

Mindfulness: Opening the doors to mental health and wellbeing

Jo Price, Director of Corpo-rate Services, University of Kent Academies Trust (UKAT) explains her conversion to mindfulness and its value to staff, students and the community

Always vigilant for personal development opportunities, I had frequently read and heard about the benefits, indeed wonders, of mindfulness and how meditation was like going to the gym, but working out the brain instead of your biceps.

I signed up to an eight-week course (two hours every Sunday evening) at my local Quakers community hall. Alongside nine other adults I discovered yoga mats, Teapigs liquorice and peppermint tea and the benefits of regular meditation. I confess: I never found nirvana, I can't say that my mind didn't wander throughout the various practices. But I can say that I found something very special that had been missing in my life: kindness and compassion and a real sense of being ok – what some might call inner peace.

New perspective on challenges & successes

Truthfully this course really did change my life. It gave a new perspective on my challenges and successes. Ultimately it gave me a very new way to live and be, that's the crux of mindfulness, learning to just 'be' with whatever life brings your way. I was genuinely amazed by the shift in my thinking and perspective. What was really impressive was that this shift was shared by the group: my mindfulness counterparts had similar stories

of finding a new sense of wellbeing at work, at home, with family and friends. The changes were really significant for everyone that attended.

I was really taken aback that such a course could create this much positive change, across a diverse section of everyday people attending for two hours on a Sunday evening! How was it possible that over a period of only eight weeks, we really could change our perspective on life? Our mental health had improved, and most importantly, we were enjoying our daily life with a sense of fulfilment.

I quickly realised that this really was a gift, a gift that deserved sharing. So I took on my next exciting challenge – to bring mindfulness to my place of work, to offer students and staff the tools to live a happier, more balanced and easier way of life. Maybe this was my nirvana moment, I wanted to bring mindfulness to our schools ASAP – in the present moment.

Inspired, enthused and mindfully proactive, I met with the Executive Principal of UKAT, Judy Rider and shared my enlightenment (without my yoga mat and new love for Teapigs liquorice and peppermint tea) and managed to convey my thoughts with clarity and vision. This was that mindfulness could be a great investment for Brompton Academy students, staff and the wider community. Gifted with an executive principal who was innovative and not afraid to think outside the box, I was given the go-ahead to grow my idea and was tasked to make it happen.

With a little research, mainly using the wonders of the internet, I was led quickly to the Mindfulness in Schools Project (MiSP), a non-profit organisation teaching secular mindfulness to students, teachers, parents and carers using the .b (dot-be) courses. They are an established organisation and they know their beans when it comes to offering mindfulness in schools.

Through MiSP I was able to locate a qualified and experienced tutor and we started with our first mindfulness .b course on a Wednesday after school. It was a success, students really enjoyed the course (particularly tasting and eating chocolate mindfully). I could see the benefits quickly as students warmed to the easy mindful techniques of FOFBOC (feet on floor, bottom on chair) and 7/11 (relaxation breathing) and were receptive to the excellent teaching materials with easy watchable animations.

I offered several 20-minute presentations to staff to introduce the concept of mindfulness. We quickly had our first cohort of 13 staff signed up ready for their eight-week course in October 2016. The tutor, Lorraine Millard, was a real find, a qualified psychotherapist and mindfulness practitioner who also happened to be employed by our lead sponsor, the University of Kent. Lorraine knew how to pitch the course to a group of enthusiastic teachers and support staff. She was compassionate, sensitive, flexible and extremely humorous. She made it clear that if you didn't do your home practice, you could still come along to the next session and it would be ok.

Mindfulness changes the dynamic

We now have approximately 70 staff that have completed the eight-week course. The general vibe is that introducing mindfulness was a good decision and there is a different feeling among those mindful participants. I have noticed that relationships have improved between colleagues. There is more understanding and a shared collective that we all still work tirelessly, daily, in busy demanding jobs, but we have time to connect through a few words or just a smile. I can see the difference, we have changed the dynamic of our academy.

Since those early days in 2016, I have qualified as a MiSP .b mindfulness practitioner and now deliver the .b courses to students at the academy. Mindfulness is built into the curriculum. All of our year 7 students have one hour every Thursday in which I teach them

Young people find a toolkit to calm down, to focus, to concentrate, to understand what stress is. And they are learning to be ok when it's not ok.

how to be more mindful, more resilient, more balanced and ultimately to be a bit more in touch with the beautiful world that we live in.

It's working. Young people can quickly find a toolkit to calm down, to focus, to concentrate, to understand what stress is. And they are learning to be ok when it's not ok.

I also run the .b course with students that have been identified as vulnerable: maybe they are having a difficult time at home, maybe they are exhibiting signs of anxiety, stress or depression and they are not coping. These groups are working really well and the young people are learning that they cannot always change their circumstances but they can change how they respond.

Sometimes, I am accompanied by my dog Monty, who is a professional mindfulness hound. He is known for his epic moments of relaxation and meditation (sleep) and the young people adore him. I use him to demonstrate focus and concentration: as he is very ball focused, he also knows a trick or two. Monty's addition to teaching .b has been truly magnificent. Whoever said never work with children and animals is missing out.

To date, mindfulness at UKAT is built into our curriculum, on offer to staff during training and development schedules and made available to students who need it most. Mindfulness is also delivered in the evenings to our parents/carers and the local community. We are developing a hub of healthy mindsets and opening the doors to mental health and wellbeing.

**Originally published in SSAT JOURNAL 1
- Spring 2018**