

# Pupils' minds put to work with lessons in meditation

Sam Lister Health Editor

Pupils at a leading public school are to receive weekly 40-minute classes in meditation and stress relief in a ground-breaking addition to the school curriculum.

Schoolboys aged 14 and 15 at Tonbridge School, in Tonbridge, Kent, were given their first lesson yesterday as part of a course designed with psychologists from the universities of Oxford and Cambridge.

The project — the first to introduce meditation skills as a regular subject on the curriculum — has been designed specifically for adolescents and comes after the success of a pilot study at the school last year.

The “mindfulness” course for Year 10 pupils will last eight weeks. It is designed to develop skills in concentration and to combat anxiety, showing teenagers the benefits of silence and helping them to identify and escape corrosive mindsets that could lead to mental health problems such as depression, eating disorders and addiction.

The course develops other exercises to help to improve attention — rather than allowing the mind to be “hijacked” by emotional issues, regrets, worries about the past and future and other distractions. This can be done in a number of ways such as by focusing on breathing, parts of the body or movement.

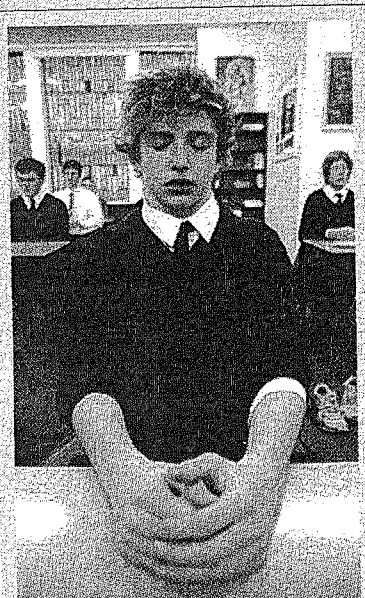
Mindfulness originated in Eastern meditation traditions such as Buddhism but is now an established secular discipline. A growing body of research supports wider use of the approach to address transient stress and deeper mental health problems, including recommendations from the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence that it be offered on the NHS to patients suffering from depression.

The project is a collaboration with staff at Charterhouse and Hampton schools — with both institutions planning similar schemes — as well as the Mindfulness Centre at Oxford and the Wellbeing Institute at Cambridge.

Richard Burnett, a divinity teacher and housemaster at Tonbridge who is leading the course, told *The Times* that the lessons demanded a “culture change” in the perceptions of silence for teachers and pupils.

“One of the things about schools is that silence is associated with power — the teacher tells the pupils to be

## Staying focused



A student in a mindfulness class

● The first lesson, being run this week, is described as “puppy training” — comparing the mind with a puppy that needs to learn how to “stay” and focus on one thing, rather than running around in a distracted fashion

● Other stages of the course include: establishing calm and concentration; recognising rumination; developing present-moment awareness in the everyday; slowing and savouring activities; stepping back from thoughts that hijack you; allowing, accepting and being with difficult emotions; reflection and making it personal

● It uses figures from popular culture to help to explain the benefits of mindfulness, including rugby player Jonny Wilkinson, who uses meditation techniques to help his concentration when kicking for goal, and Po, a lethargic panda who transforms his attitude in the DreamWorks’ film *Kung Fu Panda*

● Each class has one 40-minute lesson a week, with a weekly MP3 file of mindfulness exercises that pupils are encouraged to listen to before evening homework

Source: Mindfulness in Schools Project

quiet. What you need to do is convey the idea that silence is a positive activity to be savoured and enjoyed,” he said.

He said that while some children involved in the trial had been sceptical, most had embraced the challenge that it posed in the classroom. The pupils said that they hoped to use the mindfulness in the future to help to battle anxieties and to put things in perspective. They also said that they found it helpful for getting to sleep and becoming less nervous about school cricket matches.

Mark Williams, director of the Mind-

fulness Centre at Oxford, said that Tonbridge was the first school to introduce a full meditation course in a practical rather than academic context.

Professor Williams said: “This is not about converting people to Buddhism,

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but showing there is scientific evidence that these practices are useful. So why deny them from being used?”

In March Tonbridge is to host a conference, with Professor Williams as a speaker, that aims to encourage mindfulness uptake in schools.

Andrew McCulloch, chief executive of the Mental Health Foundation, said mindfulness training also offered the chance to take proactive steps to avoid depression and anxiety in later life.

“These problems have their roots in early life, so if you can learn techniques when you are young you might never have a breakdown,” he said.