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Mindfulness for Stressed Teens: An Expert Interview With Gina Biegel, MA, LMFT

Christy Matta, M.A. Updated: Oct 28th 2010

I recently had the opportunity to ask author and creator of the Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction for Teens (MBSR-T) Program some questions about teens, stress, mindfulness and her program.

Christy: What is stressing teens out today?



Gina: What isn't stressing teens out today? It seems that the continuum of stressors range from what us adults would consider something not worth stressing about...

problems: parent's divorcing or pressures to perform or produce put on by a teen's teachers, coaches and/or parents, to name a few.

It seems like the stressors tend to fall into the following categories (not entirely unlike us adults):

- Education/career Money Parental separation/divorce Peer pressure Self-esteem problems Body image distortions Identity formation

Christy: What kind of problems do teens run into when they're stressed?

Gina: In my opinion, the main concerns when teens run into stress is that they 1) don't necessarily know how to identify that they are in fact stressed and 2) they don't know how to manage and/or deal with the stress.

Christy: Why mindfulness with teens?

Gina: Why not? Mindfulness-based interventions have been shown to be effective for adults with a multitude of psychological and physical health problems...

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2009).

Christy: What is the current research on the effectiveness of mindfulness for teens?

Gina: Looking to research to support the aforementioned comments on the efficacy of mindfulness for teens, the curriculum and trainings assist with a number of areas that teens can use help with: adjusting perceptions and appraisals of stress, emotion-regulation skills, improved meta-cognition and awareness, ways to manage feeling out of control, their level of suffering and lastly, introduce the idea and benefit of focusing on one task versus the multitasking multi-media saturated environment of today's teens.

Biegel, Brown, Shapiro, and Schubert (2009), have demonstrated the efficacy of an adapted mindfulness-based intervention for teens and found increases in functioning, self-reported sleep quality, self-esteem; and reductions in mental health diagnoses (is), self-reported anxiety, depression, somatization, perceived stress, obsessive symptoms, and interpersonal problems.

Christy: How is teaching mindfulness with teens different than with adults?

Gina: Typically, I shorten traditionally longer formal meditation practices that can range from 30-45 minutes to anywhere from 10-20 minutes. I tend to find that teens resonate more with active and guided practices: the body-scan meditation, yoga and/or mindful movement/walking as compared to sitting meditations. When I introduce and use sitting meditations I tend to be a bit more active and guided in using words as compared to more formal and traditional adult sitting practices. Teens in general, tend to be less comfortable with silence than adults, in part due to the highly stimulated environment they are constantly involved in (e.g., computer, video games, phone, iPod, TV), not to mention that they might be using more than one of these at a time (multimedia multi-tasking), so to ask them to be with silence even in a room with a quiet fan going from heat or air, seems eerily silent to them. One key in working with teens is to help them to be in or with "silence." I created an audio CD with mindfulness meditations that take into account both duration and developmental appropriateness (see below for details on acquiring this).

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Christy: In your book, you have an activity on letting go of negative self-judgments, can you describe how you help teens do this?

Gina: A part of being "mindful," is to be aware of what is, in this moment as it is occurring. However, teens aren't always aware of their thoughts as they are occurring in this moment, or that a thought is actually just a thought and that it might not be real or based on fact. As most people know, judgments are a type of thought and just teaching a teen these things can improve their functioning. Reducing their self-other judgments can help them to better interpret and see their inner-world and the world around them.

First, help teach a teen to be aware of their thoughts, how to notice their thoughts, and which of these are judgmental, can greatly improve insight and awareness. Once this awareness is present, suggest that a teen bring an open, gentle, kind and curious attitude to these judgmental thoughts, and one can say, "Oh, interesting this is what I am thinking right now." Lastly, encourage them to pay attention to their body and more specifically their breath and notice how these are in this moment and if needed to envision bringing in calmness and peace through the in-breath and releasing any distress, tension or related feelings on the out-breath. It is a strong belief of mine that the process to change the large number of judgmental thoughts is first to bring awareness and an ability to notice that a thought is in fact a judgment.

Christy: Is there one mindfulness exercise that you find the teens connect to the most?

Gina: I don't think there is just one. In fact, I think these practices offered in the *Stress Reduction Workbook for Teens*, are all useful and that a few might be more applicable for one teen and others for another teen. It is truly based on the individual needs of the teen. The great thing about the exercises in the workbook is that a teen can work through them sequentially, as they do build on one another, or they can search through and complete and use those that stand out to them as most helpful. If you are a therapist, parent, educator or mindfulness instructor, it is advised that you aide the teen(s) in working through and getting the most out of the workbook and activities therein.

Resources

Journal Article Referenced Above:

Biegel, G.M, Brown, K.W., Shapiro, S.L, & Schubert, C. (2009). Mindfulness-based stress reduction for the treatment of adolescent psychiatric outpatients: A randomized clinical trial. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 77, 855-866.

My workbook: Available at most bookstores (Barnes & Noble & Borders) and amazon.com Gina M. Biegel, MA, LMFT, is the author of *The Stress Reduction Workbook for Teens: Mindfulness Skills to Help You Deal with Stress* (New Harbinger Publications).

My CD: Available on cdbaby.com, amazon, itunes Biegel, G.M., (2009) *Stressed Teens. Mindfulness for Teens: Meditation Practices to Reduce Stress and Promote Well-Being* [CD]. California: Gina Biegel

Contact gina@stressedteens.com or www.stressedteens.com

More about the MBSR-T Intervention

Ms. Biegel is the creator of the Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction for Teens (MBSR-T) Program, otherwise known as Stressed Teens, which is closely related to the traditional MBSR program created by Jon Kabat-Zinn and colleagues over 30 years ago. The primary focus is on formal and informal mindfulness practices for high school aged adolescents. This intervention is utilized both nationally and internationally and dissemination of this intervention is often conducted for: individuals, families, educational settings, universities, and professional research, workshops, and conferences. Adaptation of the MBSR-T program is often utilized and has been found to be applicable for teens with cancer, and those in a positive youth development setting.

About Gina M. Biegel

Gina M. Biegel, MA, LMFT is a psychotherapist who teaches Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) in multiple settings. She adapted the Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) program typically for adults for a teen population, and created Stressed Teens using the Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction for Teens (MBSR-T) program. She conducted a Randomized Control Trial assessing the efficacy of this program with adolescents with very significant results (JCCP; 10/09). She conducts workshops and conferences on MBSR/MBSR-T with a variety of populations including professionals, teachers, parents, and teens nationally and internationally. A more recent area of work is in bringing mindfulness into the California Elementary School system through her role as the Director of Research for Mindful Schools and is assessing the effectiveness of such a program. A current replication of her study with adolescents in the school system in the United Kingdom is underway through her role as partner and Director of Research for the organization, The Mindful Community. She is also exploring brain imaging work at Stanford University with adolescents who practice MBSR-T. Her first book, a workbook, entitled, The Stress Reduction Workbook for Teens: Mindfulness Skills to Help You Deal With Stress, is currently available as well as her audio CD, Mindfulness for Teens: Meditation Practices to Reduce Stress and Promote Well-Being.



Based outside Boston, Massachusetts, Christy Matta, M.A. provides customized trainings, workshops, consultation and personal coaching in Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT), Mindfulness and Stress Reduction. She is intensively trained in DBT and has designed and provided clinical supervision to treatment programs, including a winner of the American Psychiatric Association Gold Award. Matta has a Master of Arts in counseling psychology from Boston College. For more on her consultation and trainings visit her web site www.dbtmind.com. For more tips and mindfulness tips and strategies visit her blog www.christymatta.wordpress.com.

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