

South Shore Regional School Board teacher, Lindsay Welsford, has been piloting a new program I developed, *Mindfulness in the Classroom: a doorway into a new way of thinking*. The results she reports are inspiring. After four months of daily practice, she has received feedback from her students such as: enhanced relationships with parents as well as improved relationships with themselves, leading to higher self-esteem.

The education system is always pursuing the latest, leading edge modalities while the latest movement that is sweeping across North America happens to be the 5,000-year-old practice of mindfulness.

This practice is spreading like wildfire because these simple techniques aim to provide students with the skills to focus on assigned tasks, amidst many distractions and outside influences.

Studies show that repeated training using intentional focus helps to direct one's attention despite the millions of competing external stimuli, such as noise, random thoughts, cravings, etc. (Jha, 2013). By intentionally setting our thoughts to a specific task, we rewire neural pathways used for focusing (Kozasa et al., 2011; Lu et al., 2014).

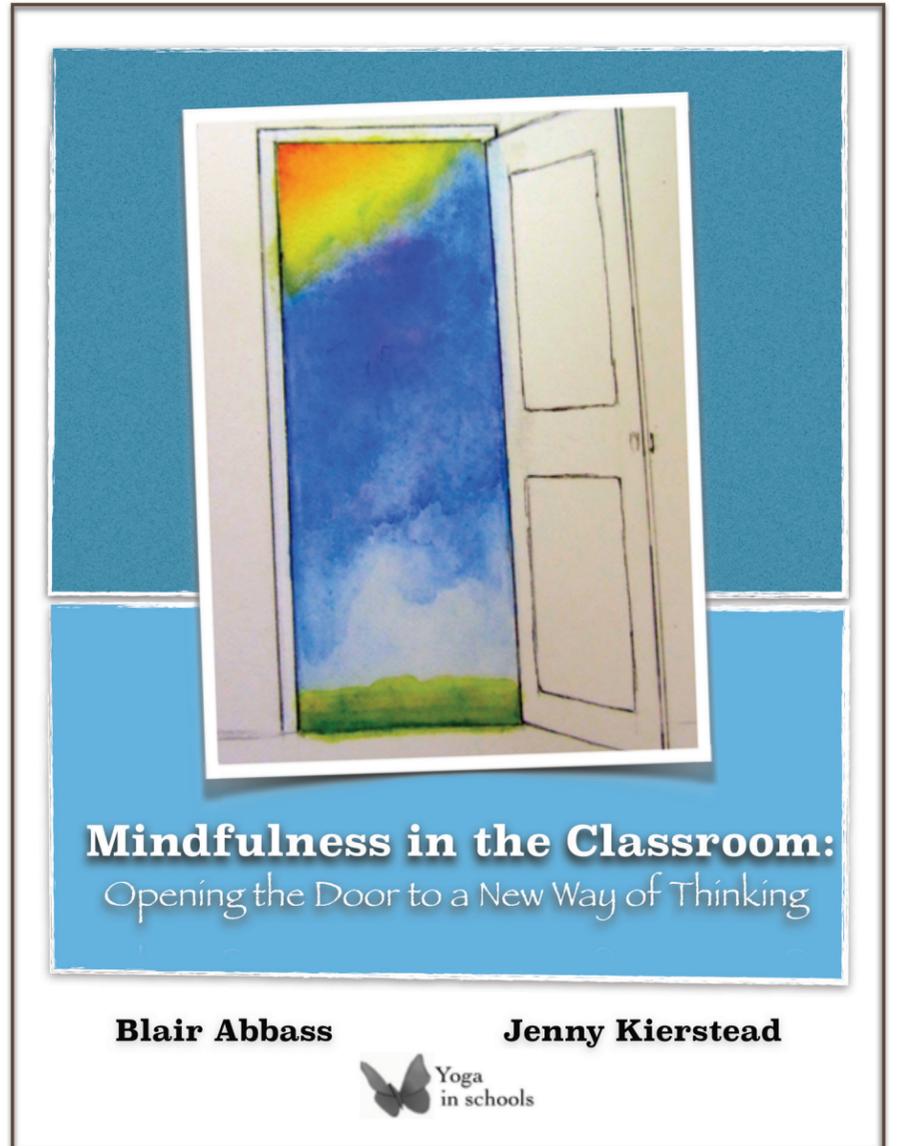
Students, however, aren't the only one's benefiting from this ancient discipline. During a random encounter with a *Yoga in Schools* graduate teaching Yoga Grade 11, she excitedly shared that although she loved the physical part of the training program, the most transformative aspect for her was the mindfulness. She attributes her vibrant health, balanced emotional states and enhanced relationships to her daily mindfulness practice.

What makes this particular program unique is the cognitive therapy/choice theory aspect that's included. Many people practice mindfulness techniques in its various forms but see no improvement in mental pathologies. For example, a student with anxiety issues can be trained to use mindfulness techniques to release anxious feelings. The challenge is that the anxiety is a symptom of a deeper issue that must be addressed to be truly healed. Otherwise, the anxiety-release cycle perpetuates. Applying cognitive therapy tools here, one could address this issue with the following free write exercise.

The student would write at the top of the page "The reason why I have anxiety." followed by an open stream of writing, listing everything that comes to mind for 5 to 10 minutes. At the end of the exercise, the student would re-read the list and add stars next to those that stand out the most, such as the common statement "I am not good enough."

This reflects a core negative belief that is usually embedded deeply into the subconscious mind. Although this belief is out of sight from day-to-day awareness, the symptom adversely affects the student's peace of mind. Here's where the therapeutic component can be applied. Working with the negative, fear-based statement, the student would create a new belief statement, affirming healthy neural pathways. In this scenario, the statement could be transformed into a phrase such as, "I have value and I am achieving great things in my life." Note that the statement leaves no room for ambiguity; it is totally affirming and written in the present moment. The student is then encouraged to place the affirmation in visible sights throughout the house, repeating the statement frequently with a sense of conviction. As Amy Cuddy says, "You need to fake it till you become it."

The student now has the sitting mindfulness practice, coupled with cognitive therapy techniques to override old programs, leading to lasting changes in one's perspective and way of thinking.



Personally speaking, as a boy reared with two immigrant parents, I developed a core negative belief that I was stupid. With no academic guidance at home, I barely scraped by in my grade school years.

Today, after two undergraduate degrees and two Masters in this work, I have outgrown my childhood limiting beliefs. A number of years ago, it was a poignant moment when I was introduced at a principal's meeting as being gifted. How did I go from scraping by as student to now a gifted teacher? I changed my mind about who I was and what I was capable of.

*Blair Abbass is a retired teacher of 32 years and a contributor to the PSP Yoga 11 course and the Girl on Fire Empowerment program being piloted in New Brunswick schools. His Mindfulness Meditation Manual is being piloted in the classroom by Lindsay Welsford and overseen by Catherine Rabey for both regular stream and special needs students within the South Shore Regional School Board.*

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