

## Mindfulness: An Approach for Learning and for Life

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### Abstract

Although present for thousands of years in various traditions, the practice of mindfulness has been growing in dedicated ways since Jon Kabat-Zinn introduced his mindfulness-based stress reduction program to students in 1979. The physical, psychological and social benefits of “paying attention in the moment” have been well-documented since then, and benefits for student learning are now being recognized. In the era of “helicopter parenting” and growing competition for the attention of our students (and ourselves), students need to learn how to learn, but also need to learn how to increase focus, improve memory and foster an independent, self-generated ability to lessen anxiety and cope with stress. If we model these skills ourselves and—through dedicated classroom time—feature them as part of university preparation for life and work, we will help students build foundational attributes and skills for the future. In this report I present data from the National College Health Assessment-II (Spring 2013) to give a snapshot of the anxiety self-reported by Canadian students, then describe a two-minute mindfulness activity that I regularly use with first-year students in a university skills course. It is simple to make this activity a regular feature of classroom learning, improving student focus, lessening anxiety, and giving them skills for a challenging future.

**Key Words:** Mindfulness; Learning; Anxiety; Grit; Life skills

### Report

After twenty years of university teaching, I am aware of new challenges: my students have increasingly limited attention spans and a growing reluctance to “settle in” at the beginning of class; they are unprepared (and frequently have no pens or pencils, no paper, no books); they have an underdeveloped sense of independence when faced with new tasks or ambiguities. (These “millennials” also have a set of corresponding strengths, but that is not my subject.) I have also noticed that, with my new position in our Teaching and Learning Centre, I have less time to transition to class, and often have a five-minute break to leave a meeting, eat lunch, and begin teaching.

I would like to see my students gain an increased sense of focus and purpose, a reduction in their levels of anxiety and stress, and increased resilience or “grit” in the face of adversity—whether that is in the face of crisis and tragedy or simply in the face of typical university course loads.

While preparing to teach a new course in university skills (called UNIV1003: Everything I Need to Know in First Year), I attended a presentation by Meredith Henry, a counsellor with Student Services, who shared data from the National College Health Assessment-II from Spring 2013. This survey is undertaken by the American College Health Association, collects input from 34,039 students at 32 Canadian 4-year

colleges and universities, with a 20.4% response rate. UNB Saint John has 2,000 students and the 2013 survey contains our most recent NCHA-II results.

**Table 1. Mental Health Findings at UNB Saint John in 2013**

In the 12 months preceding the survey, students reported that they had:

	UNBSJ	Canada
• felt so depressed, it was difficult to function	35.0%	37.5%
• felt overwhelming anxiety	59.2%	56.5%
• felt overwhelming anger	45.1%	42.2%
• seriously considered suicide	8.5%	9.5%
• attempted suicide	2.4%	1.3%
• intentionally self-harmed	8.2%	6.6%

As instructors, we are required to teach skills and course content. However, in the face of these findings, it strikes me that students are not very ready to learn when they enter the classroom. I am not a counsellor, but it seems that our students need to learn life skills as well as academic and professional skills—and they might need to learn life skills before they learn anything else. I began considering how learning such a skill (in a finite way, with no “expert” input from me) could improve academic learning. I had been reading about the practice of mindfulness, when it occurred to me this might be a partial answer.

### **Mindfulness in My Classroom**

Jon Kabat-Zinn (2012), founder of the Mindfulness Stress Reduction Program at University of Massachusetts Medical School, defines mindfulness in a simple way as “paying attention in a particular way; on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally” (p. 1). What I ask of students is that they be prepared to engage or “pay attention” for the time we are together, and I decided to try a simple exercise: once students arrived, I welcomed them, made a brief announcement about what we would be doing that day, then closed the door. I then invited them to “settle in” for two minutes, as outlined in the exercise below. I put a short paragraph on mindfulness in my course syllabus, and spent time in the first two weeks of the course talking about learning, focus, mindfulness and the research showing the positive effects of such a practice on both learning and quality of life and health. And I allowed for student to opt out, if they were uncomfortable with the exercise. They could simply arrive two minutes late to class, or sit quietly and lookout the window. I emphasized that this is a secular practice and not a religious or spiritual one, and invited them to speak with me about it at any time.

#### ***Exercise***

Sit comfortably in your chair, with your hands empty and relaxed, both feet firmly on the floor. Sit upright, with shoulders relaxed. Close your eyes, or lower and relax your gaze. Simply pay attention to your breathing. Accept it. Don’t try to control it. Just inhale, exhale. If thoughts come, accept them, and let them float through your mind. Breathe.

As an alternative, we would sometimes do a “body scan” or partway through the exercise, slowly come to an awareness of our physical surroundings, in terms of sound, light, feeling. I also seek opportunities to talk very briefly about mindfulness and resilience throughout the term, using resources such as Angela Lee Duckworth’s TED Talk on “Grit.”

As the final part of the “Furious Five,” I invited participants to engage in a shortened 60-second version of this exercise. Participants later commented how welcome such a brief respite is in a busy day, and one reported trying this with her own students since the Teaching Showcase.

## Results

Halfway through the term, and then again at the end of term, I sought anonymous feedback from the students on various aspects of the course, and particularly on this mindfulness exercise. Having done this with two cohorts of first-year students, I have had no negative feedback to date. Several students have mentioned incorporating this into their sleep routine and into their test/exam preparation. Students request this exercise, if I forget (and I am distracted!) at the beginning of class. Anxious students and student athletes especially appreciate it. Students are more ready to begin class, and automatically put away phones, etc. and take out course materials. Once the 60 seconds (or two minutes) are over, they are quiet, more relaxed and looking at me—to begin our work for the day.

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