



Mindfulness for Teens: An Interview with Gina Biegel, LMFT

By ELISHA GOLDSTEIN, PH.D.

Today it's my pleasure to bring to you Gina Biegel, LMFT and author of [The Stress Reduction Workbook for Teens: Mindfulness Skills to Help You Deal With Stress](#) and her audio CD [Mindfulness for Teens](#). Gina is a psychotherapist who works in private practice and for a large health management organization. Her passion and focus is teaching mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) with adolescents, children, adults, teachers, and health and business professionals.

Gina has adapted MBSR to MBSR-T for the adolescent population and conducted a randomized control trial assessing the efficacy of this program with significant results. She has published an article about her findings in the *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology* (JCCP). Gina is also currently conducting a formal research study to assess the efficacy of the Mindful Schools program.

Today, Gina talks to us about how to teach mindfulness to teens to help them focus and be happy.

Elisha: What is the difference between teaching mindfulness to adults versus teens?

Gina: I think the most important thing to pay attention to when you are using mindfulness with teens is assessing whom you are working with developmentally. For example, are you working with teens in middle school or those in their senior year of high school? There are many differences to notice with these two groups of teenagers. Also, in terms of emotion regulation and coping strategies I find that teens are not as able to respond to life's stressors, both large and small, with the same ability an adult. It's important to keep in mind that teens from every region of the world, nationally and internationally are going to come from a multitude of different backgrounds (e.g., socioeconomically, ethnically etc.). It's necessary to look at teens as a population, but within this population consider the unique aspects of the group all the way down to each individual you are exposed to. Additionally, I find that teens are very open to mindfulness skills and to learning something new. To many of these teens, the skills they need to become socially and emotionally balanced young adults is not where I believe they should be and mindfulness is a pathway to this and if you can plant seeds that later grow into flora all the better.

Elisha: One of the practices you have in your book is *Doing Schoolwork Mindfully*. Since this is such a prevalent issue among teens (and their parents), can you give us a sample session here of what this looks like?

Gina: I encourage teens that have difficulties with focus, concentration, and/or overload from anxiety before a test or with doing homework:

1. First start and just notice their breath as it already is. This will first, connect their head to their body, and if they are noticing their breath they hopefully aren't noticing worry thoughts or focus on self-judgments that they "can't pay attention," to take a break from these thoughts even if for a brief moment.
2. Once they have noticed a few breaths, I encourage them to do a brief body-scan meditation, and I will offer this meditation in the room with them.
3. Next, I ask them to visualize taking the test or doing their homework, and to see them completing it with ease and to remind themselves that they can do their best. This can assist in reducing the added pressure they have from themselves and from their parents.

Once they have gone through this process, they can then begin, and if they start noticing difficulty again, to take a pause and go through this process again. It is also a practice in being kind to the self. For more details on this practice, teens can follow Activity 18 in my workbook or audio track 13.

Elisha: In your book you say, "Being happy and enjoying your life takes more than just a passing thought or statement; it is about actively noticing and doing what makes you happy." How do you teach teens to do this?

Gina: There is a saying in the mental health field, something to the effect, "if it is working do more of it." I notice that some teens who are suffering from depression, anxiety and the like, at times add to their suffering or make their problem(s) worse by engaging in negative-coping strategies and self-judgments. If there are things that they can do that make them happy, then do more of it. I encourage teens to notice what healthy activities they engage in that make them happy, whether they take up a short or long period of time or if they are free or expensive. Once they have this list, they can always turn to it when they feel like nothing in their life brings them happiness or calms them and do something from the list. If we don't teach someone how to be happy how can we expect him or her to automatically be happy? We encourage teens to take a foreign language in high school, preferably for three years; I believe we need to teach them the foreign language, to most teens, of mindfulness.

Elisha: If you were sitting across the table from a teen who was stressed out right now, how would you engage him or her?

Gina: The most important thing is to be yourself! I hope that I don't come across with an all-knowing attitude instead I try to view myself as just another person on their path and if I can help in some way then that is wonderful and if I can't, then I accept that as well. I look at work with teens as being part of their journey. I try to give them a different experience with an adult and not create, as

much as possible, a 1-up position that can so easily be taken advantage of. I would like to meet teens where they are. For example, I like to use their language and share age-appropriate anecdotes that hopefully they will be able to relate to. I also use a comfortable body posture. After all of the aforementioned, I would mention what I notice, "It seems like you are stressed right now, what is going on... do you feel like talking about it?" If the teen opens up then we go from there, if the teen on the other hand says, "I don't know" or seems closed off, I might offer some red flags to notice what might be a response to stress both physically and psychologically and share with them what led me to think they might be stressed in the first place. A few other tips would be to use mindful listening and offer respect to the teen sitting across from you; he/she might not often get listened to or treated with respect.

Thank you so much Gina! As always, please share your thoughts, stories and questions below. Your interaction provides a living wisdom for us all to benefit from.

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Elisha Goldstein, Ph.D. is a Clinical Psychologist and conducts a private practice in West Los Angeles. He is co-author of [A Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction Workbook](#). Check out Dr. Goldstein's [acclaimed CD's on Mindful Solutions for Stress, Anxiety and Depression, Addiction and Relapse Prevention, and Success and Stress Reduction at Work](#) -- "They are so relevant, I have marked them as one of my favorites on a handout I give to all new clients" ~ Psychiatrist. He also current has a [FREE Mindful Companion EBook: Top Mindfulness Quotes and How They Can Support Your Mental Health](#). If you're wanting an interactive program to find relief from anxiety and stress, check out Dr. Goldstein's progressive [online behavioral change program](#) in Aliveworld. If you're wanting to integrate more mindfulness into your daily life, sign up for his [Mindful Living Twitter Feed](#). Dr. Goldstein is also available for [private psychotherapy](#).

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