

# *The Way of Mindful Education: Cultivating Well-Being in Teachers and Students*

## *Chapter 13: Working with Stress and Trauma*

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Received Sept 2021

Accepted for publication Oct 2021

Published Nov 2021

### **Abstract**

Thank you to Norton Publishing and Daniel Rechtschaffen for permission to reprint these excerpts. As we learn more about trauma and its debilitating effects on the brain and well-being, *The Way of Mindful Education* is ever more valued and appreciated by holistic educators.

Rechtschaffen, D. (2014). *The Way of Mindful Education: Cultivating Well-being in Teachers and Students*. Norton.

There is profound healing possible through mindfulness, but we need to be very aware of the mechanism of trauma and the effects of different mindfulness practices. In David Treleaven's thesis on meditation and trauma (Treleaven, 2013), he raises a crucial inquiry into the dangers of mindfulness becoming a dissociative practice rather than an embodying and healing one. To mitigate these dangers we need to get thorough training in trauma and stress-related disorders. Not only can we be trained to be sensitive and skilled with our students, we can learn how to care for our own stress and trauma.

This article is accompanied by an additional excerpt called "Roots of Emotions," a mindfulness activity referenced in the chapter. See an additional lesson plan entitled Shake It Off, which is from *The Mindful Education Workbook: Lessons for teaching mindfulness to students*.

Rechtschaffen, D. (2016). *The Education Workbooks: Lessons for teaching mindfulness to students*. Norton.

Keywords: Mindfulness, Education, Trauma

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Jose clenches the red squishy ball in his hand like prey in the jaws of a lion. His eyes, however, are closed, and gradually his shoulders begin to fall and the pace of his breath begins to slow. His fist uncoils little by little with each breath, like the petals of a flower opening, until finally the ball slips from his hand and bounces to the ground, rolling over to Gerardo, who is looking in amazement back at Jose. The rest of us – myself and four 13-year-old boys – are looking at each other with awed smiles. We know that something profound has taken place.

These boys are entangled in a complex gang culture that permeates their school, their friends, and their families. I am working as a therapist at their school and leading mindfulness-based anger management groups. For months we have been practicing the basics: mindful breathing, heartfulness, and awareness of difficult emotions. Inviting

them beneath their tough exteriors and into more vulnerable, emotional realms is an edgy process. Their ire sometimes ends up directed at me, or they taunt each other, and it takes all of my own mindfulness practices to stay grounded, patient, and open-hearted.

These boys – on the very frontier of manhood – love to act cool and tough, though their fear and insecurities are easily seen through their bravado. I see it as my job to honor and support the development of these new men, while simultaneously nurturing the little boys inside. When I offer a mindfulness practice for the first time, they sit silently for a few minutes before making rude noises and kicking each other. Yet after only a few classes they begin to say things like, "This is weird, it actually makes me really calm," or "It's like I am alone and I don't need to worry about anything."

Although youth may initially resist mindfulness practices, once they have experienced the direct beneficial effects in their minds and bodies, the practices become allies that they rely on.

When I feel like the students I am working with have adequate tools for recognizing their emotions and working with them, I start to address the anger more directly. We have a red ball we often use as a talking piece. When someone speaks they hold the ball, and then shoot it into the little basketball hoop to conclude their turn. They enjoy this, so I take the red ball and tell them we're going to play a game called Anger Ball. "Who has something they're feeling upset about right now?" I ask. Jose pops his hand up immediately. I toss him the ball, and he launches into a tirade about some kid from another school who is bad-mouthing his Dad. Jose's dad has just been taken to prison for molesting his sister. Obviously kids making fun of his father is hitting a deeply raw nerve. One can only imagine how confusing and painful these emotions are.

"If I see that kid I'll rip him apart!" He furiously squeezes and twists the ball, spewing his words in a steady, unbroken stream of anger and anguish.

"Do you see what you're doing with that ball?" I ask him.

"Yeah! This is what I want to do to him!"

"Okay, go for it. We're all with you. Supporting you. You can be as angry as you need to be." He looks at me for a moment, wondering if I am for real. His eyes flare and he throws the ball down, stomps on it, and throws it against the wall. By now he is panting, and the room feels like a shaken soda can ready to pop. I offer him a seat and gently ask the group to assist by sending him some heartfulness while he focuses all his energy into the ball with his hands.

"Jose, you have as long as you need; just hold the ball with all your feelings, and at the same time practice your vacuum breath (Roots of Emotion Lesson, p. 217), and see if you can let it suck up the anger. When the anger goes, you can drop the ball. Until then we will just sit here with you and do our own vacuum breaths to support you"

I watch him claw at the ball for about three or four more minutes, and then slowly – as he breathes and the rest of the boys breathe with him – his whole body relaxes. The tension in the room eases palpably, and slowly, his hand uncoils and the ball falls to the ground. All the boys sit there for a moment with wide-open eyes. "Let me try that," says Gerardo.

The next week in group, Gerardo tells us the story of how he got jumped by two kids who were trying to start a

fight. "I felt my fists tighten, and then I remembered the anger ball and started breathing. I relaxed and looked up at them; they seemed kind of confused and scared themselves. I just told them to calm down and I walked away. They cursed at me a bit but it didn't stick." By stepping out of the usual pattern of emotional reactivity, Gerardo was able to observe, objectively and respond with discernment.

Many other stories can be told in this vein, with youth beginning to change habitual destructive patterns.

Jose divines, "I guess the anger ball is like that hot potato game where people are passing it around because it's too hot. One person steps to another with their anger, and that person hits someone else, and we keep passing it around because no one knows mindfulness."

Research on trauma, neglect, and abuse have given us a window into their tragic effects on the brain, on gene expression, and into the patterns that those suffering from them develop over a lifetime. The Adverse Childhood Experience (ACE) study has shown how difficult early childhood experiences set a path for obesity, drug use, criminality, and other destructive behaviors. "The ACE Study also showed that as the ACE score increased the number of risk factors for the leading causes of death increased. Thus, persons with high ACE scores are later at much higher risk from health and medical conditions resulting from their choice of remedies for their pain. While these approaches are effective in the short term, they often have dire long-term consequences such as serious chronic health and social problems" (Felitti et al., 1998).

Kids need to know what to do with toxic stress. If they are not given adequate practices and venues to relieve their tensions, the basic physics of the body necessitate some other form of release. If they can't do so in a healthy way, kids can choose the endless unhealthy opportunities at their disposal. Instead of trying to stop drug use, promiscuity, violence, and other destructive behaviors, we need to offer healthy alternatives. With love, care, and attention, even children in the most terrible environments can grow up resilient and healthy.

Every child grows up with some stress, but many grow up with significant trauma, whether it stems from neglect, a random accident, or ongoing abuse. Trauma distances us from the present moment, disassociates us from our bodies, and turns us away from our emotions and difficult sensations. Mindfulness, on the other hand, returns us to the present moments, bringing our attention back to our emotions, sensations, and our ever-transforming experience.

Trauma arises when a distressing experience or an ongoing difficulty is so great that we lose our capacity to respond adequately. Stephen Cope puts it well in his introduction to the book *Overcoming Trauma through Yoga* when he says, “In Trauma, the body’s alarm systems turn on and then never quite turn off. And we experience the intense suffering of never truly feeling relaxed, at ease in life, always intensely on guard, with the primitive brain constantly scanning for threat or opportunity. Our inner sentry is always on watch” (Emerson, 2011).

With trauma, our inner sentry is always on high alert as if the initial trauma was still physically imminent, even if the current situation is completely safe. If a child is having a trauma reenactment, which means that they are reliving a traumatic experience, the usual therapeutic interventions resemble embodied mindfulness practices. One must invite the student to orient themselves back into the room, helping them feel their body in their chair, seeing the colors and shapes around them, hearing the sounds of their immediate surroundings. You want to help the student reorient to the present moment, where they are safe and sound.

Trauma separates us from the present moment, so mindfulness is a good antidote to invite kids into a restful space in their bodies. It is also imperative to help kids find a place where they feel safe. Some trauma trainings work on helping people find a safe space they can return to in their minds whenever they get too afraid. With mindfulness we are cultivating an inner experience of stillness, safety, and happiness. Creating this base of safety gives kids with a history of trauma, or continue to live in traumatic situations, a refuge.

The hope is that mindfulness can intervene to relax the “inner sentry” and bring the nervous system back to its balanced state. With the integrative effects that mindfulness has on the brain, the hope would be that the inevitable stressors of life will not get caught in the body in the first places. It has been shown how two people can share the same threatening experience but respond to it very differently – one with trauma and the other with only a harrowing story. The determining factor seems to be whether the person has the inner skills to meet the experience with resilience and hope rather than hopelessness and shame. In *Waking the Tiger*, Peter Levine says, “Traumatic symptoms stem from the frozen residue of energy that has not been resolved and discharged. This residue remains trapped in the nervous system where it can wreak havoc on our bodies and spirits” (Levine, 1997).

Most of us are familiar with the idea of the fight-or-flight response. The third option that is less often spoken of but just as real is the freeze response. If a mouse sees a hawk

flying close, for example, its whole body may freeze. If the hawk flies away, the mouse will go through an elaborate shaking response. Humans have this same freeze instinct, but most of us don’t remember how to shake out the stress. This leaves many of us storing unshaken stress in our bodies.

Long ago we knew how to naturally release our trauma and stress, but now, as the boys in my anger management class understood so well, we pass the hot potato around. When we don’t teach our children the inner resources to meet difficult experiences or give them appropriate methods to release trauma, they carry it into their bodies and inflict this pain on either themselves or the world around them.

The ideal situation is for students to have a safe and corrective experience of being able to release their stress so they can come back to rest. We can offer students the requisite experience of a safe interpersonal space to rewire their relationship with past stressors. The nervous system cannot learn a new way forward until it has had a true visceral experience of another way. The brain literally needs to be rewired, and this rewiring can only happen with repeated empathic interactions. A student may be extremely mistrusting because of a traumatic history of abuse from older people in his or her life. Through the teacher’s patience, caring, and understanding, the student may be able to learn that not all older people are unsafe, and some may truly want to help.

Bessel A. van der Kolk says, “The goal of treatment of PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder) is to help people live in the present, without feeling or behaving according to irrelevant demands of the past” (van der Kolk, 1994). Mindfulness is the doorway to the present moment. We systematically teach students how to witness the hijacking system of trauma and invite them back into their bodies in the present moment.

Embodied mindfulness can integrate a stressed system, but we need to be very aware that mindfulness practices can also provoke difficult emotional responses in children that can have adverse effects if there is not adequate containment. Usually kids learn to build emotional armoring, and when a mindfulness class opens a safe and caring atmosphere these locked-in emotions may spring forth. We want students to have a safe space to bring their full emotional experience, but if the container is not adequately held, the release will be retraumatization rather than a corrective experience.

There is profound healing possible through mindfulness, but we need to be very aware of the mechanism of trauma and the effects of different mindfulness practices. In David Treleaven’s thesis on meditation and trauma

(Treleaven, 2013), he raises a crucial inquiry into the dangers of mindfulness becoming a dissociative practice rather than an embodying and healing one. Treleaven explores the most scientifically relevant and effective trauma trainings such as Peter Levine's somatic experiencing as well as sensorimotor psychotherapy. Though he concurs with all of the research on the health benefits of mindfulness, he argues that without adequate understanding of trauma a mindfulness teacher could unwittingly push a student into a sensory awareness that was overly distressing. Treleaven says, "According to Levine, attending to somatic contractions with great intensity is not recommended, especially for individuals with a history of trauma. While this is not to suggest that traumatized individuals should not meditate or dance, it asks teachers within these traditions to become knowledgeable about the potential pitfalls of contemplative and somatically based practices."

Trauma arises because of a level of somatic distress that the psyche of the individual cannot contain, one that causes them to split off from themselves to protect their basic sanity. We would never throw a child back into an abusive situation in which he or she had been traumatized, but entering back into the somatic experience, without proper therapeutic containment, is ostensibly the same thing as the original trauma. The body is flooded with the same terror, and the protective mechanisms come right back up, reinforcing the old pattern. Treleaven says, "This places traumatized meditators in the precarious position of being mindful of sensations that may perpetuate a fear-immobility spiral."

To mitigate these dangers we need to get thorough training in trauma and stress-related disorders. Not only can we be trained to be sensitive and skilled with our students, we can learn how to care for our own stress and trauma. We all have vicarious stress and trauma from teaching, as well as the scrapes and bruises we collected on our journey to adulthood. In expanding the capacity to care for ourselves, our hearts stretch open and gain the emotional navigation skills to support students in the landscape of their own hearts.

### **Mindful Pointers**

It is important to remember that mindfulness practices, particularly heartfulness, can stimulate difficult emotional responses in children. Develop a strong network of collateral resources, such as school therapists, social workers, and local agencies. You can use these resources to consult with and refer students to if they reveal trauma or abuse.

If you have abuse or trauma in your own history, it can be very healing to seek therapy or trauma support, such as

eye movement desensitization and reprocessing, somatic experiencing, or Hakomi. Not only can this help you in transforming your own trauma, it can help you in understanding how to be of support to your students.

It is extremely important to understand the stressors and traumas of the students you work with. Learn about your student's communities, families, and local environments to gain a greater understanding of their stressors, as well as their resources.

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### **Roots of Emotions**

#### **An activity in *The Way of Mindful Education*, by Daniel Rechtschaffen, pp. 217-223**

Since we have learned the language of our minds and our bodies, we can now understand where emotions come from. When we get angry, sad, excited, or anything else, we usually begin to think a lot. If we are angry, we remember the bad thing that happened or fantasize about saying something mean in return. We often get trapped in a mental loop, either repetitively reviewing what happened in the past or wondering what we will do in the future.

Instead of being consumed by thoughts, we can work with our body sensations. Every time we have a circling thought, we can imagine that it is like a branch with leaves fluttering in the wind. You can put your arm up in the air and picture it like this branch of thoughts. If you track down the branch, down your arm, there is always a root of emotion in your body.

Every time you are scared, angry, worried, happy, you can track the emotions down into your body and see what it feels like. Whenever you have lots of thoughts, it means that there is a corresponding feeling down in your body.

The great thing about understanding this is that when you can identify the feeling in your body, you can work with it. Trying to get rid of thoughts is like trying to block the ocean waves; they just keep coming. When we go to the source of emotions we can learn to feel them in our bodies and work with them constructively. If you're feeling angry you can't fix it by thinking about it, but you can go right inside, feel the hot, tight, anger, and let the body sensations go. It will feel so much better than repeating the same angry thoughts over and over in your head.

### **Learning Objectives**

Learning to feel emotions directly in the body and letting them go.

Emotional regulation and letting go of difficult emotions.  
Relaxation techniques and self-control.

### Preparation

This practice can bring up emotions for students. Make sure that you are in a contained space and remind the class of confidentiality. It is necessary to have practiced the language of emotions lesson as well as the stream of thoughts lesson. You want students to already have a good grasp on how they feel their emotions in their bodies and to be able to witness their thoughts.

### Sample Script: Vacuum Breath

*The vacuum breath can help us relax and let go of stressful feelings really fast. Every single person – grown-ups, kids, teenagers, teachers, even the president of the United States get stressed sometimes. There are certain events that arise that create reactions inside us. Like when someone jumps out of a closet and scares you, your whole body would tighten up, you would probably take a quick breath, and then freeze.*

*It's easy to see that kind of reaction in the body, right? Well, other types of reactions happen all the time in the body, but we don't notice them as much. Maybe you get left out of something you wanted to do with your friends, or someone says something mean to you. Every time something like this happens, our bodies react in a certain way. If we feel angry, our anger may feel like tightness in our bellies or heat in our faces. When you feel sad, you may feel an ache in your heart or a heaviness in your body. No one likes to feel this way, but we don't know any ways to make ourselves feel better. With the vacuum breath we can find these unpleasant feelings, suck them up with our vacuum cleaner, and then let them go. So let's start.*

*First get comfortable in your mindful body and let's take three big mindful breaths together. Good. Now let's scan through our bodies to see where we may feel any stress or difficult emotions. As you go through your body see if there's pain, tension, or uncomfortable feelings anywhere. Right now we are not trying to get rid of these feelings, we are just trying to notice them.*

*Starting at your head, see if there is any stress, any headachy sensations, any jumpy thoughts, or anything else that is uncomfortable. Then move down through your shoulders and arms to see if there is any tightness or stress there. Then make your way through your heart and belly, feeling any emotions or painful sensations. Then make your way all the way down through your body, through your legs, all the way to your feet. Did anyone feel any uncomfortable feelings or difficult emotions?*

*Now that we have noticed the uncomfortable feelings, what can we do with them? Luckily, we have a vacuum in our bellies. When you breathe in, you can imagine the vacuum in your belly sucking in all the uncomfortable feelings you may have. Starting from your head, pull any headaches or annoying thoughts into the vacuum cleaner. Then move through your heart to suck up all the sadness or nervousness. Pull any tension or uncomfortable feeling from your arms, your legs, your entire body into your vacuum cleaner belly. Then hold the breath in the belly for three seconds. When you are ready, let all the air come out of your body and the hard feelings with it. Just like you were emptying all the dust out of the vacuum cleaner.*

*As you breathe all the air out, let your body totally relax. Let go. Then again take a good long breath, feeling any stress in your body and vacuuming it into your belly, holding the breath there for three seconds, and then realizing with your out breath. Let's try this vacuum breath for a whole minute starting right now.*

### Dialogue

This exercise often creates a dramatic difference in the students' experience of the room. Let the kids share how it made them feel personally, as well as how the room may feel different from before.

### Journaling Prompts

Drawing: Draw a picture of what it looks like when you are releasing all the stress from your body.

Writing: What uncomfortable emotions did you notice as you went through the body?

How did the vacuum breath affect your body?

When could you use this practice in your life?

### World Discovery

Now that the students have experienced the vacuum breath, they can do it anywhere. Remind them that if they get angry at their sibling, or their parents won't let them do something they really want to do, or something really scary happens, they can try the vacuum breath. I tell students that it works better than anything else to calm me down quickly and release some of the hard feelings that I have sometimes. Have them try it out over the next few days and then share about it during the next mindfulness lesson.

### Age and Stage

K-5 students can do a shortened variation of this practice. The visual of a vacuum cleaner in the belly pulling in all the uncomfortable feelings is helpful for them. The practice can

be very beneficial for students and the whole class when there is a lot of stress in the room, before a test, or after an incident. When doing the body scan with younger children, allow only a minute or so to go through the whole body exploring unpleasant feelings.

Sixth-12<sup>th</sup> grade students can explore in depth the intricacies of how emotions can be felt as physical sensations. It can be extremely liberating for students to track their emotional thoughts into their bodies, where they can relax them and let them go. With older students, you can take time during the body scan to feel into each body area to notice stress, pain and unpleasant emotions.

### **Things to Remember**

The vacuum breath can open up a lot of energy and emotion in the body. As always, get some training in trauma and have resources available in case intense emotions arise. When emotions do arise, it can be a great opportunity to support the students and let them know that everything is welcome in the class and there are no judgments on emotions.

Remember to let the students know that the goal isn't to get rid of these feelings but to simply notice them just as they are. We are trying to become aware of the emotions and let them relax, but we need to be sure that we are not pushing them away.

### **Acknowledgement**

Daniel Rechtschaffen, MA, LMFT, is the author of *The Way of Mindful Education*, *The Mindful Education Workbook*, and *Alphabreaths*. He is a senior advisor for Transformative Educational Leadership and the director of mindful education for Millennium Forum. He has organized the annual Mindfulness in Education Conference for over a decade and has led teacher trainings at centers such as Esalen, Omega Institute, and many education centers around the globe. Daniel has taught mindfulness through music, sports, storytelling, games and other creative and engaging approaches. He has been inspired to utilize mindfulness to help us become more conscious, compassionate, and committed to taking care of this miraculous world we live in. Daniel lives with his wife and son in the Pacific forests of Northern California where he spends most of his time gardening, writing, and playing in the woods with his young son.

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