

“MINDFULNESS” TO CALM YOUR STRESSED CHILD

DAUPHIN COUNTY MH/ID PROGRAM
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Living with a teenager can be a roller coaster of highs and lows. One method to help your child navigate the emotionally charged teenage years is becoming more self-aware and changing how one thinks. It's called “**mindfulness**” and it's more than a skill; it's a way of life. And it doesn't just help with everyday stressors for teens—it prepares them to become more resilient adults.

Mindfulness is intentionally being fully present in the moment. It is recognizing and becoming aware of one's thoughts and emotions with kindness rather than self-criticism.

Teens are usually quite open to it. First, have your child identify a set time every day when he or she can practice just being present in the moment for 10-20 minutes. There are some good apps, such as “Calm” and “Headspace” to help with this.

The following are some specific instructions. Sit in a comfortable position. Focus on something you can feel with your senses. One way to focus on the present is to **focus on breathing in and out** and being aware if there is any tension in the body that you can breathe out. Think of all those thoughts as traffic going by. You can choose to get on the bus or not. **We realize that we are not our thoughts and feelings.** When that “traffic of thoughts” starts going by and your mind wanders off, with kind attention, bring your focus back to breathing. **Each time you catch yourself distracted, bring your attention back to breathing.**

Be consciously aware of the nature of thoughts or self-dialogue. Remember the **goal is to accept yourself with kindness and without judgement.** The power of self-talk is huge. When we sit back and observe our thoughts, we obtain more conscious control over our lives.

Two common patterns in stress are trying to avoid thinking about the thing that is causing stress or ruminating, overthinking what has happened. Both are unhealthy approaches which lead to making poor choices. Teens who try to avoid all stress and fears get better at avoiding their fears and may not live to their full potential. Those who overthink and ruminate find it more and more difficult to let go.

Mindfulness prepares children to observe their thoughts and feelings with kind attention and acceptance while also teaching them to let go of unhealthy thoughts. They can appreciate things in the present moment like the sunset or smile on a loved one's face. They won't be busy mourning the past or worrying about the future.

Brain scans show that when people practice mindfulness their brains have more bulk in the areas responsible for attention, learning, memory, emotion regulation and decision making. There is actually shrinkage in the area where fear and stress are processed.

Mindfulness is best learned when not at a point of crisis. For teens with a formal diagnosis of conditions such as anxiety, insomnia or ADHD, mindfulness may be prescribed.

Teaching mindfulness to your child can help them be focused and intentional about their choices and ultimately they will be able to believe in themselves when going through the ups and downs of life.

This article was written by Dr. Salman Majeed a child and adolescent psychiatrist at the Penn State Health Milton S. Hershey Medical Center.

<http://www.centralpennparent.com/2018/mindfulness-to-calm-your-stressed-child/>