

# Bethany Cunningham

## Educating Mindfully

Mindfulness has the ability to transform our view of the world and the issues that challenge our understanding of acceptance and inclusion. Present moment awareness is a skill that promotes an understanding of emotions, compassion for oneself and others, and improves one's concentration. This awareness is designed to create a space (a pause) between a stimulus and a reaction – providing for a thoughtful response versus a reactionary behavior. Implementing a mindfulness practice allows an individual to connect with others on a deeper level, providing opportunities to more easily navigate challenges, acknowledge and understand differences between others, and thoughtfully respond to uncertainty when it arises.

Mindfulness is defined as paying attention to the present moment, on purpose, and in a non-judgmental way. It is used in educational settings to improve focus and concentration, to better understand and identify emotions, and to foster compassion for ourselves and others. While this practice often delivers a sense of calm and over-all well-being, its intent is not to elicit just a happy or calm sensation. Its purpose, rather, is to train the mind to observe whatever thoughts or sensations arise without getting carried away in an emotional reaction.

Issues of discrimination, intolerance and violence serve to distract us from connecting and understanding the needs of others. We get caught up in the fear these issues generate, rather than address the true source of the matter. How we choose to direct our attention is critical to our ability to engage and promote a sustainable behavior pattern of inclusion and collaboration.

Educational systems are uniquely positioned to address issues of social and cultural significance. Educators and schools have the capacity to impart skills and methods of learning across multiple age groups that impact the communities they serve. There is no single response or remedy to the issues of bias. All aspects of society, including educational systems, are at risk of returning to a close-minded philosophy. Mindfulness is one tool that assists us in recognizing these issues and better understanding the perspectives and opinions of others in non-judgmental ways.

Encouraging global citizenship does not need to conflict with the mission and values of a nation or a school. It's possible to create a community of creative thinkers and positive change-makers, who extend their understanding and compassion beyond their schools, beyond their communities and across continents. Knowledge and education empower us all. When we seek to fully understand the perceptions of others, we develop a sense of empathy that transcends bias.

Incorporating mindfulness into educational programs can foster greater well-being for all involved, teachers and students alike. Mindfulness is one small piece of the puzzle that can promote a culture of greater self-awareness, interpersonal collaboration and tolerance that extends beyond the classroom and into the community.

We cannot change the uncertainties of the world. We can, however, learn to manage our responses to the uncertainty.