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Emotion Dysregulation and Anxiety in Students: Mindfulness Strategies for School Counselors

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Abstract

Anxiety is common among students in K-12 schools. Anxious students experience emotion dysregulation as well as cognitive and physical symptoms of anxiety. Such emotional reactivity may cause students to feel overwhelmed and unable to participate effectively in the classroom. Researchers have found positive psychological and physical outcomes linked to the practice of mindfulness in the school setting. We discuss example strategies and exercises that school counselors may use to introduce students to mindfulness practices.

Keywords: anxiety, mindfulness, school counselors

Anxiety is a common experience during childhood and adolescence. During these periods, a person experiences many challenging “firsts,” such as starting school or experiencing pubertal changes, which can cause a significant amount of stress. Although experiencing stress during these developmental periods is normal, children may develop unhealthy patterns of anxiety, which can have negative,

long-lasting effects in school and beyond (American Psychological Association [APA], 2014; Keating, 2017; Mazzone et al., 2007; Owens, Stevenson, Hadwin, & Norgate, 2012). For example, one study demonstrated that higher adolescent stress led to fewer healthy behaviors like exercising, sleeping well, and eating healthy foods (APA, 2014). Additionally, children with high anxiety are more likely to withdraw from learning and social interaction (Keating, 2017) and overall demonstrate lower academic performance (Mazzone et al., 2007; Owens et al., 2012). For some, anxiety can become an even more serious issue and develop into an anxiety disorder. Anxiety disorders are among the most commonly diagnosed mental health disorders in children and adolescents (Beesdo, Knappe, & Pine, 2009; Centers for Disease Control [CDC], 2018; Ghandour et al., 2019). In a recent study examining the prevalence of mental health disorders in children aged 3 – 17 years (n = 43,282), researchers found that 7.1% had a current diagnosis of anxiety (Ghandour et al., 2019). Investigators examining the lifetime prevalence of anxiety disorders suggest that up to

33.7% of people will experience an anxiety disorder at some point in their lives (Bandelow & Michaelis, 2015; Beesdo et al., 2009; Harvard Medical School, 2007).

Feelings of worry, fear, or apprehension are common emotional symptoms of anxiety (American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2013). However, anxiety can also cause a variety of physiological reactions, including rapid heart rate, fast breathing, sweating, shaking, and digestive issues, as well as cognitive disturbance, such as ruminating thoughts and difficulty concentrating (APA, 2013; Barrio Minton, Wachter Morris, & Bruner, 2017). The exact cause of anxiety varies depending on the type of disorder, but symptoms of anxiety become clinically significant when they are excessive, persistent, and damaging to a person's daily functioning (APA, 2013; Barrio Minton et al., 2017). In recent years, researchers have increasingly focused on the role of emotion regulation as it relates to anxiety in children and adolescents. In this paper, we discuss emotion regulation as well as mindfulness techniques that school counselors may use with students experiencing anxiety at school.

Emotion Dysregulation and Anxiety

Emotion regulation is a set of behaviors intended to modulate both the experience and expression of emotions (Gross, 1998, 2002). Effective regulation of emotion is important to navigate successfully through the daily demands of the environment and to overall mental health (Gross & Munoz, 1995). In contrast, difficulty managing one's emotions results in emotion dysregulation. Researchers have linked emotion dysregulation to negative emotional outcomes including its role in the development and maintenance of anxiety disorders (Hofmann, Sawyer, Fang,

& Asnaani, 2012; Suveg, Morelen, Brewer, & Thamassin, 2010). Investigators suggest that one element of emotion dysregulation is high negative emotional reactivity. Individuals with high negative emotional reactivity tend to become easily distressed, to experience emotions intensely, and to have difficulty calming down after being upset (Mennin, Holaway, Fresco, Moore, & Heimberg, 2007). Another element of emotion dysregulation in anxiety is difficulty in identifying and understanding emotions (Cisler & Olantunji, 2012; Hofmann et al., 2012). Finally, emotion dysregulation often results in the use of maladaptive approaches to control the experience and expression of emotions (Hofmann et al., 2012; Suveg & Zeman, 2005).

Mindfulness

Mindfulness is an awareness that arises through paying attention, on purpose, in the present moment, and without judgement (Kabat-Zinn, 1982). Mindfulness involves four key elements: observation, interpretation, awareness, and acceptance. Thus, a person practicing mindfulness observes and interprets external and internal stimuli in the moment without evaluating or passing judgment on the current experience (Furtner, Tutzer, & Sachse, 2018). The function of the non-judgmental stance is to create an internal environment in which emotions and thoughts can occur without interference or suppression.

Researchers suggest that the practice of mindfulness is linked to decreased anxiety (Chambers, Gullone, & Allen, 2009; Hofmann, Sawyer, Witt, & Oh, 2010). More specifically, Subic-Wrana et al. (2014) examined emotion regulation strategies and found that the mindfulness elements of awareness and non-judgement in particular

were helpful to those with anxiety (Subic-Wrana et al., 2014). Participants who recognized and accepted their emotions in a non-judgmental way experience less anxiety. Conversely, participants who suppressed or avoided their emotions were at increased risk of negative outcomes such as anxiety and depression (Subic-Wrana et al., 2014).

Research focusing on the use of mindfulness with children and adolescents has expanded in recent years but is still limited (American Academy of Pediatrics [AAP], 2017; Frank et al., 2013; Greenburg & Harris, 2012; Rempel, 2012; Thompson & Gauntlett-Gilbert, 2008; Ziomek-Daigle & Oliphant, 2017). Research conducted over the last 10 years has explored the impact of mindfulness training on students diagnosed with a variety of mental health conditions including Conduct Disorder, Autism, Asperger syndrome, and those in treatment for chronic pain (Ziomek-Daigle & Oliphant, 2017). Likewise, the available research on the use of mindfulness in a school-based setting shows promise (Semple, Drouman, & Reid, 2017). Initial research has found positive psychological and physical outcomes linked to the practice of mindfulness in the K-12 setting (AAP, 2017; Dimick, Noltemeyer, & Klatt, 2015; Felver, Frank, & McEachern, 2013). It is clear that mindfulness practice can potentially address anxiety, as well as a host of other emotional issues, experienced by students of all ages. In the next section, we discuss mindfulness practices and specific interventions for use by school counselors.

Mindfulness Practices in Schools

School counselors are ideally suited to implement mindfulness into the schools.

Their training and role within the school allows them to identify students in need of support and the appropriate level of intervention delivery. School counselors also have the skills and knowledge needed to adapt mindfulness practice for use with students at all grade levels and across all levels of intervention (Felver, Doerner, Jones, Kaye, & Merrell, 2013; Tadlock-Marlo, 2011). Finally, mindfulness practices are ideally suited for the school setting and contribute in a practical and meaningful way to the school counselor's repertoire of skills and techniques. Lessons are typically brief, require minimal resources, and are relatively simple to implement.

School counselors may incorporate mindfulness in their day-to-day routines with students in a variety of ways. First, school counselors may introduce mindfulness practices to all students as part of an existing school-wide social and emotional learning (SEL) curriculum. The integration makes conceptual sense given that SEL and mindfulness are complementary of each other in their focus on self-awareness, equanimity, attention training, and promoting empathy, pro-social attitudes and behaviors (Brensilver, 2016). In using this whole school approach, it will be important for school counselors to conduct in-service training for teachers and administrators, describing the positive effects of incorporating mindfulness. Additionally, mindfulness could easily fit into an action-research plan for the year by utilizing data to evaluate the effects of mindfulness activities.

Several colleagues provide online resources for how they are incorporating mindfulness in the classroom as school counselors (see Counselor Keri, Counselor

Chelsea, Jessica Woody, etc.). We discuss selected strategies from each tier or level of intervention to provide examples of how school counselors may begin incorporating mindfulness in their schools. School counselors provide Tier 1 interventions to all students through classroom-wide instruction. One efficient way to teach mindfulness strategies in the classroom is to let students practice mindfulness exercises through centers or stations. Students can rotate through centers, spending 5-10 minutes practicing each exercise and then debrief with small groups to talk about their experiences and impressions (Counselor Keri, 2018). While elementary school classrooms offer more flexibility in scheduling for mindfulness activities throughout the day, middle and high schools may opt to use a weekly flex period to introduce mindfulness strategies. Alternatively, school counselors could lead large groups of students in brief mindfulness exercises on a designated day each week, such as "Mindful Mondays", by visiting individual classrooms, providing classrooms with pre-recorded videos of themselves leading a mindfulness exercise, or reading a mindfulness script over the announcements (Counselor Keri, 2018).

While providing large group lessons or consulting with teachers, school counselors are likely to identify anxious students that could benefit from more intense practice with mindfulness skills. School counselors may then offer Tier 2 small group mindfulness interventions that provide identified students additional opportunities to learn adaptive emotion regulation skills when anxiety is experienced. These small groups may be time limited or on going depending on the school's needs and resources available. Additionally, with time and continued practice, it may

be possible to offer peer led mindfulness groups. Finally, school counselors may identify students that are not able to independently regulation their emotion in the classroom and need Tier 3 individual counseling interventions. As time permits, school counselors provide these types of individualized interventions. However, given the myriad of expectations and responsibilities that school counselors manage on a daily basis, ongoing individualized counseling may not always be possible. Therefore, one alternative may be to create a mindfulness meditation space within the building or in a small section of the counselor's office for individual students who need time alone to calm down by refocusing on the here and now (Counselor Keri, 2018).

Mindfulness lessons are highly adaptable and provide school counselors significant flexibility in their use with students at the elementary, middle, and high school levels. Adaptability is important for tailoring mindfulness techniques to students' developmental (Thompson & Gauntlett-Gilbert, 2008). When selecting developmentally appropriate mindfulness interventions, school counselors should consider students' cognitive development, attentional capacity, level of interest, and engagement. For instance, younger children will likely benefit most from lessons that focus on the concrete experience of mindfulness, whereas older children may be able to grasp the more abstract meta-cognitive elements of mindfulness (Weare, 2013). Additionally, the time spent practicing mindfulness should vary according to a student's developmental level. Practice sessions with young children are typically short (between 1-5 minutes) or the recommended one minute of mindfulness

practice for every year of age (Greenland, 2010; Thompson & Gauntlett-Gilbert, 2008).

Another consideration when teaching mindfulness skills to children and adolescents is maintaining the interest and engagement of the learner. To do this, school counselors should vary how students practice mindfulness skills and minimize or eliminate extended periods of meditation that are often present in the mindfulness practice of adults. Other ways to maintain interest and engagement include incorporating multiple senses into practice activities (e.g., hearing, tasting) and using metaphors and analogies with older children to illustrate concepts (Thompson & Gauntlett-Gilbert, 2008).

The possibilities and methods for using mindfulness in the schools are numerous. We discuss a few of the most frequently used techniques to provide an understanding of how school counselors may begin incorporating mindfulness-based techniques with their students. School counselors or others can implement or adapt these methods as necessary for use within the schools.

Mindfulness of the Breath

A major area of focus for many mindfulness techniques is focus on one's breath (Tadlock-Marlo, 2011). The ever-present yet fundamentally necessary nature of breathing lends itself well for use in mindfulness practice. When practicing mindfulness, a person can use their breathing as a focus of attention as well as use it to cope with stressful situations. People experiencing anxiety tend to breathe in their upper chest with shallow, rapid breaths, which may contribute to hyperventilation. Mindfulness practices

encourage slow deep breaths, which stimulate the body's natural relaxation response (Harvard Medical School, 2018). In breath-focused mindfulness techniques, a student is encouraged to focus awareness on their breath and practice breathing in a particular way (e.g., take a deep breath for 5 seconds, exhale for 10 seconds).

Take 5 Breathing Exercise. One example of a specific breath-based mindfulness technique is the Take 5 Breathing Exercise (e.g., Burnett, n.d.). In this exercise, ask students to spread the fingers of one hand, stretching the fingers wide. Then, students use the index finger of one hand to trace the outline of the fingers of the other hand beginning with the thumb and ending with the pinky finger. Instruct students to pay attention to how the index finger is moving and to think about how tracing the fingers feels. Students will then repeat the action by tracing the hand again. While doing so, they will breathe out through their nose while the index finger is tracing upward and out through their mouth while the index finger is tracing downward.

Breathing Applications. Alternatively, there are a variety of breathing applications, or apps (e.g., Breathe2Relax, Universal Breathing- Pranayama, Relax Stress and Anxiety Relief, Breathing Zone) available for download onto a mobile phone or tablet. Breathing apps provide instructions and practice exercises to help users learn deep breathing techniques. Integrating technology into the practice of mindfulness techniques may be an appealing alternative for some children and adolescents. Mobile apps may encourage continued practice of mindfulness techniques at home in addition to school. However, the cost of mobile apps varies.

While some breathing apps such as Breath2Relax are free, others have a small purchase price typically ranging from \$1.99 to \$4.99. The cost of mobile apps may pose a barrier for some students, as does limited or no access to mobile technology. It is important for school counselors to be sensitive to such barriers and provide students with alternatives for home practice such as handouts of mindfulness activities, narrated written scripts, or audio recordings.

Mindfulness of the Body and Senses

Another common focus of mindfulness practice is mindfulness of the body (Kerr, Sacchet, Lazar, Moore, & Jones, 2013). In body-focused mindfulness techniques, students direct their attention to physical sensations experienced within the body (Kerr et al., 2013). School counselors may implement body-focused mindfulness techniques as part of a larger mindfulness approach (e.g., mindfulness based stress reduction) or use them in isolation. Regardless of the method of implementation, body-focused mindfulness practices typically involve two elements: focusing attention on physical sensations and developing an understanding of how emotions affect the body. A common body-focused mindfulness technique is the body scan (e.g., "Body Scan Meditation," n.d.). The body scan can be done in different ways (e.g., Greater Good Science Center, 2020; Kerr et al., 2013), but the process typically involves starting in a comfortable position (seated or lying down), taking several deep breaths, and systematically focusing on the sensations felt in different parts of the body. Students make connection between the body and emotions during the mindfulness activity, after the activity, or both.

An area of practice related to body-focused mindfulness is sensory mindfulness. Sensory mindfulness entails directing awareness to each of the body's sensations and perceptions in the moment (e.g., what sounds are heard, the temperature of the room). Two common sensory-based mindfulness techniques are the 5, 4, 3, 2, 1 grounding technique and the raisin exercise.

5, 4, 3, 2, 1 Grounding Technique. There are numerous variations on this technique, but all involve bringing awareness to each of our five senses in the moment (e.g., "Coping Skills Spotlight," 2016; Ackerman, 2017). Often, practice begins by taking several deep breaths. The second step is to identify five things that can be seen and name those things aloud. In the third step, ask students to focus their attention on four physical sensations experienced in that moment (e.g., how shoes feel on the feet, the feel of the chair) and name those sensations. Fourth, three things that can be heard are identified and named. The fifth step is to identify and name two things that can be smelled and name those two things. Identifying and naming one taste is the sixth and final step. In some variations, this technique will end with taking several final deep breaths.

Raisin Exercise. The raisin exercise is one that can be used as an introductory mindfulness technique. Despite its name, school counselors may use any food item to perform this technique, although ones with distinctive attributes are best (Ackerman, 2017). In this exercise, ask students to imagine that they have never seen a raisin. Then, slowly direct them to attend to how the raisin looks, feels, smells, and tastes. The intended purpose of the raisin exercise is to bring students'

attention to the present moment by focusing on one particular item using all of the senses in turn (Ackerman, 2017).

Walking Mindfulness. Many believe you must be still to be mindful, but the goal of mindfulness is to have it generalize to daily activities. For example, you can practice mindfulness while going for a walk by simply paying close attention to all aspects of the process (Thompson & Gauntlett-Gilbert, 2008). While walking, instruct students to first focus on their breath and then focus their attention to their other senses in the moment. Encourage students to walk at a comfortable pace that allows them to focus on the body (e.g., sensations in the feet as they hit the floor) and the events around them (e.g., changes in temperature, light, sound). Instruct students to avoid talking with others and to notice and react mindfully to outside events. With practice, have students try labeling, or using anchor words to help focus attention and stay connected with the sensations of walking (e.g., "stepping" or "right" then "left. "). Next, we provide more information about the use of anchor words.

Anchor Words. When practicing mindful breathing or other techniques, students will still experience thoughts, sounds, physical sensations, emotions, and other sensations. Teach students to attend to these external experiences when they enter conscious awareness with the use of anchor words (Mindful Schools, 2011). The use of anchor words may help steady one's attention on something that enters conscious awareness while practicing. Anchor words are mental labels that may be applied to anything, but anchor words should be purely observational and not judgmental (Mindful Schools, 2011). For example, if a student hears a noise, label

it "sound." If they have a body sensation, label it "itch" or "ache." Once a student names something, they may choose to focus their attention on it or focus back on the breath. Students can also use anchor words to label emotions. Then, a quick body scan may be helpful in understanding connections between emotional and physical experiences.

Again, the possibilities and methods for using mindfulness in the schools are numerous. We simply offer this overview of some of the most frequently used techniques to provide a better understanding of how school counselors may begin incorporating mindfulness-based techniques with their students. School counselors can implement and adapt methods as necessary for use within the schools.

Conclusion

In conclusion, mindfulness based techniques show considerable promise in alleviating student anxiety characterized by emotional dysregulation (Semple et al., 2017; Subic-Wrana et al., 2014) and the literature provides a strong rationale for the implementation of mindfulness based techniques by school counselors (AAP, 2017; Frank et al., 2013; Greenburg & Harris, 2012; Rempel, 2012; Tadlock-Marlo, 2011; Thompson & Gauntlett-Gilbert, 2008; Ziomek-Daigle & Oliphant, 2017). School counselors are encouraged to incorporate mindfulness into the schools at all grade levels and across all tiers of intervention by introducing frequently used techniques such as the Take 5 Breathing Exercise, Body Scan, or 5, 4, 3, 2, 1 Grounding Technique. Such exercises require minimal resources, are highly adaptable, and are relatively simple to implement. Furthermore,

school counselors are encouraged to seek professional development opportunities related to the practice of mindfulness and explore other methods for using mindfulness in the schools. It is clear that developmentally appropriate mindfulness practice can help alleviate anxiety commonly experienced by students of all ages and help them participate more effectively in the classroom.

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