



Meditation – Training the Mind

by JUDY BERANGER

This past school year I had the privilege of facilitating sessions with 38 schools across Newfoundland and Labrador. As educators we are always hungry for new tools to add to our toolbox of ideas – striving to add that special something to our repertoire of skills, not only for our students but also for our own self-care. In my travels, I learned that many teachers have some form of “meditation” as part of their resource kit of self-care.

Like any other tool, meditation takes practice and commitment before we come to understand how it can make a difference in our lives. It is well understood that integration time is necessary to truly embody any new learning. In the words of a teacher who is committed to practising meditation: *I find meditation and focusing to be very helpful tools in accessing my inner knowing. I find less balance in my life when I do not take daily quiet time. This focus keeps me from reacting to situations and leads me to responding from a wiser place. It has increased my productivity and helped clear my mind.*

Ironically I often used the excuse that I do not have time for meditation, I am just too busy. However, the opposite has proven true in that when I take the time I am much more effective in everything I do.

Inner peace practices that have been around for thousands of years include prayer, yoga, Tai Chi, Qigong, mindfulness, mantras, focusing and transcendental meditation. What do they have in common? They all have components and elements that will promote and create a relaxed state of well-being.

David Rome, in his book: *Your Body Knows the Answer* says: *Accessing the body's more holistic knowing can bring us back into accurate relationship with our life situations. This often involves acknowledging aspects of our lives that are not as we would like them to be, or as we would like others to see us. But knowing ourselves as we really are, and seeing things as they really are, provide the only basis for a wholesome, genuine, and truly productive life. "Know thyself" the ancient Greeks taught.*

Meditation is the art of training our mind and ensuring mind and body integration. With this practice our mind can connect to greater awareness and acceptance of who we are, how and why we act and react the way we do, and how we want to evolve. It can lead to an ability to grow even stronger relation-

ships along with more effective problem solving skills.

The curious paradox is that when I accept myself as I am, then I can change. ~ Carl Rogers

Who can do meditation?

Anyone with the desire. What does it involve? Meditation includes the essentials of keeping focused attention on deep breathing, checking in for increased awareness of body discomfort, tension or pain, followed by breathing through any discomfort, tension or pain and moving into relaxation. It takes a little time and focused attention and pays off in dividends. Some people like to use mantras and there are endless examples of meditations free online with YouTube.

The more skilled we become, the more flexible we can be as to where we are able to meditate – such as long waits in the car or practically anywhere we can carve out a few uninterrupted moments. The regular practice of meditation can help us deal with stressful situations like being around people who exhibit high conflict personality symptoms, long traffic delays, people keeping you waiting for inordinate amounts of time, or even waiting in grocery line ups. Regular practice can also activate the resilience and ability necessary to remain strong and respectful in what can sometimes be disrespectful situations. The actual time spent per day can be as little as a few minutes and up to ten or twenty minutes and longer depending on work/life schedule. As teachers, we spend so much time doing things, trying to meet all the expectations within our numerous roles, that it is not uncommon to feel overwhelmed with responsibility. Meditation is an opportunity to increase energy, peace, calm and balance that would not otherwise present itself.

David Simon says, “Meditation is like a bath for the mind. It clears and refreshes our windows of perception, allowing more light, love, and happiness to flow into our lives.”

Evidence-based Research

It is worthy of note that there is evidence-based research available as to the value of meditation in classrooms as well. Waters, et al in the *Educational Psychology Review*, (2015) reported on the effect of meditation interventions in schools. They reviewed

studies to determine how meditation affected middle school, high school, and college students in regards to academic achievement and well-being. They also compared the effectiveness of different forms of meditative programs on student outcomes. Their research indicates that meditation programs have significant positive effects on well-being and social competence, stress reduction, and cognitive enhancement.

In the words of a high school teacher here in Newfoundland and Labrador: *In the school where I teach we are building on the concept of quiet time and have offered meditation during lunch hours and received the following feedback: relaxing; helpful for stress release; calmed the mind; gave personal time not usually available. We have also offered daily meditation cards and I was pleasantly surprised how several of our participants wanted access to these cards once they had graduated. Many have been using them on a daily basis.*

Benefits of Meditation

There are hundreds of research studies on Transcendental Meditation that document its effectiveness in relieving stress and anxiety, improving brain function, cardiovascular health, and general well-being. The Mayo Clinic, along with many recognized experts such as Roger Gabriel and Deepak Chopra, quote a growing body of research on the scientific benefits of meditation. They say it produces immediate and long term benefits for both body and mind.

Physical benefits:

- Decreases inflammation and strengthens the immune system
- Stimulates the body's self repair mechanisms and self regulation
- Relaxes breathing, assists us in properly breathing, lowers blood pressure and decreases heart rate
- Increases levels of the enzyme telomerase, which helps slow the aging process
- Turns off the genes that contribute to diseases such as diabetes, dementias, autoimmune illnesses and some types of cancer
- Turns on the genes responsible for good health

Psychological benefits of meditation:

- Reduces feelings of stress and increases feelings of relaxation and peace
- Expands experience of healing emotions such as love, compassion, joy, calmness and gratitude
- Decreases experience of painful emotions that constrict awareness, e.g. fear, anger, guilt, shame, depression
- Enables a more conscious response rather than a reactive response in tense situations, thus lowering our participation in dramatic situations
- Boosts better relationships
- Improves sleep
- Decreases addictive behavior

Deepak Chopra so eloquently captures the essence of meditation: *the true purpose of meditation isn't to get away from it all but to get in touch with the all... to find the source of all peace, joy, love, creativity and bliss.*

As a start, consider just practicing being mindful and associate meditation with pleasing things that give you joy like fresh air, nature, music, a welcoming smile, appreciation from a student or colleague, savoring a hot drink, noticing the gift of your voice and your ability to hear, hanging out with someone you love, thinking about how resilient you have been/or are when times are tough.

Meditation is not just one more thing to fit into an already jam-packed day. We may be able to squeeze a few minutes when we first awake in the morning or last thing at night. Early morning meditation may help you focus throughout the day, and late night meditation may help you sleep more deeply.

There are an endless array of trained people and modes of meditation including numerous phone apps available to choose from. Find one that works for your personality, schedule and life. Making meditation a part of your lifestyle and selecting the type of meditation that's best for you can go a long way to increasing quality of life and safeguarding optimal health.

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As a start, consider browsing these examples of the many websites available:

- www.chopra.com/ccl/guided-meditations
- marc.ucla.edu/body.cfm?id=22
- www.davidlynchfoundation.org/
- www.macleans.ca/society/health/bringing-mindfulness-to-the-school-curriculum/
- www.edutopia.org/stw-student-stress-meditation
- greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/research_round_up_school_based_mindfulness_programs
- www.youtube.com/watch?v=Oj0ewBvr6zM