

namaste

# The Mind-Full Minute

Bringing mindfulness to the classroom one minute at a time, Dr. Lori Walker joins the movement to incorporate meditation into our education system. **by Alicia Neptune**

**P**icture a class of 30 university students. One or two sneak a glance at their phones under their desks, but most are just sitting there, eyes closed. No, it isn't a particularly boring history lecture. They're taking a mindful minute.

It's a quick exercise, where students sit and focus on their breathing for one minute, and it's just one of the ways mindfulness has become a part of educational environments.

A growing list of institutions around the world including Harvard University, Oxford University, and post-secondary institutions across Canada, offer drop-in mindfulness meditation sessions, training seminars, and workshops, usually through counselling services. And some professors have even brought the practice into their teaching.

Instructor Dr. Lori Walker, at Capilano University's School of Communication, has made mindfulness a major part of her teaching philosophy. Around the time she turned 40, she realized she needed help with anxiety and so she turned to mindfulness. Dr. Walker borrowed tapes on guided meditation from the library and from there, her

interest grew. "I started realizing that it was connected to everything that I taught," she says.

She's been using mindfulness techniques, like the mindful minute exercise, in her classroom since she started teaching at Capilano University in 2012. Though she initially worried about what students would think, she finds that most students embrace the practice. "Now I'm much braver because I'm feeling like students are really much more supportive of it or interested in it." Interest amongst her colleagues has also led several other Capilano professors to integrate mindfulness into their teaching.

Initially, Dr. Walker saw the practice as a way to increase focus and to support students with anxiety issues. However, it has also impacted the way she teaches courses like Interpersonal and Intercultural Communications, where being empathetic, non-judgmental, and patient are essential elements.

With support from Capilano's Counselling Department, her courses sometimes include a class focused solely on mindfulness and teaching students techniques for being aware of their emotions and their environment.

Even as mindfulness practices become more commonplace, some critics argue mindfulness doesn't belong in schools. In 2016, Vancouver father Ray Chwarkowski started a petition (which is still active in 2018) for the removal of mindfulness-based programs from public schools, arguing that mindfulness meditation sessions were equivalent to Buddhist meditation, and violated students' freedom of religion. However, the Vancouver School Board maintains that the programs are research-based and non-secular. For example, the lessons in MindUP, a program widely used in B.C. elementary schools, are based on neuroscience.

Meditation can help people take advantage of neuroplasticity, the brain's ability to form and reorganize synaptic connections in response to experience, injury or learning. Multiple studies have found a connection between mindfulness and increased gray matter

concentration in brain regions involved in mood, learning and memory, and sensory processes. The practice can help people to purposefully reshape their brains and achieve the often-touted benefits of mindfulness, including reduced stress and improved memory.

For Walker, the neuroscience side of mindfulness is one of the most fascinating parts of the practice. "My practice is not faith-based," she explains. "It's really grounded in science. I see it as an opportunity to talk about the brain."

It's another way of taking a multidisciplinary approach in the classroom, regardless of what you teach. Mindfulness can help connect psychology and neuroscience to other fields of study, while also helping students to achieve a calm and balanced state of mind.

In a university setting, when young people are still learning to make their way in the world, Walker says it's important to "treat the student as a whole person—someone with a mind and a heart and emotions." ■

