



# THERAPY NEWS

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## Stress Management and Mindfulness

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School is back in session! This is the time of year I begin to see an increase in young clients due to school stress. According to ADAA (2018,) [anxiety](#) affects 25.1% of kids ages 13-18. The middle school population comes to mind due to their transitioning from childhood to teenage years, known as the 'tween' stage of [child development](#). Now peer-group acceptance becomes very important. Both finding and fitting into one's tribe with the concerns about [identity](#) taken to heart; now self-consciousness and [shame](#) are intensified. There is also the academic shift from learning 'how to learn' and building a knowledge base to critical thinking and using inferential learning. At this time, kids

are asked to employ their independent thinking, adjust to changing classes with varying demands and less teacher availability. Kids tell me they are 'overwhelmed' adapting to these novel stressors. A skill that helps young people to navigate their perceived stress should be in order. This is where mindfulness training can come in handy. These supportive skills to calm the Self help to increase [executive functioning](#), aid in sustaining focus and attention, as well as enhancing the capacity to deal with stress. In a recent [study](#) regarding effects of mindfulness training on stress and brain plasticity's impact on the developing brain, evidence was found for

self-calming skills in children reducing stress and promoting functional brain changes. Proof was also indicated on neurocognitive mechanisms, for both stress and its reduction, by mindfulness training that specifically related to reduced amygdala responses to negative stimuli (Bauer, C., et. al., 2019). So by learning simple mindfulness techniques, such as paying attention to one's breath and sustaining a meditative focus, young people can learn how to [self-regulate](#). Lowering perceived stress can improve anxiety and create a better chance of academic success. Now that school is back in session with the uptick in pressure, setting aside a regular time every day to be still, to just sit and notice the breath, clearing the mind and temporarily turning inward may result in a valuable life skill.



### Three Self-Calming Steps

*Parents can help children turn off [back-to-school stress](#) by teaching abilities to be in the moment and release their many distractions. Kids now can build skills for lifetime resiliency.*

#### Sit and Relax

Sit comfortably and try squeezing/relaxing your body to release physical tension. Take a nice, deep inhale. Flex your arms, clench your hands, crinkle your face and curl each toe. Exhale slowly & relax. (Repeat three times).

#### Breathe and Relax

Put one hand on your belly and one on your chest. Fill each space with air as if you are filling a balloon. Exhale slowly. Notice your hands moving up and down with each slow breath. (Repeat three times).

#### Listen and Relax

Place hands in lap, close the eyes and be very quiet. Listen carefully to sounds in and outside your room. Can you hear your heart? (Repeat three times)

## Wellness Skills for School Pressure

All human beings need to learn how to unwind. For kids, it is especially challenging to really slow down in an active, overscheduled world of infinite stimulation, entertainment and confusion. Mindfulness techniques help kids unplug from the world and to tune in to their bodies, minds and inner environment. These skills help to, first connect to what's happening within them, then to the eventual mindfulness of their environment and the larger world. A child's fear reaction to stress is the brain's way of helping them to stay safe; a survival safety mechanism. A part of the brain called the amygdala processes uncomfortable feelings and mediates emotional responses. For example, the amygdala can manage a fear reaction to a barking dog until the person gathers enough information to decide the dog is merely excited; not really dangerous. After that time,

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"Feelings come and go like  
clouds in a windy sky.  
Conscious breathing  
is my anchor."  
~Thich Nhat Hanh "



the brain can settle the body and mind down. But if the brain is overly excited by excess stimulation, it can continue to send out distress signals in situations that don't call for it. Such as when there's a lot of homework, which isn't actually perilous, but some children react as though it is a threat. This is not a particularly good state in which to study, as kids cannot focus and concentrate well on the task at hand. Given the many challenges of school, it follows that children become affected and are in need a coping skill to calm their excited nervous systems. According to the [Earth and Spirit Center](#), science has confirmed the immense benefits of mindfulness meditation practice:

- Increases emotional regulation
- Expands capacity for resilience
- Nurtures compassion and self-awareness
- Reduces stress, worry and fear
- Improves memory capacity
- Enhances ability to pay attention
- Increases a sense of wellbeing
- Eases symptoms of depression and anxiety

In my therapeutic work, as well as yoga teaching, these self-calming methods are a focus, such as breath-work and meditation. The power of knowing calming techniques gives confidence that there really are tools to help one's self to lower anxiety. Fear comes from the idea of helplessness in out-of-control environments. Mindfulness puts people back

in charge of their lives. There are many apps, free videos and articles detailing easy-to-learn mindfulness practices. These teach shifting one's attention back to the present moment or learning how to pay close attention to one's breath. Self-regulation can be the ultimate life skill contributing to a person's success. Integrating this vital information into the school system to render wellness tools could be beneficial for ALL children (and teachers). In [Australia](#), there is growing concern about an anxiety epidemic in their schools that stems from the combined pressures of social media, personal issues, as well as academic tensions. The school system in this country has imbedded meditation into their daily lesson plan to improve student wellbeing. One program in Louisville, KY, [The Compassionate Schools Project](#), focuses on educating the whole child in health and wellness. The goal is to increase abilities toward self-awareness for [stress management](#) and discipline. The curriculum: meditative movement and postures, as well as using controlled breath-work, for physical awareness and agility. Topics of healthy eating and social/emotional skills for effective interpersonal relationships are also included. The tools of self-regulation and the power to shift focus onto what is important and away from less relevant sources of stimuli is a valuable way to control the stress response. Goal-directed behavior is key to achievements in life. The use of mindfulness techniques can support children in achieving just that!