



Q&A: Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction

*With Bernadette Evans-Smith, Ph.D. Assistant Professor, Licensed Clinical Psychologist, Clinical Director at RNBC
By Camaree Turman*

I had an engaging conversation with **Dr. Bernadette Evans-Smith Clinical Director and Licensed Clinical Psychologist at RNBC**. Dr. Evans-Smith offered great insight into Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction, it's effectiveness in helping children with regulation and attention challenges, and how parents can help their children reduce stress and improve attentiveness with mindfulness techniques.

Camaree Turman: How do you explain Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) to your clients?

Bernadette Evans-Smith: Mindfulness is the ability to stay aware of your breathing, to stay aware of your experience in the moment, and the ability to let other thoughts that enter your mind go, disciplining your mind to be able to be more in tune to what's going on around you so that you can become more familiar with different sensory experiences. It is a technique that has been extracted from Buddhist practices, but I use it in a more secular way. It's not Buddhism that I'm promoting, but the techniques can be very helpful. The techniques are geared towards helping one to regulate and control their emotions, behavior and attentiveness more effectively.

The techniques help you to relax and clear your mind so that you do not stay focused on a thought that may cause stress or anxiety. Instead, you just briefly reflect on the thought and just say, "Oh it's a thought" and let the thought pass on. Learning to let certain thoughts come and go is part of the process. The other part of it is to be aware of your breathing in a natural way and to sustain focus on your breathing. Additionally, you notice the natural sensory experiences around you so you might be focused on something that you're listening to, you might be paying attention to something you're looking at, it might be something that you're tasting, so it's being able to keep your attention on whatever the sensory experience is in the moment and any intrusive thoughts that are coming into your mind while you're doing that you just let them go and keep your mind on whatever the experience is that you're having in the moment.

CT: Could you give an example of one of the mindfulness techniques that you use with your clients?

BES: I might say to the family and to the children there are a lot of fun activities that we will be doing and one is where I'll have you taste something and then you're going to just tell me a little bit about what that experience is like for you. A traditional exercise is using a raisin to taste and look at, but I use jellybeans so the kids and their parents can pick a jellybean and we look at it and focus on the way the jellybean looks. Then I instruct them to put the jellybeans in their mouths, let it move around, and to notice the way it feels in their mouths then gradually let it dissolve. As that's happening, notice how the jellybean changes in its texture and its taste and then once it's disintegrated or sort of gone then gradually swallow and notice the way it feels as swallowing.

CT: When did you become interested in using MBSR to treat children with neurobehavioral challenges?

BES: Well in 1995 I worked in Children's Hospital Oakland in the Hematology Oncology Inpatient Unit and we were looking into methods to help children manage pain. At that time, it was mainly used with people that had any illness related to stress that could seriously impact their medical condition, for example, they would use it for patients with heart conditions. It was really being promoted by Jon Kabat-Zinn in Massachusetts and then he had written a book and it was spreading a little bit more through pockets in the country. There was an individual that had been trained in Massachusetts and moved to the Bay area so he was offering the mindfulness training to practitioners, but the practitioners were all focused on the health of adults, so we were the first to look at children. In our area no one else was considering using mindfulness with children. We did a study and we found that there was significant improvement in the children's ability to manage pain more effectively and this was with about 10 children across about 8 weeks in an hour long session, but we never got around to publishing the story. ...continue to page 2.

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From that experience I then saw that it was very beneficial to use. I had to go through a certification program in Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction and I actually saw the value for myself too. From there I started integrating it into my clinical work with children who had problems regulating their behavior, emotions, attention and I found it to be very useful for those kids and especially for those kids who had Autism Spectrum Disorders, ADHD, Anxiety, Depression, so those were the kids that I was mainly using it with.

CT: How effective are mindfulness techniques in helping children with neurobehavioral challenges? What have your studies been finding?

BES: There have not been a lot of studies done to look at its effectiveness with kids on the spectrum or with ADHD, it's really very sparse. Recently I was able to start up a study at [Summit School in Elgin, Illinois] to look at it in a closer way. Our findings were that the kids really enjoyed the activities. We found that the kids were really eager to try it and make it fun.

Each group was focused on a particular sensory experience so we had a variety of activities that they did to emphasize that experience. We kept it moving and changing so that they would enjoy it and also allowed an opportunity to the kids to evaluate the experience for themselves so that we encouraged more thinking and reflection. It was very well received by the children and the school as helpful. The experience was also helpful for my own practice.

For example, in a listening mindfulness activity, the kids might have listened to some chimes. I wanted them to notice the differences in the chimes, you know one sound over the other, and then I asked the kids to choose an experience that they like the best that was the most calming for them and easiest for them to pay attention to. Some prefer the tasting one some prefer the listening one, some kids like to look so it's about figuring out what works best for them and then being able to use that when they go home and then helping parents to encourage practice you know in the home.

CT: What mindfulness techniques can parents use at home to help their children with stress reduction?

BES: I've had a number of kids that had problems managing their behavior where they really like the eating mindfulness activity would help them and so they'll ask to have a jellybean when they're starting to get upset and then they'll be able to shift over and will start to pay attention to the process of starting to taste the jellybean and they really can get into it.

It's a matter of recognizing when your child is starting to feel stressed. Depending on their intellectual cognitive functioning and their level of self-awareness, a child may need people in their environment to cue them that this is a time to use the mindfulness technique. So, more often than not, the support of parents to say to their child "you're starting to look a little stressed, how about doing your tasting mindfulness exercise?" or "why don't you just be still and notice your breathing right now?" helps the child shift their focus away from the stressful situation, reducing their stress.

Parents can practice the techniques with their child by inducing a slightly frustrating situation then immediately switching over to do a mindfulness activity to teach their child to regulate a stressful experience. That would also be helpful in training the child so that they can integrate their mindfulness techniques better in the real world.

For more information about Dr. Evans-Smith, Mindfulness research, or the RNBC Stress and Anxiety Clinic, please contact us at 847-933-9339 or info@rnbc.org.

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