

Meditation for the Young Mind

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My teacher is standing in front of me. Her mouth is moving but no sound is coming out. She's mad at me for something, yes, but I can't seem to remember what. I know she's mad at me because of the look on her face, her hands on her hips, the other kids staring at me with sorry eyes. But I can't hear her. All I can think about is what might be for dinner when I get home and the silly conversation I was having with a friend before this and what I would wear to church this coming Sunday and the new cartoon my brother and I had started. And it wasn't my fault that I was distracted by the sound of pencils on paper and all the pretty pens on her desk and I noticed that one of my shoes was untied and, man, those pens were *really* distracting. This was just how my brain always operated. It was always stuck in a run-on sentence.

The Challenge

When I was a child, I struggled a lot in school. I had home problems and struggled with being focused in my classes. My emotions, compared to other children in my class, were something that I never learned how to control. My teachers didn't understand what I was going through and as a result, I was labeled as a "bad kid". I hardly had the support I needed at such a young age. I didn't have someone to help me regulate all the big feelings in my small body.

Going into middle and high school, the issue didn't resolve itself. I seemed to be getting worse, feeling the label of "bad kid" following me from my younger years. I was quieter in the classroom, more obedient and more reserved. However, I still had no guidance in dealing with these big emotions. I started to internalize a lot and all the overwhelming thoughts in my head only brought more issues with my focus. I was struggling, not only in the classroom but in my own mind.

As I got older, I met more of my peers who seemed to struggle with similar problems. It felt comforting, knowing I wasn't alone, but it saddened me to realize how many students had no way to cope. I discovered so many of my friends were battling with symptoms of depression and so many of them couldn't seem to remain focused on their work either. There was an overwhelming amount of kids who didn't know how to deal with the stress of everyday life and things that they may not have talked about. Many students couldn't seek out professional help and there was only so much that a school counselor could do.

The Big Idea

I am now much older and have much more experience and insight gained from difficult life challenges. I have worked on ways to improve my ability to focus as well as ways to regulate and recognize my emotions. I have gone through many trials and errors of finding what helps me and I believe have found a rather precious method of coping with the stresses of mental health. I believe that learning healthy coping mechanisms is something that should be more regularly taught at an early age, to become something individuals can always remember how to use. If we can teach the ABCs and 123s so easily, why can't we teach how to calm down your mind?

One day, I decided to give meditation a try. It was something that was recommended to me by many mental health professionals and various internet articles. I shoved it to the side at first, believing that it would be too impossible a task. Sit still for some period of time? I had too many thoughts in my brain, how would I ever quiet them down? I eventually gave in, having tried various other solutions, and tried it. I sat outside on my deck and closed my eyes, listening to nothing but the breeze. It wasn't something that became easy the first time, or even the second, third, and fourth times. However, slowly but surely, I was meditating for five, then ten,

twenty, and now *thirty* minutes at a time. For someone with ADD, it once sounded impossible to be accomplished.

While I like meditating, I find that many kids with ADD and ADHD tend to need to be moving *some* part of their body. I am an active person and like to be on the go almost all the time. Apart from meditation, I cannot *stand* to be forced to sit still for too long. I have begun to do something called meditative walking. This method of meditation is essentially a nature walk in which you pay attention to nothing but the sensations of your surroundings or you have binaural beats playing on headphones. It has become a great way for me to take time to silence my brain and I find that, once I am done, I can focus on tasks at home better.

My approach would be called Peace and Patience. Peace and Patience would work on implementing this method of meditation and nature and introducing it to young school children. Children would participate in meditative walks and learn how to develop meditation skills. It would essentially be an out-of-school wellness class aimed to teach young minds the art of practicing inner stillness. I believe that teaching children how to regulate their own emotions is a very important step in development and one that we are not teaching enough. Children need to have better tools in their back pockets than fidget toys or medication.

ADD is a real difficulty for many people and it goes unnoticed in so many children. Less than 20% of adults with ADD/ADHD are professionally diagnosed and receiving treatment (Ginsberg et al., 2014). I did not get diagnosed until my *senior year* of high school. However, I truly believe that if I had learned the importance of meditation and practicing being present, it would have made a huge difference in my youth. Using my method, children can learn how to help themselves. There will always be counselors and doctors who will help where they can. But

to have the skills to know how to make peace with your inner monologue, is something unmatched.

The How-To

Peace and Patience would be a community-led project, working to teach children and adolescents the importance of mindfulness. Groups of 5-10 children, divided by age, would participate in a weekly meditative nature walk located somewhere in their community. This can be at the same location every time, or in different locations in their community. The location would be somewhere with minimal noise and distractions, one where there is not much to be seen apart from the surrounding nature. Locations will also be required to have a restroom near or on-site as participants will be urged to go before the walks begin. The project would take willing, trusted adults in the community as volunteers to lead these groups. Ideally, these group leaders would have some knowledge of meditation and techniques to improve mindfulness. Groups would be assigned 2-3 leaders, depending on the size, ensure that there are enough eyes to keep watch and maintain safety. If parents of participants still worry for the safety of their child, especially for younger children, they will be allowed to join groups to accompany their child.

These weekly sessions would be an hour long, divided into four parts: A 10-minute introduction of participants and brief discussion allowing participants to speak about any issues they may be facing; A 30-minute meditative walk through the designated location. This will help to begin quieting down racing thoughts in participants' minds while still keeping them stimulated; A 10-minute meditation after the walk, to help alleviate any final worrying feelings and thoughts. This is to primarily help children understand the importance of stillness and strengthen their abilities to focus by including a non-active meditation; A 10-minute debrief and

discussion of how participants are feeling after and any final thoughts or notes they may want to share. During the meditative walk portion of the session, participants may be able to use headphones to listen to their own music, play binaural beats, or go headphone-less and listen to the sounds of nature around them. The meditation after will be a guided meditation led by one of the group leaders or founded on a trusted internet source. Sessions may exceed an hour if participants feel they need more discussion time before and after.

Peace and Patience will be introduced to children in schools, encouraging them to discuss participation with their parents and to give a session a shot. Parents will also be informed of this as an option for their children. Group leaders will be community volunteers willing to take time out of their day to lead as many sessions as they can. This can be multiple sessions in a row or multiple sessions spread throughout the week. Even just being able to lead once a week will be deeply appreciated! During the week, sessions will be held beginning anywhere from 3PM with final sessions ending at 6PM. During the weekend, sessions will be held beginning anywhere from 10AM with final sessions ending at 5PM. Multiple sessions can be going on at the same time in different locations across the community, allowing for more participants to have the opportunity to join.

The Impact & Call to Action

As someone with ADD, I can confidently say that meditation and mindfulness has been the most powerful tool to help me refocus and release anxiety. Everyday, I make time to engage in at least 15 minutes of some form of meditation. Doing this consistently over the past year has put me in a stable and positive frame of mind that I once felt would be impossible for me to achieve. I am less worried throughout my day and feel I enjoy the present much more than I used

to. Meditation has improved my emotional regulation, my ability to complete tasks, and my overall health.

With that being said, don't just take it from me! Research done on the relationship between meditation and ADD/ADHD has provided evidence that meditative practices can help to improve attention and relieve emotional dysregulation (Modesto-Lowe, et al., 2015). Meditative walking is not the only way to practice meditation; Other methods, such as breath work — which can work to improve one's ability to stay on task — or open-monitoring — which can improve impulse control — can be just as useful in calming the mind (Modesto-Lowe, et al., 2015). There are many ways to practice meditation and there is no harm that can be done in trying it.

It is important to recognize the signs of neurodivergent people at a young age. Many neurodivergent children are impacted by negative stigmas, often labeled as “weird” or “difficult” or “*bad*”. The truth is, there are so many children and adults who go through life undiagnosed and struggle with truly understanding themselves. I believe a group like Peace and Patience will not only teach kids valuable skills, but give children a safe space to open up about things that they may be struggling with. It will provide a community for those who feel unheard, promote self-love at an early age, and teach children the importance of understanding those who are different from you.

References

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