

Integrating mindful yoga into your school counseling program can help students both academically and emotionally.

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CALM, COOL AND CONFIDENT





Early in my career as a school counselor, I often left work wishing I had the power to protect all children from the brokenness and sorrow they experienced. I remember feeling the safe school environment and my brief school counseling sessions with each child could only go so far. Because I am an optimistic person, I just knew there had to be a community of people who shared my feelings. That's when I began investigating how I could further help my students.

I started to talk with teachers, administrators, community members and parents about their own childhood experiences. I asked them to reflect and share with me what they thought would have helped them through some of the growing pains of adolescence.

Their responses included techniques on how to handle feelings and emotions; more opportunities to build self-confidence, compassion and forgiveness; and better ways to deal with stress. This information was so enlightening to me. These adults' responses paralleled what I had observed as the needs of my own students.

The Need For Balanced Education

Most academic learning environments teach students self-regulatory skills of how to plan, organize and manage work and responsibilities. Often missing, however, are the social and emotional lessons supporting student ability to focus, identify feelings and release stress. For children to truly thrive, we must address all aspects of their lives. We see this, for instance, in

the well-documented benefits of physical activity on fitness, learning and emotional health. Recent research studies show what we have intuitively known for years: that the reduction of stress and the development of social/emotional skills and a sense of well-being have produced corresponding health and academic benefits.

As a school counselor, it became my goal to address all students' needs for a more balanced approach to their growth and education, and I chose to do so by introducing them to yoga and its benefits. I wanted students to be equipped with tools they could use in all areas of their lives. Creatively applying these interventions into the school counseling delivery system at my school changed the climate and overall mood of students, faculty and administrators.

Consider the following. We are not born knowing how to deal with stress, especially emotional stress. Rather, this is a skill most commonly learned by observing others. Yoga can prepare children for learning and teach self-regulation and self-understanding. The meaningful physical movement combined with breath control and mental relaxation activities fully engage a student's mind and emotions.

Breath work: Breath work is the heart of yoga practice. Breathing patterns have such a profound effect on a student's general health as well as mental well-being. Breathing interacts with and affects the cardiovascular, neurological, gastrointestinal and muscular systems. Often symptoms of stress, disease, fear and anxiety can lead to unhealthy

breathing habits. Irregular breathing patterns such as breathing rapidly, jerky or high in the chest can activate the fight-or-flight response, resulting in anxiety and chronic overstimulation of the sympathetic nervous system.

By contrast, the intentional act of slowing one's breathing and relaxing muscles can calm the nervous system, lower heart rate and blood pressure and turn on the immune system. Through breath work students can learn to slow their nervous systems, develop self-control and connect with their bodies and feelings. School counselors can teach these five steps, particularly focusing on the last two.

1. Become aware of your breathing pattern.
2. Breathe through your nose (mouth closed).
3. Relax. Make sure the abdominal muscles are not overly tense, which can interfere with the action of the primary breathing muscle, the diaphragm.
4. Slow the breath cycle, particularly the exhalation.
5. Pause at the end of each inhalation and exhalation.

Yoga-based movement: The word yoga means "to yoke, to unite" and is commonly translated as the union of mind and body through physical movement. Yoga poses/postures are a form of meaningful physical movement exercise. Movement in the form of exercise has been suggested to be the single most important thing to prepare the brain for learning. Through physical movement, neurotransmitters within the body are increased, and signals between nerve



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cells are relayed. Neurotransmitters are the brain chemicals that tell the heart to beat, lungs to breathe and stomach to digest. It is also the chemical substance that affects a student's attention, motivation, mood, focus and concentration. Using yoga poses as a relaxation technique can produce a calming effect, which helps children reduce tension, channel excess energy, relieve tiredness and lengthen attention span. Yoga postures have been found to promote body and emotion awareness, balance, student self-image as well as self-regulation.

Guided mental relaxations: Guided mental relaxations include activities of mindfulness. Mindfulness can be described as paying attention on purpose with an affectionate awareness and a lack of judgment. Listening with their eyes closed, students practice receiving information in an unprejudiced, non-judgmental manner. School counselors can use stories, books and created journeys in which students imagine or visualize peaceful, restful or joyful places or situations. These experiences contribute to the development of focused concentration and creative-thinking abilities as well as enable clarity of perception and more balanced emotional responses to situations.

When creating short relaxation journeys for your students, include relevant content from classroom lessons or short impromptu stories. Students love stories that include things from their own lives. In advance of the relaxations, invite students to identify locations, animals, people and objects to incorporate within the short journeys. Sample images to weave into guided journeys could include:

- imagining the teacher doing something silly
- riding a dolphin through the ocean
- enjoying a quiet walk in a dense field of magical flowers
- entering a castle where all the students are kings and queens

One-minute relaxations can enable students to easily transition from one subject/lesson to the next. Students are able to focus their minds on positive thoughts and emotions as well as

experience a brief minute of stillness. You can help spark students' imaginations by offering ideas of where they might go:

- go to your favorite spot in your house, and take three deep belly breaths
- remember a favorite time with a friend or family member
- imagine the kind of day you would like to have today
- think of three compliments you can give your teacher or classmate

Scripted relaxations are guided relaxation journeys you can read to the class. When using scripted imagery use a favorite book, poem or short story that has plenty of visual imagery. During the script reading it is important to go slowly to give students time to process the images and situations. Taking the time to pause after the imagery and tuning into student breathing helps you become more aware of the "body time" needed by students. The book "Ready... Set ... R.E.L.A.X." is an excellent resource for K-8, and "Relax.calm" helps teens manage stress through guided imagery. Both books are co-authored by Jeffrey Allen and Roger Klein.

Delivery System

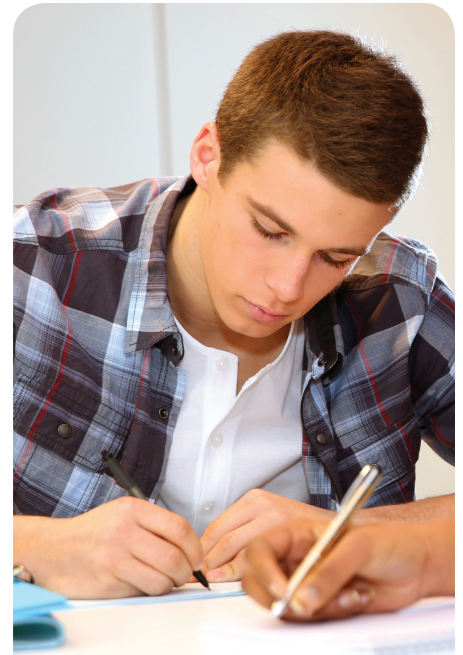
As I walked into school one day, Leland, a first-grade boy ran up to me. "I'm not scared anymore when mommy and daddy argue," he shared excitedly. I asked him to explain what he meant.

"Now when Mommy and Daddy argue I don't cry. I go to a quiet place in my room, do 10 deep belly breaths and pretend I'm sitting in stillness under my favorite tree."

Leland learned when and how to use yoga activities during classroom lessons and individual sessions. You can incorporate these activities into the three direct student delivery platforms of the ASCA National Model.

School counseling core curriculum:

Regardless of your theme or grade level taught, you can incorporate yoga into your school counseling core curriculum. Following an energy cycle of calm-active-calm, students are ready to perform learning activities with strong mental and emotional awareness. Each lesson starts with breath work as a way



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to bring student attention back to their bodies and individual selves. Follow this with a short period of meaningful physical movements, and then end with a short, guided mental relaxation activity. This process develops students' ability to transition and practice self-regulation, as they go from calm to active and then back to calm. For example, when doing a lesson on healthy friendships, school counselors can use language that emphasizes the activity and value of "listening" when in a healthy friendship. During breath work, encourage students to listen to their breathing, think about how their inhalation and


exhalation changes when they are with different people, as well as the listening to the messages and kind words given to them by people in their lives. Along similar lines, when activating the body, you can lead students through a short partner yoga stretch sequence while encouraging them to listen to their bodies in each pose, exploring how it feels to breath, move and work while in relationship with others. Following this active time, students can integrate their experiences by returning to calm with a guided mental relaxation journey focusing on the importance of healthy friendships and relationships. Additionally, you can use activities as a single activity with large groups, such as an energizer or guided relaxation journey for focus before a test.

Responsive services: Several state comprehensive school counseling programs include small-group topics such as anger management, loss/grief/divorce, self-control, healthy relationships and

self-esteem. Yoga activities can be beneficial as intervention for each of these. When coupled with a school counseling core curriculum that uses breath work, body movement and guided relaxations, the root cause/concern of the particular responsive service is much easier to address and explore. Because of classroom lessons, students in an anger management group, for example, will have already learned how to use their breath to relax. Students equipped with the ability to relax and control their breathing can more easily identify feelings of hurt, disappointment, frustration or anger. The same is true for a grieving, anxious or emotionally impaired student. Yoga poses can open the body and make space for the release of restrained emotions. During intimate small-group work, students are encouraged to identify where emotions can be locked in their bodies.

Individual planning: You have the skills and training to help students feel

empowered, confident and motivated. During individual sessions, enhancing the awareness of the heart (feelings and emotions about an event/situation), mind (thoughts that justify/disprove a feeling) and body (releasing of energy/emotions that are often locked in the body) can give students a sense of control, confidence and balance needed to make healthy decisions as well as plan for a meaningful life.

I'm sure this is why I am in the school counseling profession; I believe every person can live life with a healthy heart, mind and body. 

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Lacretia Dye, Ph.D., is an assistant professor at Western Kentucky University. She is also a certified Yoga Calm instructor and trainer. Her favorite yoga book for children is "Yoga Calm for Children," written by Jim and Lynea Gillen. She can be reached at lacretia.dye@wku.edu.

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