Patricia A. Jennings explains why teachers should cultivate moment-to-moment awareness of thoughts, feelings, and surroundings.

1. **Mindfulness helps teachers understand our own emotions better**

**Exercise: Centering**

1. Before class, take a moment to get centered.
2. Stand with your feet about shoulder width and relax your knees, don’t lock them.
3. Bring your attention to a point in your abdomen about two inches below your navel and about an inch into your body.
4. Spend a few minutes focusing on this point and feeling gravity connecting your body to the Earth.

When I teach, I sometimes notice that my mind is so focused on thinking about what I need to do and how to do it that I’m not paying attention to the present moment. I have expectations about how things ought to be and I become attached to them, rather than noticing and accepting how things actually are.

This causes distress, making me emotionally volatile, which in turn affects my perceptions and makes me more sensitive to threat. I may imagine a student’s disruptive behavior is intentionally designed to interfere with my teaching when in fact it is the normal behavior of a child who needs help with his self-regulation. If I take his behavior personally, I may lose my temper and say something that makes matters worse.

Practicing mindfulness can help teachers to recognize our emotional patterns and proactively regulate how we behave, responding in the way we want to rather than reacting automatically. It can also help us to savor the positive moments in our job—when we feel the joy of true connection with our students or resonate with the joy and excitement our students feel when learning clicks for them.

**AFTER READING,**

- How might Centering support you in the classroom?
- Discuss ways that you already employ to recognize your emotional patterns?
- Discuss how you regulate your personal emotions in order to behave/respond in ways that will make the learning environment the best it can be.
- What will your group present for your one minute summary?
- How will you lead the whole group in the centering exercise?
2. Mindfulness helps us communicate more effectively with students

Our Mindful Mondays series (The Greater Good, U.C. Berkeley) provides ongoing coverage of the exploding field of mindfulness research.

During my first year of teaching I had no idea how to get my students to pay attention to my lessons, respond to directions, or behave appropriately. I thought that if I was nice to my students, they would like me, want to please me, and do what I wanted them to do.

However, I was wrong. My students didn’t respond or behave that way at all, and, day by day, my frustration grew to the point where I was impatient and snapping at them.

One day a supervisor came to observe my teaching and gave me some important feedback: She told me that I was saying “okay?” at the end of many of my instructions to students, giving them the message that whatever I asked of them was optional. No wonder they were so unresponsive!

After that feedback, I began to monitor myself to break this bad habit, and this helped me see how mindful self-awareness could help me succeed as a teacher.

AFTER READING,

- How can you be mindful of negatives and positives in learning and work environments?
- Love & Logic would advise asking, “What did I just say?” as a way to be sure your student/audience/children/coworkers received the message you intended. What other ways to you ensure that you are being perceived the way you want to be perceived?
- What will your group present for your one minute summary?
- How will your group share out things that you can do to successfully manage classroom transitions and ownership of learning?
3. **Mindfulness helps us manage students we find difficult**

**Exercise: Working with Difficult Emotions**

1. Think about a student you find challenging.

2. Recall the last time she or he did something that made teaching difficult.

3. What emotions does the memory elicit? Do you feel annoyed? Frustrated?

4. How does your body feel? For example, are your shoulders tense? Your stomach tight?

5. Don’t try to stop the feelings or change them. Just sit with them.

6. Listen to the thoughts that come from these feelings.

7. This practice is helpful because it will enable you to learn how your emotions function. This will help you to respond consciously, rather than unconsciously, to misbehavior.

8. It may help you to record these reactions in a journal.

All teachers have problems with particular students who misbehave in the classroom. Mindful awareness helps us attend to what’s happening with a child to cause them to misbehave.

Sometimes students misbehave because the environment is inappropriate for their developmental stage—for example, we can’t expect kindergarteners to sit quietly listening to an adult talk for long periods of time. Children exposed to trauma in their lives tend to be hyper vigilant—which consumes a lot of cognitive resources, and can lead them to learn more slowly than other students or to be overly sensitive to changes in environment.

Nonjudgmental awareness is an important aspect of mindfulness, too—one that involves accepting things as they are in the present moment. When we first practice mindful awareness, we often notice how hard it is not to judge. But, as we observe ourselves engaging in judgment, we become more aware of it in the moment, our mind begins to settle, and eventually our tendency to judge subsides.

Judgment often induces feelings of guilt and shame. Sometimes teachers judge their students harshly and unconsciously use guilt and shame as management techniques with their students—probably because they’ve learned these techniques as a child from their own parents. But there’s plenty of evidence that this approach doesn’t work. Rather than encouraging children to behave, it promotes resentment, distrust, and retaliation.

Mindfully recognizing our emotional responses toward students may help us understand why they are behaving the way they are. If we feel annoyed, the behavior is likely attention seeking. If we feel threatened, the behavior is likely a bid for power. If we feel hurt, the behavior is likely an attempt at revenge, and if we feel discouraged, the student is likely giving up. These feelings can help us respond more appropriately to the underlying issues of our students, and help us shift from a negative appraisal to a state of compassion.
AFTER READING,

- How can mindfulness of our emotions support us to be the best we can be for ourselves and our students?
- Discuss ways that you recognize difficult emotions in response to a student and how empathy and understanding of that student might change how your work with that student.
- What will your group present for your one minute summary?
- Can you lead the whole group in the Exercise: Working with Difficult Emotions?
4. Mindfulness helps us set up a positive learning environment

There is a mistaken belief among many teachers that we can and must control our students’ behavior. This sets us up for power struggles, where our attempts to control are likely to backfire.

It’s far better to create and maintain an effective learning environment by learning to control ourselves. We can control how we communicate, how we behave and where we position our bodies in space. We can set and reinforce expectations and limits. And, we can control the classroom physical space so that it supports learning.

A kindergarten teacher I know couldn’t get his students to stop running in the classroom, even after repeated reminders, and he was getting very frustrated. But, once he became mindful of the fact that his classroom furniture was arranged to create distinct “runways” in the class space and remembered that children have a natural inclination to run in open spaces, he could see what needed to be done: he moved the furniture to block the runways, and the children stopped running.

Knowing what’s going on in your classroom and with your students is critical to your ability to orchestrate the social-emotional dynamics and the physical spaces that are conducive to learning. Practicing mindful awareness helps you develop the skill of paying attention in the present moment and learning to see what’s truly happening in your classroom, allowing you to come up with better solutions to problems you see.

AFTER READING,

- How might mindfulness support creating a positive learning environment?
- Discuss how you have set up your environment to be an emotionally and physically safe environment for learning.
- What will your group present for your one minute summary?
- Be ready to share some examples (like the one in this section) with the whole group.
5. Mindfulness helps strengthen our relationship with students

Research on effective classroom management points to the importance of teacher-student relationships. We can set up great management systems involving guidelines and limits, but if our students don’t trust and respect us or think we don’t respect them, we’re in for some challenges.

Giving each student our full mindful attention for even a short period of class time gives him or her the message “I see you.” By making a connection with our students, we let them know we value them as individuals.

Because the goal of school is learning, we naturally tend to signal to students that we value high academic achievement. However, we need to be mindful when we see students displaying non-academic attributes, such as helpfulness, friendliness, creativity, problem-solving, and conflict resolution, and to communicate that we value these as well. Students feel connection with teachers when they know their teachers truly see them and appreciate them.

AFTER READING,

- Discuss and name how many different programs and/or practice in LISD are aimed at positively connecting with students, such as Capturing Kid’s Hearts.
- Share with the group, the ways in you build and manage positive relationships in your learning or work environment.
- What will your group present for your one minute summary?
- How will your group share out things that you can do to show appreciation to your students or coworkers?
6. Mindfulness helps us slow down when we need to

**Exercise: Wait Time**

1. Explain to students, “We know that kids learn better and teachers teach better when we give ourselves time to think about a question before answering it. I will wait about three seconds after I ask a question before I call on anyone to answer. This will give you time to think about how you’d like to answer. I will also give myself some time before I respond.”

2. Each time you do your three-second wait time, use it to mindfully take a nice, deep breath.

3. If you are standing, notice the weight of your feet on the ground.

4. Allow your awareness to broaden so that you can take in the entire class.

5. Scan the class, noticing each students as they raise their hands, and choose one you may not have called on much lately.

6. As the student answers, listen mindfully and spend time considering it.

Sometimes as new teachers we can be overly concerned about getting through our lesson plans and can unconsciously start to rush. Slowing down and deliberately pausing for a moment of mindfulness can give us time to ask ourselves how we are feeling, what’s happening in the classroom, and what our students need at that particular moment. It also models mindfulness for our students.

The speed at which students process information varies. Some students process auditory information very quickly, while others tend to have more visual or sensory-motor strengths. Younger children require more time to process than older children, though adults often forget this. No matter their ages, students process information better when there a little extra time, and consciously creating pauses throughout a lesson helps support learning.

Too often teachers forget to pause after asking a question or interrupt student pauses and hesitations, not giving students a chance to think through their answers. Pausing is helpful during lecturing (to give students time to absorb the information and consolidate their thinking) and during student work periods (to give students uninterrupted time to figure things out for themselves). It can also generate feelings of suspense and expectation, enlivening the classroom.

If we rush because we are anxious, we may miss these opportunities to deepen learning. Mindfulness can teach us to wait and be patient and to time our pauses appropriately.

**AFTER READING,**

- What are ways that you take the temperature, monitor and adjust the pace of learning to ensure all students are learning as intended.
- What will your group present for your one minute summary?
- How will your group lead the whole group through the Exercise: Wait Time?
7. Mindfulness helps us build community

Students have a basic need to belong to and contribute to a community. We can foster a sense of community by modeling caring and other prosocial behaviors, instituting caring routines, and mindfully listening to our students.

To cultivate a community of learners, we can provide students with opportunities to collaborate with and help one another—for example by having students work together in groups where each student has a specific task that contributes toward the outcome. Collaborative learning gives students the opportunity to help others and to reflect on the experiences and needs of others, which promotes empathy and perspective taking.

Another way to build community among students is through joint service learning projects, where students work together on giving back in some way to their community. Mindfully taking note of different student strengths and challenges can help teachers make these shared work opportunities enrich student learning and can help build a positive classroom climate.

AFTER READING,

- Share with your group, ways that you build a community of learners through social-emotional learning, new games, joint service learning projects, and others.
- Discuss ways that the Jigsaw activity that we are participating in a powerful social-emotional learning activity?
- What will your group present for your one minute summary?
- How will your group share a few ways in which you build an emotionally safe learning or work environment?