Inner Explorer
Beyond The Program for Teachers
August 2015



Pleasant or Unpleasant?



Dear Inner Explorer Teachers,

All of us at Inner Explorer hope that summer has treated you well. Because our academic year is often quite different from our summers, strong emotions may be present regarding the transition back to school. As July ends and August begins it's hard not to notice ads for back-to-school supplies and clothing. Perhaps those ads provoke feelings. Perhaps they are feelings of excitement about a new school year, or perhaps a feeling of, oh-no, already?

What happens after you have those thoughts? Do you mull them over and over? Might a feeling about summer being over too soon interfere with the reality that you are still on summer vacation and most of you are not yet back in the classroom?

Many of us spend most of our time in our heads with our thoughts worrying about something that may have happened in the past or thinking, planning or worrying about the future. When we do this we miss this very moment. And when we do this over and over and over again, we actually miss our lives. So what happens when we miss this moment? Perhaps a dear friend or relative is telling us something important but we don't hear it because our thoughts are too loud. Perhaps we are so mired in our thoughts that we miss a wonderful discovery by a small person, be he or she a son or daughter, sibling, niece or nephew, grandchild or neighbor. Or perhaps we are taking a lesson of some kind but not really benefitting from it because we are fretting about an interaction that happened a few hours ago.

Awareness of our thoughts and feelings is very important for our health and well-being. Have you ever had a thought that leads to another and another and still another? Have you ever recognized that those thoughts may not be true but stories are built on thoughts and sometimes they aren't accurate? There is a saying in the mindfulness community, "Don't believe your thoughts." We have 100 billion neurons in our head and thoughts activate neurons. Just because you have a thought doesn't mean that it's true. And just because a thought crosses your mind doesn't mean that you have to analyze it and pick it apart. Recognizing whether a thought is pleasant or unpleasant may be enough, and can actually bring you back to the present moment.

These things are true for our students as well. If a fourth grade girl was excluded from a game out on the yard, she might return to classroom conjecturing that no one likes her. Instead of focusing on the math lesson you are teaching, her mind is off recollecting every time she felt excluded. If she were trained to think, 'well that was unpleasant' she might be able to more easily move back into the present moment, reentering the classroom ready to learn.

One way to become more aware of our thoughts and feelings is by labeling them. In Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction classes, labeling thoughts pleasant or unpleasant is an important activity. That awareness can calm down our nervous system, and get us back into the present moment. So, as you begin preparing for school or once you are back in the classroom, you may want to notice experiences or interactions and whether they are pleasant or unpleasant. Doing so may make your days much more pleasant!

Activities for Inside the Classroom and Outside the Classroom

Host a discussion about living in the present versus living in our heads. Give some examples and then have students chime in about how they too have missed things by living in their heads.
2. Have kids break into groups of four to discuss living in the present and why it is important and beneficial to do so.
3. Have students make up sayings about worrying and how not useful worrying is. For example, "When I look back on all these worries, I remember the story of the old man who said on his deathbed that he had a lot of trouble in his life, most of which had never happened." Winston Churchill
4. Hand out index cards. Ask students to keep tally marks each time their mind wanders from a lesson. After they make the mark on the card, encourage them to pat themselves on the shoulder as they say to themselves, "Oh, my mind wandered. Thanks for noticing(their name)." Let them know that it is important for them not to get mad at themselves when their minds wander.
5. Give students a homework assignment to talk to the people they live with about how our thoughts often take over our lives and how as a result we miss lots of the good stuff in life. The next day, debrief those conversations.
6. One week hand out the attached <u>pleasant events calendar</u> . Give examples of things students could write in each box. At the end of the week, go over their charts with them and ask them what they noticed.
7. The following week hand out the attached <u>unpleasant events calendar</u> . Give examples of things students could write in each box. At the end of the week, go over their charts with them and ask them what they noticed.

8. Ask students about falling asleep. Ask them what happens when they cannot fall asleep. Usually we cannot sleep because our brains won't stop thinking. Encourage students to label the thoughts they are having rather than working those thoughts to see if that helps them fall asleep. Have a follow-up discussion the next day.

NEUROSCIENCE OF LIVING INSIDE AND OUTSIDE AWARENESS

The reason that we feel good when we practice mindfulness is that we are connecting our neurons from four parts of our brain; the brain stem, hippocampus, amygdala and prefrontal cortex. When we are aware that we are breathing, or aware that we are angry, or aware that we are happy, the neurons from these parts of the brain actually touch one another and form neural connections. These connections cause the optimal level of physical, emotional and cognitive activation. (It's when our best decision-making happens). When our mind is wandering and we are unaware of what's happening we may be disconnecting those neurons. If we are nervous or worried, our bodies may release stress hormones called adrenalin and cortisol which when done repeatedly can cause havoc on our bodies, raising blood pressure and heart rate, negatively impacting our immune system, etc. Two thirds to three quarters of all doctor visits originate because of stress. When we practice mindfulness, we live in the present moment and our stress is greatly reduced. Labelling our thoughts and emotions calms down our amygdala, (stress reactions) and helps us get into the present.

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.)

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