- Emotional Regulation: recognize emotions when they occur, and begin to change how we respond to them
- Adaptability: awareness of patterns and ability to change habitual behaviors

Areas of Benefit, cont.

- Compassion: awareness of how our own thoughts and emotions grows our understanding of others
- Calming: access to ways to relax regardless of the external circumstances
- Resilience: objective observation leads to greater balance

Teacher Stress

- A 2016 survey of over 30,000 educators by the American Federation of Teachers revealed:
 - 78% felt physically and emotionally exhausted at the end of the school day
 - 87% reported the demands of their job interfered with their family life
 - 14% responded that they would consider leaving teaching within the next year.

Special Education Benefits

- Decreased need for adult support for special education students, leading to increased independence
- Reduced time required for teacher or support staff for individual attention
- Increased time spent in class (instead of breaks taken outside of the classroom)

Mindfulness Lessons

- Mindful Bodies; Mindful Listening
- Mindful Breathing (breathing ball)
- The Mindful Brain (mind jar)
- Mindful Movement
- 5 Senses; Mindful eating
- Strong Emotions
- Heartfulness; Happy Wishes
- Gratitude

- “Mindful Bodies” - alert body position that shows readiness to learn
- “Zip Up” - one hand in front, one hand in back; zip hands up and over head; reverse
- “Tic Tock” - sway body from side to side until you find your “center”

- Tone Bell
 - “Put on your mindful bodies”
 - Close your eyes or look down at your lap
 - Listen for the sound until it is gone
 - Raise your hand when the sound is completely gone (lower hand, other gestures to change things up)

- Anchor Breathing
 - Hand rests at nose, chest or belly
- Breathing Ball
 - Expanding ball (Hoberman ball) used to show inhale (expand) and exhale (contract)
 - Person holding the ball guides the breathing for the group (breathe in/breathe out, repeated 3 times)
 - Ball can be passed around the group for each to take a turn (with no talking)
 - Finger counting or anchor breathing can be used for practice without a prop

- Mind Jar
 - Plastic water bottle with water, glitter and glue
 - Demonstrates how the glitter gets shaken up, much like our thoughts do when we are upset/angry/sad/excited
 - We can breathe and observe the glitter settle to the bottom as our thoughts settle
 - Point out that the glitter doesn't go away, just as our emotions can't; they can "settle:

- Mindful Movement
 - Mindful walking: slow steps, feeling each part of the foot as it touches the floor
 - Mindful dancing: using a drum or patting the legs, match the volume (small movement for soft sound, large movement of loud sound); match the speed (slow and fast); can be done sitting or standing

- Five Senses Experiences
 - Listen for sounds in the room
 - Look for shapes and colors in the room; “I see (red). What could it be?”
 - Smell a variety of soaked cotton balls (vanilla, pine, cinnamon, orange juice, etc.)
 - Touch a variety of materials (fabrics, sand paper, cold packs, cotton balls, etc.)
 - Taste (chocolate chips, raisins, mints)

- Mindful Eating
 - Look at the food and see colors, shapes
 - Smell the food (sweet, salty, pleasant, unpleasant)
 - How does it feel? (smooth, bumpy, sticky, squishy)
 - What sounds do you hear? Does it have a crinkly wrapper? Do you hear noise when you eat it?
 - Notice the tastes; hold it in your mouth

- Noticing Emotions
 - Prompts to notice where emotions can be felt in the body
 - Resources:
 - “Visiting Feelings” by Lauren Rubenstein
 - “The Way I Feel” by Janan Cain

- Heartfulness
 - Think of a time someone was kind to you
 - Think of a time you were kind to someone else
- Happy Wishes
 - Start with self, then extend to others
 - Picture the person in your mind, doing something that makes them happy
 - Send that person a silent wish: “May _____ be happy today.”
 - Happy Wish challenges: send to others during transitions (walking to music; entering the gym for an assembly)

- Gratitude
 - Resource: “The Thankful Book” by Todd Parr
 - Upper Elementary: writing practice for things to be grateful for at home, at school, city's, country, world

Resources

- Mindfulness4me.com
- Mindful Schools (mindfulschool.org)
- Susan Kaiser-Greenland (susankaisergreenland.com): “The Mindful Child,” “Mindful Games”
- Dr. Dan Siegel: “The Developing Mind,” “The Mindful Brain,” “The Whole-Brain Child”
- Christopher Willard: “Growing Up Mindful”
- Michigan Collaborative for Mindfulness Education (mc4me.org)
- “Room to Breathe” Documentary