

Mindfulness training in school helps teens cope with stress

By GOSIA WOZNIACKA
Associated Press

PORTLAND — As the morning school bell rings and students rush through crowded corridors, teenagers in one Portland classroom settle onto mats and meditation pillows. They fall silent after the teacher taps a Tibetan “singing bowl.”

“Allow yourself to settle into the experience of being here, in this moment,” teacher Caverly Morgan tells two dozen students at Wilson High School.

The students are enrolled in a for-credit, yearlong mindfulness class meant to ease youth anxiety and depression and to prevent violence. For 90 minutes, three days a week, they practice a mix of yoga, sitting and walking meditation, visualization techniques, deep breathing, journaling and nonjudgmental listening.

The idea behind mindfulness is that focusing on the present moment helps a person deal better with stress, difficult emotions and negative thoughts.

Mindfulness, yoga and meditation have gained popularity among Americans in recent decades, buoyed by studies showing their benefits to emotional, mental and physical health. The centuries-old practices have roots in Buddhism and Hinduism, but Western culture has secularized them to focus on physical postures, breathing and relaxation techniques.

Such practices are now offered by corporations like Google, Target and General Mills to their employees. Prison inmates, hospital patients and the U.S. Marines are using them to combat stress and illness, increase focus and well-being. And now schools all over the country are introducing the practices.

Some objections

Some people have greeted the move with less than enthusiasm.

Last year, an elementary school in Ohio ended its



Students meditate during Mindful Studies class at Wilson High School in Portland. The yearlong course is one of a growing number of programs that are incorporating mindfulness, yoga and meditation into school curriculums to bring socio-emotional benefits to students. notforsale



ABOVE LEFT: Caverly Morgan speaks while teaching a Mindful Studies course to students at Wilson High School in Portland in October. Morgan started the course after studying for eight years at a silent Zen Monastery. ABOVE RIGHT: Students work on yoga postures during Mindful Studies class at Wilson High School in Portland.



mindfulness program after parents complained it was too closely linked to Eastern religion and a conservative Christian law firm unsuccessfully sued on behalf of a couple in Encinitas, Calif., arguing their school district's yoga classes indoctrinate children.

But many school districts are reporting success.

In Richmond, Calif., where a teacher started a mindfulness program called the Mindful Life Project, schools have reported drops in detentions and referrals among low-income, at-risk youth.

The school district in South Burlington, Vt., implemented a successful mindfulness course as part of a health and wellness program, and now administrators there have written a manual on incorporating mindfulness into K-12 curriculums.

Portland is known for its progressivism, so it should be no surprise the idea of teaching mindfulness is being embraced here. Students at Wilson say the class has been a boon for them.

“Sometimes I have trouble breathing, I have panic attacks. This class helps me

bring more attention to my breath and overcome that,” junior Cassia McIntyre said. “I’m less stressed out and able to better cope with stress.”

The class is the brainchild of Morgan, who trained at a Zen Buddhist monastery for eight years and started a meditation center in Sacramento. After moving to Portland two years ago, Morgan teamed up with Allyson Copacino, who teaches yoga to children.

The two started an after-school program at Wilson. After hundreds of stu-

dents signed up, principal Brian Chatard took note. The school was dealing with a student's suicide, and few resources were available to address students' emotional and mental health.

Chatard said high school years are hard for many students, because they entail emotional and hormonal changes, social and academic pressures — and for some, depression.

“High school is the hardest period of time for kids,” Chatard said. “You’ve got emotional changes, hormonal changes, all the social pres-

ures. It’s also the onset of mental illness for some kids, depression hits, and there’s the pressure of college and sports. All these things kids do is overwhelming without having a strategy to deal with it.”

Nonjudgmental listening

During a class in October, after a half-hour of yoga exercises, Morgan asked students to visualize a stressful moment in their lives and notice the negative internal dialogue in their heads.

Students wrote the negative self-talk in a journal, then shared it with the class and practiced compassionate — nonjudgmental — listening in pairs.

Learning how to recognize the “inner critic” is crucial for teens, Morgan said.

“It’s very important that teens learn how to do that, because that critical voice leads to behaviors that are extremely unhealthy, such as overeating, bullying, even committing suicide,” Morgan said.

Pediatric psychologists at Oregon Health & Science University are partnering with the mindfulness program to study its impact on students.

A similar yearlong program is offered at Rosemary High School, an alternative school in nearby Gresham that serves students who were expelled or dropped out, are homeless or single parents.

Unlike at Wilson, mindfulness at Rosemary is mandatory for some 70 students, many of whom knew little or nothing about it. Some of the students were initially skeptical and complained about the course, the principal, Erica Stavis, said.

But on midterm reviews, students reported the class had helped them better recognize their feelings, deal with anger and distance themselves from destructive thoughts during difficult family situations.

“This program filled a gap,” Stavis said. “It helps students build capacity to problem solve.”

Former Long Beach filling station becomes a seashore-themed park

By NATALIE ST. JOHN
EO Media Group

LONG BEACH — A dead man owns it. The bank doesn't want it. It's not worth a cent, and it would cost a lot more than that to clean up.

But on the bright side, it looks really nice now.

Long Beach officials recently spent about \$700, plus staff time, to beautify a small abandoned downtown lot that has been derelict for many years because of its status as a hazardous waste cleanup site.

Recently, Long Beach parks, streets and drainage Supervisor Mike Kitsman and his crew created a sand dune on the site of the former Obie's Union service station at the corner of Sid Snyder Boulevard and Pacific Avenue. They planted beach grass, installed engraved wooden posts that spell “Long Beach,” and linked them together with heavy nautical rope. They also relocated a decorative buoy that was suffering from salt damage at its previous location nearer the beach.

“It was a scrounge and recycle project,” City Planner Gayle Borchard said Jan. 13. The city paid to purchase rope and have a woodworker route the letters in the posts, but most other materials were already on hand.

Borchard said she asked the crew to spruce up the lot, because it occupies a busy intersection that every visitor to Long Beach sees.

A couple of years ago, the city demolished the Obie's building as part of an effort to clean up the south end of town, so city officials felt that sprucing up the bare lot was a logical next step.

“I think we've just incrementally made progress on this site. It is the second most important entryway to the city,” Borchard said. “I wanted to give a statement that we're a beach town.”



NATALIE ST. JOHN — EO Media Group

City of Long Beach workers recently adopted a semi-abandoned lot on a key corner of downtown and turned it into a seashore-themed pocket-park.

Trouble below the surface

The thrifty project was a practical response to an unfortunate situation.

From the 1930s until the early 2000s, various owners operated filling stations on the lot. A sheet-metal locomotive on the roof paid tribute to the Ilwaco Railway and Navigation Co., which ran nearby until 1930. Over time, fuel and oil contaminated both the soil and the table of groundwater that lies just a few feet below the surface.

In early 2001, the property's final owner, Ervin Neff, was in serious debt, according to records from the state Department of

Ecology. He had a large outstanding loan to his lender, the Bank of the Pacific. The bank had begun considering its options. As part of that process, they hired an environmental assessment company to test the soil and water.

The tests revealed that at least one of the underground fuel storage tanks on the property had leaked, leaving parts of the property heavily contaminated. The leak didn't pose an immediate health or environmental threat, but it was serious enough to require clean up under state law.

The DOE added the site to its “LUST”

(Leaking Underground Storage Tank) database, and notified Neff that he would need to pay for waste cleanup.

The environmental company estimated that it would cost \$10,000 to \$20,000 to determine the full extent of the damage. Actually cleaning it up involved excavating much of the soil, and using a special process to filter thousands of gallons of groundwater, at a cost of \$60,000 to \$100,000.

Neff didn't have anything like that kind of money.

A few months later, officials from the city, county, DOE and bank met with him to see if they could find a way to clean it up. According to a DOE report, “Little was concluded at the meeting.”

The bank decided to let Neff keep the property.

All dressed up with nowhere to go

Fourteen years later, it's still awaiting cleanup, and no one knows if the pollution has spread.

When the DOE last tried to get an update on the clean-up effort in August 2014, they sent a letter to Neff, who is still listed as the owner, even though he died in 2004.

It's not all bad news. The state or federal government occasionally make a little money available to pay for waste cleanup, especially when a property is considered “abandoned,” or if the site could be used for a project that benefits the public, like a library. A buyer who didn't plan to disturb the soil could probably pave it over without much risk of disturbing the contamination.

In the meantime, Borchard said residents seem to like the results, and have praised the city crew for cheaply turning a former eyesore into scenic spot.

“The crew kind of adopted it. They did a really nice job,” Borchard said.

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