

## Beyond The Program - Uncertainty

4 messages

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### *Using Mindfulness to Prepare & Fortify Us and Our Kids for Uncertainty*



Life is full of ups and downs, and we never know when the rough spots might hit. A friend is diagnosed with a terminal illness. Our child gets a concussion while playing a sport at school. A partner loses a job. A family member gets arrested.

As teachers, we know our students may experience stress or trauma before coming to class. Neuroscience clearly shows that stress impedes learning. Our challenge as teachers is how to help our students when this occurs. We believe fortifying children with a daily dose of Inner Explorer is just what the doctor ordered.

Many children in the U.S. are regularly exposed to violence in their communities. In the last couple of years, the media has begun to cover these events enabling all of us to witness what many children experience. This knowledge creates unease for many and terror for those directly affected. Nervous systems are shaken and stress hormones - adrenalin and cortisol - course through our bodies. When this occurs, health is drastically affected: blood pressure and heart rates rise, digestive systems are compromised, sleep may become difficult. Nervous systems on 'high alert' often cause negative reactions rather than thoughtful responses.

Practicing mindfulness regularly creates equanimity in our bodies and minds so that when difficult events occur, we can be more resilient and make it through challenges more easily. Mindfulness primes the nervous system to react less severely to stressors.

You may remember the Boston Marathon bombing that occurred in 2013. One of the children tragically killed in the bombing attended a school that had been using Inner Explorer at the time. As we witnessed more and more children experience difficult circumstances, we wondered what impact Inner Explorer had in Boston. Responding to our inquiry, an

administrator wrote, “By continuing to participate in IE each day after the bombing, IE served as good trauma ‘first-aid’ by:

- Maintaining familiar routines and rituals
- On-going teaching of calm-down strategies
- Creating a safe space and sense of security
- Helping teachers and students with self-care”

While protecting our kids is what we all hope to do, it's clear that election rants, bullying, police violence, and street altercations are becoming increasingly more prevalent. As such, it's now more difficult than ever to shield them. Don't we owe it to our kids to do everything possible to help protect them as much as we are able? 'Pushing the button' with Inner Explorer is one great way to help our children address difficult realities as well as to enable them to appreciate the wonderful aspects of our world. We are privileged to be on this journey with you!

## NEUROSCIENCE

Sara Lazar conducted on the brain structure of people taking an eight-week Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction course, the same program upon which Inner Explorer is based. Mass General published an article in January, 2011. Here is an excerpt: “The analysis of MR images, which focused on areas where meditation-associated differences were seen in earlier studies, found increased grey-matter density in the hippocampus, known to be important for learning and memory, and in structures associated with self-awareness, compassion and introspection. Participant-reported reductions in stress also were correlated with decreased grey-matter density in the amygdala, which is known to play an important role in anxiety and stress.” This science explains why mindfulness prepares and fortifies us in times of uncertainty.

<http://www.massgeneral.org/about/pressrelease.aspx?id=1329>

## CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

1. Make a glitter jar to demonstrate how when things go awry, it is hard to think clearly because so much is happening in our heads. Shake up the bottle and have students watch the chaos of the glitter. Ask them to take deep breaths as the glitter settles. Describe how when things go wrong, everything seems to go crazy and our heads swirl around like the glitter. When we stop and breathe, things settle down and we can see more clearly. Just as the glitter bottles settles, so does our mind, creating clarity so we can make good decisions. Use the glitter bottle in the classroom during trying times when calm would be a useful thing.

Supplies: Small jar, glitter glue, fine glitter, water

Instructions: Fill jar almost to the top with water. Add 1 tablespoon of glitter glue. Add two tablespoons of fine glitter. Screw the lid on tight and shake!

This is a great art activity for kids. However, having a glitter jar or two in a classroom is a wonderful thing regardless of students' ages. The glitter jar provides an important demonstration about the power of our breath to calm things down. One high school student called the chaos and the glitter bottle 'Hurripain' and the breathing, 'Calming of the storm.'

2. Name it/Tame It...This is a practice you can make into a game. It involves becoming aware of emotions and naming them. This can be a playful activity with little ones but truly it is important for kids of all ages. By doing this kids become more comfortable with identifying and expressing their emotions, (rather than acting them out). Once feelings are identified, invite students to notice where the feeling lives in the body, (Chest, belly, head, etc). You might ask them what the color or sound of the emotion is. Encourage the students to ask the feelings what they want. Usually feelings need something simple, like attention, time and space. Check in with students to see if they are willing to give the feelings what the feelings requested. This exercise decreases the tendency to over-identify with emotions, while enhancing a perspective of playfulness and curiosity toward emotions.

3. Give students the following homework assignment:

- Describe a time you said something you wish you hadn't said. Now imagine the same situation. Before speaking, imagine taking five deep breaths. What might you say now?
- Describe a time you did something you wish you hadn't done. Now imagine the same situation. Before acting, imagine taking five deep breaths. What might you do differently this time?

4. Break students into small groups of 2 or 4 students. Ask them to describe times when they feel the most calm. What makes a situation calm or not? Have them share with the large group. You might have them draw themselves feeling calm.

5. Host a discussion in class about what causes students stress. Break kids into groups of four. Ask them to each mention two things that stress them out and ways they could use mindfulness to address that stress.
6. Explain the brain science described above to your students. Let them know that when they practice every day with Inner Explorer, or on their own, they are strengthening the prefrontal cortex, the part of the brain responsible for good decision making, and weakening the reactive part of the brain, the amygdala. It is for this reason that mindfulness creates equanimity so that when things don't go our way we can respond calmly instead of reacting in an unskillful way.
7. Encourage your students to practice 2 – 5 minutes of mindfulness before doing their homework assignments. (In fact, make that part of the homework). Ask them to write down any changes they notice as a result. (Many tell us they get it done more quickly and more easily).
8. Have a conversation about exercising and what happens when we do so. Exercising makes the body stronger. The more we exercise the stronger we get. Ask your students what practicing mindfulness does and make the comparison so they understand that the more they practice the stronger their mind, decision-making and calmness get. For young students have them draw exercising to make the body stronger and practicing mindfulness to make the mind stronger.
9. Give students a writing assignment to recall a time when something went wrong. Encourage them to find the silver lining and write about what when right with the thing that went wrong. When we train our brain to look for what is right, we also calm down our amygdala.

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