



# Promoting Social and Emotional Well-Being through Meditation

## SUMMARY

Positive affirmations, guided imagery, and deep breathing have been found effective at improving students' and teachers' social-emotional health and physical well-being. The authors describe their approach to teaching mindfulness through meditation combined with a values curriculum in which students are guided towards examining and exploring their own values and behaviors to build a culture reflective of 'peace, respect, cooperation, and responsibility.'

*A constant challenge* for teachers at any level is to engage students to the point they are resistant to distractions. This is even more difficult in the contemporary classroom with widespread technology and social media at students' fingertips. For some students, academic performance is also hindered by limited coping skills which can prevent effective management of anger and frustration. Aggressive behaviors such as bullying or cyberbullying are experienced by one in five students once or twice a month (National Center for Education Statistics, 2012b). In New York state, approximately 24 percent of high school freshmen fail to complete their education (NCES, 2012a). These compelling statistics demonstrate some of the educational challenges that are beginning to receive much more attention at all levels.

This increased awareness of destructive behaviors has led to state laws such as New York state's Dignity for All Students Act which charges schools to create a respectful, tolerant climate to prevent bullying and other harmful behaviors (New York state, 2013). One recent large-scale study found that teachers often observe bullying and would like additional training in its prevention (Bradshaw, Waasdorp, O'Brennan & Gulemetova, 2013). One useful approach that has the potential to increase self-awareness and reduce distressing behavior is meditation. This practice, when applied in conjunction with values training can be used to develop students' social-emotional skills. We shape the five social and emotional learning core competencies in two stages. First, we develop self-awareness and self-management through

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meditation. Then we use that foundation to progress to social awareness, building relationships with others, and being accountable for our decisions and behaviors.

We seek to promote social-emotional learning by creating activities which foster students' introspection and self-awareness as well as the impact of their actions on others. There has been increased attention to meditation and mindfulness, and self-awareness is growing in all types of organizations including the corporate world and higher education (Gardiner, 2012; La Forge, 1999). There is also an increased amount of attention to meditation and mindfulness in the P-12 environment. Ferguson (1976) reported that meditation produced relaxation which lowered anxiety, increased self esteem, and improved academic performance and social relationships. He recommended that meditation may be especially helpful to special education students. Teachers can be trained to consider their own sensory state as part of the learning situation and how to use various exercises to "open" their senses before teaching. These techniques can

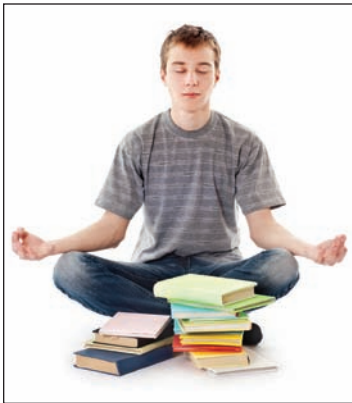
then be taught to students, marrying the intellectual with the sensory to create greater teacher awareness of their own and their students' reactions and experiences (Brown, 1998).

At SUNY Old Westbury, a diverse campus in the SUNY system, students and faculty are receptive to these activities. We started with a classroom-level approach in one course which spread organically to other classes and then activities open to the entire campus. Speakers and workshops on meditation, self-awareness, and relationships with others to develop positive social, emotional, psychological and physical balance have been introduced over the past several years. These have been well received by faculty, students and as stand-alone extracurricular events as well as in a range of college courses in sociology, psychology, and business. The positive reaction led to the development of an entire course "Theories of Social Work, Spiritualism, and Meditation" which connects the core competencies of social and emotional learning to everyday life and especially career decision making (Vaid, 2012). The more faculty and students who

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participate in these activities, the more interest grows.

In our context, spirituality does not include any mention or discussion of religion or religious practices. Rather, we offer students the idea that spirituality means being in touch with the inner-self and the world around us and we ask them to consider what guides them in thinking and acting with their peers, family, teachers, and employers. Faculty, staff, and student interest in speakers on meditation, along with anger management, and other methods of self-development continues to grow. We also turned our attention to students' earlier experiences and how these techniques could be more widely used in the education system before students enter college and thus we have collaborated with a high school vice-principal and teacher to determine the usefulness of meditation and a values focus curriculum on the high school level.

## Background

A major trend in the past few decades has been to recognize the role of cognition (thinking processes) in human behavior (Ellis, 1962; Beck, 1976). It is widely accepted that thinking (self-talk) determines emotions and actions. By changing the self-talk, we can change how we feel and act. We cannot always control events that happen

to us, but we can choose to think rationally about them and thereby change our feelings and actions. With repeated thinking, attitudes — positive or negative — develop. With repeated actions, habits are formed.

The main source of ones thoughts is drawn from beliefs, values, and information. Several theorists (Ellis & Harper, 1977; Zastrow, 1979, 1993) have identified common beliefs that generate irrational or negative self-talk. Thinking in negative patterns and consistently defaulting to should haves, could haves, and what ifs, may perpetuate setbacks and can also distort the reality of a situation and lead us to overact. By using self-talk, and thinking proactively, a more rational philosophy might take hold; “I would like to be treated reasonably well by people and life.” This practice is applicable to students' educational experiences and outcomes. Students who are interested in school and abide by the rules are more engaged in their education and more disposed to learn and finish high school (Archambault, 2009). A meta-analysis of social-emotional development programs found that educators are able to build the social-emotional core competencies of self-awareness, self-management, and accountability. Interactions with others are improved by social awareness, especially of those from different backgrounds, and developing relationships through active

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listening and practical methods of handling conflict. These skills were teachable to students of all levels and across various types of environments such as urban and rural schools, resulting in improved student confidence, persistence, ability to plan, and ultimately, their academic performance (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor & Schellinger, 2011).

How could we create a classroom environment in which social-emotional competencies could be taught and sustained? To bring about change and transformation, thinking, beliefs and values need to be challenged and changed. We use meditation and the Living Values Education Program (LVEP) (Arweck & Nesbitt, 2004, Tillman & Columbina, 2000; Tillman, 2001) in our classes to meld the individual to the group in order to accomplish this goal.

**Meditation**

Students at all levels can benefit from reducing their stress through short periods of meditation (Dembosky, 2009). Mindful meditation can reduce one’s usual response to anger-provoking situations (Wenk-Sormaz, 2005). Short amounts of meditation may be sufficient to evoke behavior change and positive outcomes. One study of health care professionals found that stress and anxiety could be reduced

with 15 minutes of meditation once or twice a day over a four week period (Prasad, Wahner-Roedler, Cha & Sood, 2011).

The English word meditation is derived from the Latin verb *meditari* meaning “to think, contemplate, devise, and ponder.” Meditation enables one to create new responses, attitudes, values and habits.

There are many types of meditation. *Mantra meditation* involves silently repeating a calming word, phrase or a thought to prevent distracting thoughts. Another kind of meditation — *Prana Yama* — focuses upon the breath. Attention is given to inhalation and exhalation; on the in-breath you absorb fresh air (oxygen) and on the out-breath you expel carbon dioxide and the impurities of the body. *Mindful meditation* has been defined as a moment to moment non-judgmental awareness. It focuses on living in the present moment and broadens the conscious awareness. *Raja Yoga meditation* emphasizes reflection and contemplation. The most powerful form of thinking is contemplation. It is a deep and purposeful thought, weighing the pros and cons of a specific course of action. Thoughts are a creative force and a source of power. Positive and constructive thinking leads to opportunities and choices that contribute to personal growth.

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# Promoting Social and Emotional Well-Being through Meditation

To bring about change and transformation, thinking, beliefs and values need to be challenged and changed.

Meditation is much more than achieving a deep state of relaxation. Its practice enables you to look within and make contact with your inner truth and brings you in contact with your intrinsic positive qualities. As you turn your attention within, you become aware of your qualities, virtues and powers. The power of thinking is extensively used to solve emotional and behavioral problems. The positive affirmation technique helps in achieving emotional and behavioral goals. For example, “I am peaceful and calm” or “I am confident, powerful and strong.” This is repeated a number of times a day for 1-2 weeks.

During meditation, purposeful and introspective thought help in the development of values and character. For example, thinking “I am peace. I am. I exist. My essence is peace,” you will absorb the significance of this phrase into your consciousness, be stable in peace, and be free from external influences. The focus is on developing, inculcating and practicing various qualities and virtues. When students develop the values of love, peace and self-respect, this will prevent them from hurting themselves or others. This awareness will lead them to make better choices. Meditation gives a sense of calm, peace and balance that benefits both emotional well-being and overall health. It also enhances skills important for academic performance,

like concentration and problem solving. Meditation focuses on the whole being — body, mind and spirit. Small steps lead to big differences.

## Values Education

The Living Values Educational Program (LVEP) curriculum is supported by UNESCO and has been extensively used (Arweck & Nesbitt, 2004; Tillman, et al., 2000; Tillman, 2001) in more than 65 countries. LVEP centers around 12 core values — peace, respect, love, happiness, freedom, honesty, tolerance, cooperation, responsibility, simplicity, unity and humility. The program focuses on accepting and practicing these values. A number of studies demonstrate that LVEP contributes to improved academic diligence; an increase in student attendance; more interest in school; improvement in test scores; the ability to concentrate; increases in respect, cooperation, and motivation; more self-confidence; decreases in aggressive behavior; improvement in social skills and the ability to solve peer conflicts; greater respect for peers and adults; better student-teacher relationships; and the school achieves a calmer, more peaceful environment (Lovat, Schofield, Morrison & O’Neill, 2002; Lovat, Toomey, Dally & Clement, 2009; Nesbit & Henderson, 2003; Arweck, et al., 2005). LVEP helps in

creating a caring, positive educational climate where students feel valued and safe, and quality learning can take place. It builds a culture of peace, respect, cooperation and responsibility.

### **Our Program - Materials and Strategies**

For both high school and college students, we have found that a nonthreatening way to develop self-awareness, the first competency of social-emotional learning, is to offer a few minutes of quiet meditation at the start of a class. It takes very little time and involves teaching students to calm their breathing by concentrating on their inhale and exhale. If space permits, some upward and sideways arm stretches and bends can help loosen muscles before the breathing. Students seem caught off guard at the calm silence, especially with the excitement of the start of the new school year but readily slow their breathing, listening to instructions. We give instructions to take a few minutes to withdraw into ourselves and to focus on our breathing. “Inhale through your nose, exhale through your mouth to release whatever is troubling your mind.” Depending on the level of collective energy that day, we may do this several times and then move into Prana Yama, breathing through the nose. “Inhale through your nose, expanding your ribcage

and down into your navel; slowly exhale through your nose, listening to the sound of your breathing. At your own pace, inhale again thinking about the front and back lobes of your lungs, filling your body with fresh air.”

Depending on the level of energy of the class, this takes less time as the term moves on and students become more familiar with this practice. Students may sit quietly with their eyes closed and start to focus on their breathing, its depth, and to areas of tightness. They can be asked to breathe more deeply into these areas and consider their breath. Nostril breathing using the fingers to control inhaling and exhaling may also be used as well as counting to four to count out the inhale and exhale. If time permits, students can be asked to visualize a cloud, color, flame or some other focal point to practice clearing their mind of distractions and clutter, which improves concentration.

This simple exercise is supplemented when possible with other methods of self-awareness. After the first weeks of classes, once we are in a routine, we use meditation to move into values awareness. Given these positive experiences for both the faculty and students, and considering that the connection between research and practice may be tenuous (Levin & Cooper, 2010), we choose from the different types of meditation which

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include using positive affirmations, guided imagery and breathing to improve students' and teachers social, psychological, emotional and physical health and well-being.

The second approach is more extensive and involves adapting the LVEP to our classes. LVEP helps in receiving, developing, and practicing the core values of peace, love, respect, cooperation and tolerance that create a positive educational climate where students feel valued and safe. It builds a culture of peace, respect, cooperation and responsibility. Students are guided to examine and explore their own values and behaviors. The process includes presenting a goal and value to the students and asking them to consider scenarios in which they experienced, for example, respect or disrespect. They relive how it felt and how others might feel in a similar situation in which they were involved and share it with the class or a small group. Visualization follows more easily when they are practiced in prior classes. The Living Values (LV) Curriculum starts with peace and we start with this value in the class by using something like these instructions:

Meditate about your qualities in terms of the value, think, 'I am peaceful, loving and powerful.' Imagine what it would be like to be peaceful. You feel what it is like to

be peaceful. You are at peace with yourself. 'I am peace, calm, serene, quiet, silent, no upheavals, no strong emotions, just quietly being myself. I am at peace with myself, at peace with others, at peace with the world?'

Typically, students focus on one value a month in class discussions, meditation, and visualization of themselves and others, keeping logs, and perhaps role playing one of the values.

Teachers may choose to focus on one, some, or all the values as well as ask students to examine how these are similar or different in other neighborhoods, countries, and cultures. It isn't difficult with a little foresight to fit the value into the lesson of the day.

Our third approach is to build upon the calm and emerging class community to place students in groups to work on a task or project. Stressing the living values such as respect, tolerance, cooperation, responsibility and developing them from the beginning of the term has avoided some of the problems that sometimes occur with group work when students encounter conflicts or simply go off task.

## Resources

We learned about meditation through breathing, guided imagery and positive affirmations from our own library research and by consulting with

experienced professionals in the field. Guest speakers in the areas of yoga (healthy body, healthy mind), anger management, meditation, and related areas have visited our classes and demonstrated how to develop a healthy attitude, mind, and body. We benefitted from programs available from Global Harmony House, located in Great Neck, NY and New York, NY.

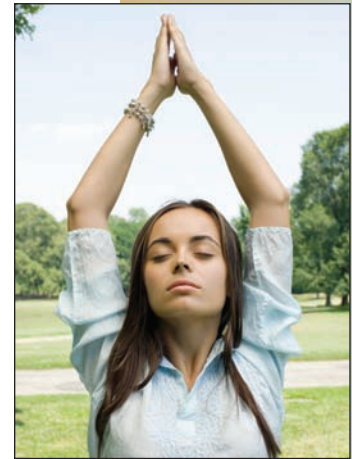
The Association for Living Values Education offers professional development workshops and seminars for educators, psychologists, social workers and parent facilitators. The LVEP resources and activities are in age-appropriate books and describe imagining, visualizations, role playing, games, story-telling, discussions, mind mapping values and anti-values, peace circles and direct instruction of social skills. Creating our own self-paced learning environment, teachers chose a value on which to personally focus for a week to a month so we can understand and share experiences and thoughts with our students.

### **Promoting Social and Emotional development learning**

Students from different socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds view conflict, respect, unity, and cooperation from different perspectives. Our meditation and self-awareness activity encourages introspection and awareness of how others

may view the same situation. For example, a student sharing an experience of feeling disrespected by another student may listen to feedback and interpretations by others in the class. The slighted student can reframe the situation by considering the reaction of his or her peers. Further, students learn how to recognize situations that are trigger points for anger or depressive thoughts. Globalization includes examining differences in values and behaviors in other cultures. The cultural interpretations of the same situation or experience as well as a reality check of one's reactions in comparison with peers should promote self-examination.

The process we use to incorporate the LVEP is to examine a value such as respect, how it was presented or implied in our respective courses, think about how we felt when respected or disrespected, and consider how we may have demonstrated respect and disrespect to others. We develop a thought "I am respectful" which we use to create a positive attitude and vision of ourselves as we act in the world. We also keep a daily log of our thoughts and behaviors to increase our self-awareness and to reevaluate our interaction with others. These activities allow us to share our experiences and anticipate students' questions, frustrations, and efforts. We practice what we preach, so to speak, before classes begin.



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Discussing values and goals with a diverse student body helps students learn the perspectives, values, and beliefs of others and allows for questions and explanation.

Activities such as meditation, yoga, and breathing are based on Eastern world perspectives. To those unfamiliar with these concepts, such approaches may be derided, misunderstood, or rejected by students and parents who consider them a waste of class time or even an affront to their religion. These issues are discussed in class and offer a good opportunity for students to voice their values and concerns. We stress that there is no religious component to this activity. Discussing values and goals with a diverse student body helps students learn the perspectives, values, and beliefs of others and allows for questions and explanation. Students are asked to keep a weekly log of their goals and values and how they enact them. They are encouraged to share their logs with one another to continue this dialogue and to examine how others perceive the same value and interpret an experience.

## Outcomes and Caveats

While we would like to state that this was a smooth and easy process, there were random bumps and cautions. At first, some students may have difficulty understanding the intention of meditation and settling down. One student shook his head and said, “sounds like

some old hippy stuff to me” and proceeded to text while breathing. In another class, we started to lead the breathing and after two inhale/exhales one student declared, “OK, enough breathing for me!” which caused the class to lose focus and start laughing. High school and college students change classes and come in late, behavior that was highlighted when the rest of the class was meditating. At first, latecomers realized they were disturbing the class and either came on time or tried to minimize noise, often waiting to enter the room. The courteous behavior started to erode over time but offered an opportunity to discuss being respectful of the teacher, classmates, and purpose of the activity.

Based on college students’ anecdotal responses, we have found short periods of meditation in the form of controlled breathing and visualization creates a calmer classroom climate both for the students and the teacher. We also noticed that students did not demonstrate the frenetic distracted behavior typical of the end of the semester. However, comparison of one class’s final exam scores with a class from the previous year did not show a significant difference. A sample of college students revealed that meditation helped students remember the contents of lectures (Ramsburg & Youmans, 2013); thus, we are starting to collect data as we implement the

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meditation and values curriculum on a more consistent basis. A similar calm was found in the high school classes as well but we have no hard data to report as of yet.

Our college students, even those with extensive work experience, remember the one session on meditation or anger management, referring to that class even a year after practicing breathing and visualization in a one-time class.

The students who were enrolled in the semester-long course pronounced it “life-changing” and enthusiastically recommend it to other students.

*...I always felt like an outsider growing up in a destructive environment...My perspective on actions that lead to destructive behavior was silenced or beaten down verbally and physically...having to apply techniques to myself was uncomfortable. I know I will have moments...to react versus taking a moment to explore my surroundings objectively...I have recognized the triggers that create unwanted thoughts or feelings...*

— A female student in her 20s

*I think I benefitted most from the meditation portion of the class. I am a soul, not the labels of male, White, student, American, etc. I still to this day use a simple type of meditation. I sit in a quiet area, clear my mind of all thoughts and focus on breathing.*

*It calms and relaxes me. I also share this technique with everyone I know. From this positive thinking I noticed I am less angry... I try not to focus on the past too much anymore. I focus on my future and planning for a better tomorrow.*

— A male student in his 20s

*The skills...from this course are... priceless...that I can take with me throughout my entire life. The breathing techniques...have definitely made a major difference in...how to control my reaction in certain situations. If I were to feel myself becoming angered by something surrounding me I simply employ the slow deep breathing exercises. As an educator, having the time to reflect on my practice is very crucial to the improvement of my instructional style.*

— A female student in her 20s

In the group assignments, we found that college students do not balk at working with others whom they don’t know in completing assignments both in and out of class. The high school students were assigned into groups with a peer teacher, a student sometimes performing sometimes only slightly better than others in the group. Although there was some pushback, the students assumed responsibility for their preparation of material and being ready for the next class. This required more than the average amount

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of work outside of class. The group dynamics are more positive and high-functioning than students without exposure to meditation and LVEP.

Most recently, a group of college students majoring in a range of areas such as criminology, business, and science were inspired by the campus sessions and material including stress management and daily affirmations mailed out to the entire campus community.

They started a student club “Inner Souls” to promote meditation and values. We are heartened by the students’ reactions and outcomes enough to share our experiences in this paper.

It is important to stress that students at any level, including teachers, be advised that the practice of meditation, self-examination, visualization and living values is a continuous, life-long process. Some days it is easier to focus than others and as human beings, we may find it difficult to be peaceful, cooperative, or respectful in a situation that is important to us. We as people and teachers need to be honest in sharing our experiences, frustrations, and successes in our adoption of these techniques in our quest for self-improvement in order to model this process for others and improve our learning environment.

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RESOURCES RECOMMENDED  
BY THE AUTHORS

Association for Living Values Education.  
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