

# Mindfulness practices shown to help teenagers deal with stress

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The teenage years are often a time when anxiety and stress are heightened, causing individuals to deal with problems in self-defeating ways. New research led by a Penn State College of Education faculty member suggests that practicing mindfulness exercises, particularly mindful breathing, could enable adolescents to more effectively manage the stress in their lives.

"Adolescence is a time of uncertainty and exploration," said Deborah Schussler, associate professor of education in the Department of Education Policy Studies. She said the [mindfulness exercises](#) "are really kind of helping (research participants) settle into their bodies, their thoughts, their emotions."

Schussler is the lead author on a new article in the *Journal of Child & Family Studies* titled "Stress and Well-Being: A Systematic Case Study of Adolescents' Experiences in a Mindfulness-Based Program." The study was funded by a \$1.4 million Institute of Education Sciences (IES) grant studying Learning to BREATHE (L2B), a mindfulness-based program, in 11th-grade health

classes. Collecting a variety of qualitative and quantitative data, the project examined whether a diverse group of students from two high schools who participated in L2B exhibited more mindfulness, attention and well-being than students who had health class as usual.

The study was conducted in partnership with colleagues at the Edna Bennett Pierce Prevention Research Center (PRC)—Jennifer Frank, associate professor of education (special education) in the Department of Educational Psychology, Counseling, and Special Education (EPCSE); Trish Broderick, research associate at PRC; and Mark Greenberg, founding director of PRC. Schussler also was assisted by College of Education doctoral graduates Julia Mahfouz, assistant professor at the University of Colorado Denver, and Joe Levitan, an assistant professor at McGill University.

Drawing from a large intervention trial with 389 11th-graders, the researchers examine how a subset of nine students' participation in the L2B program impacted their perceived [stress](#) and well-being, and whether they chose to integrate mindfulness-related practices into their daily lives. As part of the study, students in health classes at the two high schools completed quantitative self-report measures (pre-, post-, follow-up), qualitative interviews and open-ended survey questions.

"We found that students who reported more practice seemed to benefit the most from the program, especially in their management of stress," Schussler said. "Basic mindful breathing seemed to be the most accessible practice they used and could be the easiest for schools to integrate."

Learning to BREATHE, which was developed by Broderick, is a school-based mindfulness-based program (MBP) developed for adolescents that has been implemented in a variety of contexts. The program comprises a six-theme module delivered in six, 12 or 18 lessons, with the module themes

stemming from the BREATHE acronym: Body awareness, Reflections, Emotions, Attention, Take it as it is, Healthy Habits of mind, and Empowerment.

Program goals include helping adolescents:

- become aware of their thoughts, feelings and physical experience;
- use mindful, compassionate awareness when managing distressing emotions; and
- practice these skills in a group setting.

When analyzing the results of the study, Schussler said, there was some discrepancy between the quantitative and qualitative data that indicated the nuanced effects of the intervention on the target students' stress levels. The quantitative data showed that the students actually experienced more stress after participating in L2B. However, she added, "the qualitative data had all this rich information on how they now have all these tools to manage stress."

"We need to have this fuller picture, how these students are using these practices," Schussler said. "Students may not be reporting that they're experiencing less stress in their lives but they are now able to relate to their stress in a more productive way."

While students in the L2B study participated in a variety of practices such as mindful eating, mindful walking and sitting meditation, mindful breathing was by far reported as the most successful. The value of taking a breath when feeling stressed or anxious, Schussler said, lies in its ability to re-direct emotional reactions.

"When we judge things, we react to things," she said. "What L2B does is it gives you a pause so that automatic response, which is frequently not the best response, is hijacked."

An additional advantage of mindful breathing, Schussler added, is its simplicity.

"That seems to be a portable practice that students can easily integrate anytime, anywhere," she said.

Another finding from the study was that the students who were more prone to anxiety, in clinical range of depression, benefited the most from the L2B exercises.

"Students who had more room for growth grew more," said Schussler..

What neither the qualitative nor [quantitative data](#) from the study demonstrated, she said, was any significant impact of L2B on how students interact with others.

"The idea is you're not being mindful just to be mindful for yourself," she said. "This is supposed to impact not just you, but how you are in the world and how you impact others."

While Schussler said that the age group of the target students (16-17 years) may be prone to self-absorption, future research could expand the L2B concept to be more socially inclusive.

"If we coupled compassion training with mindfulness training in a really purposeful way, maybe that helps pull them out of a focus on self," she said.

While the researchers' study demonstrates a positive effect of L2B on students' mental health, Schussler emphasized that the underlying mechanisms of the program are yet to be determined and could be areas of future research.

"An addendum to this work is trying to figure out what's in the 'secret sauce,' what's making these mindfulness-based curricula effective or not and how are they presenting this material?"

**More information:** Deborah L. Schussler et al. Stress and Well-Being: A Systematic Case Study of Adolescents' Experiences in a Mindfulness-Based Program, *Journal of Child and Family Studies* (2020). [DOI: 10.1007/s10826-020-01864-5](https://doi.org/10.1007/s10826-020-01864-5)

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