

Presence of MIND

Valley launches stress management program for teens

WRITTEN BY JOSEPH RITACCO

In response to the growing need to provide teens with resources to manage their stress, Valley Medical Group's Center for Integrative Medicine now offers a six-week Mindfulness Tools for Teens course designed to enhance areas of the brain that are important for regulating emotions, paying attention and relating more effectively to stressful situations.

"A lot of physical illness has its origins in stress," says Dr. Jodie Katz, medical director of the Center for Integrative Medicine, which was founded in 2015 with the purpose of combining conventional Western medicine with complementary therapies to promote balance in mind, body and spirit. "Additionally, what we're hearing anecdotally and seeing in the literature is showing us the prevalence

of anxiety and depression in the adolescent population in very high."

Katz, a board-certified family medicine physician, specializes in functional integrative medicine – a patient-centered approach that addresses the whole person, not just an isolated set of symptoms. She earned her Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) teacher certification from the University of Massachusetts Medical School's Center for Mindfulness and began teaching a course for adults in 2006. When the Center for Integrative Medicine opened last year, she eyed a mindfulness course designed specifically for teens. Requests from the community, as well as disturbing trends among teens she noticed while practicing as a family physician, provided the impetus.

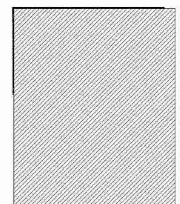


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THE PRESSURES OF GROWING UP

Dr. Jodie Katz, medical director of the Center for Integrative Medicine at The Valley Hospital, believes the rise in social media has intensified the peer pressure that typically plagues teenagers.

"I was seeing incidents of drug abuse and cases of suicide increase in the adolescent population," she says.

The rise of social media, she believes, has intensified the peer pressure that typically plagues the teen population.

"Pressure for adolescents is off the charts because academics are more rigorous and because social media provides 24/7 exposure to one's peers," Katz says. "I could turn off the outside world when I was a teen. Now, teens are connected via Facebook, Twitter and Instagram – it's all incredibly difficult to negotiate and a big contributor to stress in that population. We have to give them the tools to access their own reservoirs of strength and resilience so they can be responsive, not reactive, to the stress in their lives."

Toward that end, she began mapping out the Mindfulness Tools for Teens course with Beth Sandweiss, a fellow University of Massachusetts trainee whom she met at a monthly gathering of MBSR teachers held in Manhattan.

"She was talking about her program at Valley and expressed interest in a teen program," says Sandweiss, a social worker and licensed professional counselor with more than 25 years of experience working with teens and families in both clinical and nonclinical settings. "I didn't know her well but I told her that I'd been teaching groups of teens. So we met and talked about our vision for this program."

Tailoring the course content specifically for

teens was of the utmost importance, says Katz, who points out there are considerable differences in the ways in which mindfulness is presented to different age groups.

"You can't ask a teen to meditate for 45 minutes," Katz says. "The content has to be aimed at adolescent pressures like school, peers and parents. Teens are undergoing tremendous changes over a very short time period."

The responsibility of teaching the six-week course was given to Sandweiss, who decided to structure Mindfulness Tools for Teens around the evidence-based program detailed in licensed clinical psychologist Patricia Broderick's 2013 book, *Learning to Breathe: A Mindfulness Curriculum for Adolescents to Cultivate Emotion Regulation, Attention, and Performance*. The backbone of the program is the "BREATHE" acronym: Body, Reflection, Emotions, Attention, Tenderness, Habits and Empowerment.

The first two steps, Body and Reflection, develop an attitude of openness and curiosity toward mindful movements, including walking, breathing, lying down and exercising, and an understanding of the ways in which people can relate and react to thoughts. Step three – Emotions – is what Sandweiss describes as a teen's "entry point" into mindfulness, where they learn to experience waves of emotions manifested in the body.

"When they recognize an emotion," Sandweiss says, "it's different than knowing 'I'm sad.' It's recognizing how that feels in the body. It's like being

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 medical director of
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ADOLESCENT HEALTH



MINDFULNESS TOOLS FOR TEENS

Held quarterly at a cost of \$225, the course is divided into two groups: eighth through 10th grade, and 11th and 12th grades. All sessions are held at 1200 E. Ridgewood Ave. in Ridgewood. For more information about start dates, or to register, call Kathy Newberg at (201) 291-6090.

in a car in a traffic jam when you have to get someplace. You notice your hands are gripping the steering wheel – ‘I’m going to be late!’ – but you can notice what is happening and decide to loosen the grip. You realize you have a choice – there’s nothing I can do about this [traffic jam].”

She describes it as the “experiential” way of learning – through reflection on doing – rather than the more traditional cognitive learning offered in schools, adding that the former is particularly important for adolescents, who tend to react more impulsively.

The following steps – Attention, Tenderness and Habits – develop an understanding of stress as a physiological response to feelings of anxiety, instill a compassion and kindness in oneself when dealing with stressful situations and, ultimately, incorporate self-nurturing habits to help teens combat such situations.

Sandweiss says a variety of strategies are utilized in class to accomplish the objectives. Among them are activities that incorporate movement, drama and writing, and one-on-one or group exercises, including mindful listening, during which students work in pairs and simply listen to

each other, rather than give advice or “fix” the problem. The purpose, Sandweiss says, is for students to appreciate the power of listening and begin to feel like they are not alone.

“Our rule,” Sandweiss says, “is that people don’t have to share anything they don’t want to, but there’s a lot of sharing anyway. People want to share, especially in groups of two.”

She adds that students will leave the course having achieved the final step – Empowerment – with tools necessary to handle arguments with friends and parents, repetitive negative thoughts and worries, difficult moods, physical problems and stress associated with their education.

Sandweiss cites a quotation from author and Holocaust survivor Viktor Frankl, who once wrote, “Between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space is our power to choose a response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom.”

That “space,” Sandweiss says, is the terrain for mindfulness.

“We’re trying to bring a level of awareness of that space between stimulus and response,” she says. “Students learn to act and behave in a wiser and more productive way.” ❖