Inner Explorer
Beyond The Program for Teachers
March 2015



New Beginnings



Dear Inner Explorer Teachers,

Spring is only a few weeks away. We would like to invite you to experience spring differently this year and to encourage your students to do the same. With any luck, depending upon where you are in the country, you may be noticing new green leaves, colorful blooms, robins, snow melting** or other signs of spring. Or perhaps, you have been too busy to notice. We invite you to bring a sense of wonder, or specialness to what previously has seemed ordinary.

Mindful awareness provides us with the opportunity to be here now, to take a deep breath and to notice our surroundings, perhaps as we haven't before. When people begin practicing mindful awareness they often see things or hear things as if for the first time. Beginner's mind is a phenomenon that occurs when we begin to pay attention anew. You may be able to hear birds chirping, even with your car windows closed, or perhaps you might notice the colors of a bird flying by more vividly than ever before. You might want to take a walk that you have taken many times, but do so with the intention to really be on the walk and to observe things you hadn't previously noticed. It can be astonishing once we realize how much in our lives we miss because we are stuck in our heads bemoaning the past or planning the future.

Boredom can occur when we become so accustomed to our lives we feel as if we've done and seen it all before. However, it doesn't have to be that way. Is there a routine you could change in your classroom? Might you walk or drive a slightly different route to school? How about changing up what you bring for lunch or inviting a neighbor to dinner? Have you thought about trying a new recipe but just haven't made the time? How about taking a Saturday or Sunday and exploring a place near where you live that you've

never been?

When we are busy, often too busy for our own good, our relationships may seem tired as well. When we are tired, we may not bring our best selves to the people in our lives. Might you do something special to spice up those connections? Might you celebrate the coming of spring with a friend, partner, neighbor or child? Might you create a new weekend routine or do something special for a person important to you? If you have a difficult relationship with a family member or friend, might you be able to find things to appreciate about that person and try to connect from a place of gratitude instead of resentment? While not easy to do, you might find that a new approach could make a difference.

Albert Einstein said, "There are only two ways to live your life. One is as though nothing is a miracle. The other is as though everything is a miracle."

Happy Spring!

**If you live in the NE, we know that your snow has not melted at the time we wrote this, but we are hoping it is melting by the time you read this!

Activities for Inside the Classroom and Outside the Classroom

- 1. Ask the students to practice mindful breathing for one minute. Have them open their eyes and ask them to look around the room for something in the classroom they have never noticed before. Call on several students and have them share.
- 2. Assign homework to have your students do the same activity at home with the people with whom they live.
- 3. Create a new way to line up in the classroom by birthdays. If your students are third graders or older, have the kids figure out how to do this non-verbally. If you don't have a lineup order, ask the students to allow someone to get in front of them every time they line up. This may change the pushing dynamic of needing to be first in line.
- 4. On a Friday, have a discussion about boredom with your students. Ask them what makes them

bored. Ask for ideas students could use to move away from boredom. On a weekend, assign homework for students to do something they have never tried before, perhaps something that came up in the discussion.

- 5. Have a discussion about things we do on automatic pilot, ie turn on the tv, play video games, check email every 15 minutes, eat between meals when we aren't hungry, carry our phones around as if they were life preservers. Have your students think about and write something they'd like to do differently. Then go around the classroom and have people share what they chose to do differently. Follow-up the next day to see if anyone was successful in doing so.
- 6. Give a writing assignment asking students to notice and write about something they never noticed about a person or pet they see every day.
- 7. Bring a snack to school to share with the students to eat mindfully. Have them close their eyes as you pass it out. When they open their eyes, ask them to really look at the snack as if they had never seen this thing before. Ask them about the color, shape, texture. Next ask them to smell the snack and to describe the smell. Finally ask them to slowly put a piece of the snack on their tongue without actually chewing it and to notice what is happening in their mouths while they do this. Then, encourage them to chew the snack 10 20 times before swallowing it. Discuss the activity. Encourage the students to take a mindful bite the next time they eat a meal. You might want to ask them how many people they think it took to get the snack to them. (It's thousands, think of the people that cut down the rubber to make the tires on the truck that carried the snack to the store and those that mined the steel to make the saw to cut down the tree, etc). When we eat, unless we grow our own food, we are connected to many others. Knowing this and thinking about it can make us feel more connected and less lonely.

Neuroscience of Beginner's Mind

When we think things over and over, feel emotions over and over or do things over and over we wire neurons together over and over in the same way and we deepen neural pathways. Both skillful and unskillful habits strengthen. It is said that "what fires together wires together." Not long ago, many of us were taught that human brains were growing and developing until the age of 25 when they were fully developed. "You can't teach and old dog new tricks" is no longer applicable to the human brain. In the last decade neuroscientists have discovered neuroplasticity, which means that brains are capable of change

our entire lives. We have a mere 100 billion neurons in our brain (more stars than in our galaxy, by the way), and when we fire the neurons differently, new neural pathways are created and we begin to see things differently. When we learn a new skill, take a new walk, or enter a relationship differently we fire new neurons creating new neural pathways. By practicing mindful awareness, neurons from the brain stem, limbic system and prefrontal cortex connect and we function at our highest potential cognitively, emotionally and physically.

WE WANT TO HEAR & SHARE YOUR STORIES!!!

One of the most rewarding aspects of being involved with a mindful awareness program is listening to the heart-warming stories of how the program affects students and teachers. Some of the most important learning occurs from hearing others' stories. On that note, we'd like to feature your stories and photos in our Beyond the Program monthly newsletter! Please send your stories and photos to Tabitha at totoole@innerexplorer.org.

(If you send a photo, we will need a completed consent form. Click here to print the photo release form.)