



BEST PRACTICES: Mindfulness in the Catholic Tradition

Mindfulness is a manner of being attentive to the here and now, with acceptance, without judgment. According to meditation teacher and physician Jan Chozen Bays, “Mindfulness means deliberately paying attention, being fully aware of what is happening both inside yourself – in your body, heart, and mind – and outside yourself - in your environment. Mindfulness is awareness without judgment or criticism” (p. 3). We can find mindfulness being exercised as far back as the Old Testament. God our Father was intentional regarding creating aspects of nature and of man and woman, then resting on the seventh day. *On the seventh day, God completed the work He had been doing; He rested on the seventh day from all the work He had undertaken. God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it He rested from all the work He had done in creation* (Genesis: Ch.1). We read in Psalm 46, “*Be still and know that I am God!*” Bottaro in *The Mindful Catholic: Finding God One Moment at a Time (2018)*, states, “If mindfulness is awareness of the present moment, God is the present moment. He defined Himself as ‘*I am who am.*’ God sees all as a present moment, and it is our goal to see as He sees.” Bottaro believes, “The practice of mindfulness, ... integrated with a trust in God, will help you let the moments be moments, and not turn them into more than they need to be. Paying attention to the full scope of your life will give you a greater sense of freedom, joy, and peace” (Kindle Loc. 241).

We discover in the New Testament how Jesus was mindful in all His interactions. He also took time out of His busy schedule of teaching and healing to be rejuvenated through silence and stillness in prayer. Consider how, before responding to the accusations of the Pharisees, Jesus paused before reacting and thus responded in a forthright manner, speaking according to His Father’s will. Also recall when the Pharisees brought the woman caught in adultery to Jesus, He didn’t lash out against her, but instead was silently drawing on the ground and then looked up and said, “*Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?*” She replied, “*No one, sir.*” Then Jesus said, “*Neither do I condemn you. Go, [and] from now on do not sin anymore*” (John 8: 1-11). We can find many other instances of Jesus being fully aware of Himself and His surroundings and He reminds each of us, “*I have told you this so that you might have peace in Me. In the world you will have trouble, but take courage, I have conquered the world*” (John 16:33).

Not only Jesus, but also His Mother Mary taught us the importance of mindfulness as we read in the Gospel of Luke, Chapter 2, “*All who heard it were amazed by what had been told them by the shepherds. And Mary kept all these things, reflecting on them in her heart*” (18-19). The Blessed Mother, together with Joseph, her beloved husband and protector, guided the young Jesus. Surely, they understood the overwhelming importance of their mission. Both were mindful and attentive to their daily tasks.

We too are charged with an awesome task of educating students academically, emotionally, and spiritually, most especially in the teachings of Jesus and our Catholic faith. The tenets of our faith are subject matter to be taught; more importantly they are a means of putting our faith into action. One such strategy for making our faith a lived reality is by following the Holy Family’s example of mindfulness.

Simply described, mindfulness is about paying attention to all the aspects of our lives; for example, being attentive to what we are doing at any given moment or paying attention to the breath of life or slowly breathing in and out as a means of calming ourselves. To avoid distractions by all things that have yet to be accomplished during the day, try for a few minutes to attend to the inhaling and exhaling of breathing. Notice how the chest and lungs expand and contract.

How often do we engage thoughtfully in a conversation? While we are listening to someone, often our minds are rapidly planning our response, judging what is said, and interrupting instead of giving our full attention to the speaker. How often when driving are we distracted by our thoughts, what needs to be done, what groceries to be purchased, laundry to be folded, . . .? If we are honest with ourselves, we recognize that we are regularly living very inattentive or unconscious lives. It makes me think of the song from Simon and Garfunkel, “*Slow down you move too fast, you got to make the morning last.*” Smalley and Winston (2011) believe that, “Mindfulness is an antidote to the dullness and disconnection of life lived on automatic pilot” (p. 12). **They reason that “we have become human doings instead of human beings.** Mindfulness is a means to rebalance doing and being” (p.17). Goldstein (2011) stresses that “mindfulness breaks the grip our thoughts have on us, allowing us to more often choose whether to act on them or not... Mindfulness also keeps us connected to the people around us, so we don’t just rush by them in the busyness of our lives” (p.21).

Focusing on the here and now, living each moment attentively will provide us with more peaceful living. God saw everything He had made as good and that includes each one of us. Therefore, if we believe and trust in the great

love God has for us, we can then conclude that all will be well according to God's plan. Bottaro (2018) reminds us, "My God, My God, why have You abandoned Me?" Why did Jesus go through that? Because we go through that. He knew He wasn't going to take away our suffering, so He joined us in it. God is really here for us. We can let go of our worries and trust Him." This does not mean we will have all the answers, but recognizing the truth that Jesus is one with us, we do not need to be bogged down by endless worrying. He is in charge, He is God, and we are not. With this in mind, we can then strive to live life more intentionally, giving full attention to the matter at hand, resulting in a less chaotic, more creative, and more peaceful existence.

This goal will not happen overnight; it requires consistent effort. For example, when working with family members, colleagues, students, and friends, we can aim to give them our complete attention and listen without interruption, looking them in the eye, and not being distracted digitally or by our thoughts. Attentive listening to the people we encounter daily demonstrates to the listener that we care, we respect them, and that we recognize that they too are God's wonderful creation. Consistently interacting in this manner will deepen our relationships and make them more meaningful. As parents and teachers, putting ourselves in the shoes of the child, viewing situations from their perspective, and giving them our undivided attention will help to develop in them a positive self-esteem and create a caring and accepting environment.

Chapman (2011) emphasized that recognizing how we interact with others can have a profound impact on the way we encounter others. **Pausing and thinking about what we are about to say and considering how what is said will affect the listener may save us from later regret.** If we are overreacting to a situation, we need to give ourselves time to regroup. Being mindful of how we communicate with others and asking ourselves if we are giving our full attention to a conversation, will help to improve and deepen our relationships (221). Jon Kabat-Zinn, Founder of Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction Program, emphasizes in an article, "*Parenting with Mindful Awareness*," that parents and children obviously both have needs and that parents must take the time to be fully present to each of their children every day. He suggests that parents (and we could add teachers) should "imagine how you appear and sound from your child's/student's point of view, that is, what it is like having you as a parent/teacher today, in this moment" (p. 233). He continues that at times we must sincerely apologize to children if the situation warrants it. An apology demonstrates that the adult thought about the situation and considered the child's point of view. He finally exhorts the reader, "We only have right now. Let us use it to its best advantage for our children's sake and for our own" (p. 235).

Jennings (2018) recognized that teaching and dealing with all the issues educators must address in a single day can be quite stressful. She therefore recommends that teachers need to take time for themselves. She encourages teachers to utilize the practical strategy of "taking three deep breaths and assess the situation. This simple ability to respond, rather than react, does help to reduce a teacher's stress level" (p. 65). Rechtschaffen and Rechtschaffen (2015) note that studies conducted by Schonert-Reichl et al., (2015) reveal "that when students practice mindfulness, their stress, depression, and anxiety decrease, while their impulse control, emotional regulation, happiness, and empathy increase" (p. 59). Practicing mindfulness to relieve stress may be as simple as having the class take a few deep breaths before a test for the purpose of alleviating anxiety and of aiding full attention to the task at hand. Role-playing mindful communications will assist students to recognize how their words and/or body language can either build up or tear down relationships at school and at home. Encouraging students to pause before responding in an antagonistic manner and explaining that unlike the computer we cannot hit undo, will help them to develop more productive communication skills. As parents and educators, we too need to provide ourselves with time before replying to a verbal or digital communication. Regarding email, Scott & Davenport (2017) stress that "we must be mindful of our language and tone, and to remember that we're communicating with another human being. Take three deep breaths before hitting the 'send' button and ask, 'Is it true? Is it necessary? Is it kind?'" (p. 108).

Another technique for mindful living, suggested by Scott and Davenport, is that before getting out of bed in the morning that we take 10 minutes to lie comfortably, without falling back to sleep, and be aware of your breathing throughout the body, slowly reviewing the plans for the day. We know that Jesus speaks to us daily in His Word. Therefore, make it a daily practice to read or listen to the Mass readings for the day at <http://uscgb.org/bible/readings/> and click on a particular date on the calendar. Then in the classroom, read the Gospel for the day with students and share reflections. It has often amazed me how deep and close children are to God because their reflections are often truly profound. Participating in this mindful practice will result in a more peaceful classroom environment. Teaching and providing time for quiet stillness in the class, slowly giving attention to the web and flow of breathing is a great way to begin the day in calmness.

May God help each of us to live more mindful lives for His greater honor and glory!

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Mindfulness Resources:

Bergstrom, C. (2018). *Ultimate mindfulness activity book: 150 playful mindfulness activities for kids and teens (and grown-ups too!)*. Kindle Edition.

Bottaro, G. (2018). *The mindful Catholic: Finding God one moment at a time*. FL: Beacon Publishing. Kindle Edition.

Bays, J. (2011). What Is Mindfulness; Chapman, S. Stop, Go, Wait.; Goldstein, J. Here, Now, Aware.; Kabat-Zinn, J & M. Parenting with Mindful Awareness; and Smalley, S. & Winston, D. Is Mindfulness for You? In Boyce, B. & Shambhala Sun (Eds.). *Mindfulness revolution: Leading psychologists, scientists, artists, and meditation teachers on the power of mindfulness in daily life*. MA: Shambhala Publications, Inc.

Collard, P. (2014) *The Little Book of Mindfulness: 10 Minutes a Day to Less Stress, More Peace*. UK: Octopus Publishing Group Ltd. Kindle Edition.

Jennings, P. (2018). Bringing mindfulness to teacher PD. *Educational Leadership*, 76 (2), 64-68.

Rechtschaffen, D. & Rechtschaffen, T. (2015). The five literacies of mindful learning. *Educational Leadership*, 73 (2), 58-62.

Scott, S.J. & Davenport, B. (2017). *10-Minute Mindfulness: 71 Habits for Living in the Present Moment*. Oldtown Publishing LLC. Kindle Edition.

Snel, E. (2013). *Sitting Still Like a Frog: Mindfulness Exercises for Kids (and Their Parents)*. MA: Shambhala Publications, Inc. Kindle Edition.

https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/mindful_education - Resources on mindfulness in the classroom

https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/tips_for_teaching_mindfulness_to_kids

---TEN STEPS TO---
MINDFULNESS MEDITATION



1 Create time & space.
Choose a regular time each day for mindfulness meditation practice, ideally a quiet place free from distraction



2 Set a timer.
Start with just 5 minutes and ease your way up to 15-40 minutes.



3 Find a comfortable sitting position.
Sit cross-legged on the floor, on the grass, or in a chair your feet flat on the ground.



4 Check your posture.
Sit up straight, hands in a comfortable position. Keep neck long, chin tilted slightly downward, tongue resting on roof of mouth. Relax shoulders. Close eyes or gaze downward 5-10 feet in front of you.



5 Take deep breaths.
Deep breathing helps settle the body and establish your presence in the space



6 Direct attention to your breath.
Focus on a part of the body where the breath feels prominent: nostrils; back of throat; or diaphragm. Try not to switch focus.



7 Maintain attention to your breath.
As you inhale and exhale, focus on the breath. If attention wanders, return to the breath. Let go of thoughts, feelings or distractions.



8 Repeat steps 6-7.
For the duration of meditation session. The mind will wander. Simply acknowledge this and return to your breath.



9 Be kind to yourself.
Don't be upset if focus occasionally drifts or if you fall asleep. If very tired, meditate with eyes open and rearrange posture to more erect (but still relaxed) position.



10 Prepare for a soft landing.
When the timer goes off, keep eyes closed until you're ready to open them. Be thankful. Acknowledge your practice with gratitude.



Mindfulness activities

1. KNOW YOUR EXISTENCE
2. ATTENTION TO ALL THE DETAILS
3. A SIMPLE COMPLIMENT.
4. A GOOD SIGN OFF OF THE DAY
5. MOVE YOUR BODY
6. GET YOURSELF SOME FRESH AIR
7. WATER, A FREE MEDICINE
8. A LITTLE MUSIC
9. NO PHONE, NO WORRIES
10. STRETCH, STRETCH AND STRETCH

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