The Magic of Mindfulness: Evidence Based Guidelines for Practicing the Art of Mindfulness in Children
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Today's course is The Magic of Mindfulness: Evidence Based Guidelines for Practicing the Art of Mindfulness in Children. Our presenter today is Dr. Aditi Mehra. She graduated with a Bachelor’s in Occupational Therapy from Western Michigan University in 1998, and has a Doctorate in Health Sciences from Midwestern University in Illinois. She has practiced as a pediatric OT for the past 22 years in various settings, early intervention, hand therapy inpatient and outpatient rehabilitation and school settings. During her doctoral studies, she also pursued a certification in applied behavior analysis to improve and enhance collaboration with multidisciplinary teams. Once she delved deeper into this field of ABA, Dr. Mehra uncovered Fit Learning, an academic program based on the principles of ABA designed to build fluency and address all differences in learning such as executive functioning, ADHD, and et cetera. She is currently the Director of Fit Learning Labs in the Chicagoland area and continues to practice OT in the school setting. Her passion is rooted in IPE and aims to foster multidisciplinary collaboration with the field of OT and other allied health professions. She provides continuing education presentations to various allied health groups in the community and is an avid blogger for Psychology Today. Welcome Dr. Mehra, so glad to have you back.

- [Aditi] Thank you so much, Fawn. The one thing I would like to add to your lovely introduction is that I've lived in a variety of countries over the course of my life. And I think it's really pertinent here because as I grew up in India, or I was born in India, grew up in Zambia, which is in Africa, went to school in England and then I came here for university. And the one thing that I've noticed having lived in all these countries is specifically to the Western culture that this notion that if we are not stressed and time poor, then we're not being productive. And that's really why I delved into this topic of mindfulness. Despite knowing all the statistical data on how harmful being stressed is, multitasking and being busy are an all time high. And actually, there was a study
recently by Harvard that suggests that being time poor and possessing lack of leisure
time is now perceived as a status symbol because it's some has suggest that we're in high demand. So while I recognize it's not always a conscious decision, right? There's so much input in the environment. We're constantly getting bombarded with notification and texts and email. Now, there's a choice we can make to turn your phone off or turn off the notification, we can certainly do that. But there's also intrinsic element to the busyness of our environment and that is that constant chatter in your brain. How do you shut that off? 'Cause unfortunately, there isn't just a switch, a power off button. And that's really what I want to talk about today and how that can impact us as OTs, and how it can impact the population we serve.

So moving on to, that's just a little visual for you, it's life as we know it. It was very poignant to me when I did this presentation 'cause that's sometimes exactly how I feel, as I'm sure you all can relate. So as far as learning outcomes, it's really about discussing the key principles of mindfulness. Just looking at the research and how it impacts children, adolescents and adults, and then linking mindfulness practices to being a therapist, specifically for OT and well-being. Because I think a lot of people don't think of mindfulness as really being within an OT realm. However, it really can be. And then really identifying some strategies that you can use. The biggest thing I think, is that if you can take away one element from this presentation for your own personal or professional gain, it would be to have those tools if you decide to choose that path. And hopefully, I'm gonna show you that today and also give you an example, a snippet, of what mindfulness might look like.

So let's get started at the very beginning. The beginning really is that mindfulness has been around for quite a while. Two decades ago I believe, it was initially introduced in this format to really bridge a gap between medical and mental health contexts, and it was kept but since visioned to really use mindfulness as a reduction for stress in the medical fields for example, with chronic pain, I think that was the first arena it was
introduced in within the medical context. And the program really focuses on mind-body connections and a series of attentional practices to help patients experience their thoughts and feelings with a level of detachment. Like you know there is pain, but experiencing it with this detachment is what really brought mindfulness into the medical field. So mindfulness has been described as the awareness that emerges through paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally, to really let things unfold moment by moment. And there are lots of myths unfortunately about mindfulness because you know what? You don't know what you don't know.

I myself thought mindfulness was all about having to meditate like the Sadhus in India. Well, that's not what it's about. It doesn't have to be religious or spiritual. It can be a spiritual experience, it can be incorporated into religions, but it doesn't have to be. And it's not necessarily about having to meditate in these long, deep, passive sitting sessions. It doesn't have to be. And it's not about all these various aspects, hypnosis or suppressing emotions, it's none of those. And the biggest thing I think people think is, "Oh, if if I'm mindful, I can't think about the future "and I have to be happy all the time." That's not what mindfulness is. It's really about being an observer. It's like if you were an alien and you came to this planet and you're just observing what's going on. You might watch the scenario and you're just enamored by everything that's going on, on all the sensory input and visual auditory that you're getting but you're not judging, you're just observing. That's really what mindfulness is.

So then the question begs to differ is, is it a state or practice? Well, actually can be both. Mindfulness is a state. It's an awareness and a mindset that we can carry through life. But this state can be developed and enhanced through activities. These activities are often also referred to as meditation or mindfulness practice. That would be a formal way of doing things. Formal practice is mindfulness meditation where you sit, you might close your eyes, you might focus your attention on one thing, and then
you usually use your breath or other sensations experienced within your body. It does require a lot of discipline and it’s not easy for all of us to do. However, you can practice it. Informal practice, which is really what is so profound, and I’m quite enamored by it because you can do it anytime, anyplace. What you do is you’re bringing the same kind of improved attention that you might from formal practice into everyday situations. However, what it really involves is directing your full and nonjudgmental attention to the activity you’re currently doing. So it could be as simple as washing the dishes, brushing your teeth, chatting to a friend, studying, but being mindful when you’re doing it.

And an example I’ll give you is I take my dog, I have a big, huge St. Bernard, and I take him out to go potty and when he does that he’s on a leash and I take that time, ‘cause I can’t take him out like three, four times a day. But when I go out, I take that moment to really take in my environment, I look at the trees, I look at the weather, the sun shining, or whatever it is, I really try to be present in the few moments that I have during the day. And I know that it’s a routine for me so every time I go out with him I practice it. And it’s just a snippet and might only be 30 seconds, it might be two minutes, but that’s time that I’ve built into my schedule. So that’s your informal mindfulness. Now, what I do want you to remember that mindfulness is not a one time and done thing. It’s not, "Let me just do a little bit here, "a little bit here." You’re not going to see the optimum benefits of that and it does require practice because mindfulness is like physical exercise. It’s actually mental exercise. It literally strengthens the brains gray matter in the prefrontal cortex and the hippocampus. These are the two key learning areas that really supports the mind’s ability to focus, pay attention, and reduces worry. So the more you practice it, the stronger it becomes. Just like going to the gym. You cannot expect to get a six pack going to the gym once a week. It’s not going to happen. Trust me, I’ve tried and so have many people. It’s about really making sure that if you’re going to do it, really find gaps in your lifestyle to incorporate it and get it in there. So if mindfulness is like physical exercise and going to the gym, it stands to
reason that we can't just go to the gym and enjoy the benefits for half an hour that we're there. Same thing with mindfulness. You can't just enjoy the benefits in that moment. But we go to the gym in order to enjoy benefits for 24 hours the day and a long-term pursuit. That's what mindfulness is. The more you do it, the effects increase over time and it really compounds to developing a long term plan for well-being.

So there's no doubt we need mindfulness, but do my children need it too? Well, unfortunately, adults and children alike certainly can benefit from mindfulness. One of the key reasons is the World Health Organization has projected that depression is one of the leading health problems worldwide. And that's astounding to me given the propensity for depression and all those anxiety-type mental issues are proliferating. We really need something that's going to help us ground and address those challenges. In schools, one in seven four elementary school children, and one in four are experiencing these problems. That's too profound. So we definitely need a preventative action so we know we can address these issues. And then these issues really become greater issues as we've seen in the media recently or over the few years, especially in the Western world. But these statistics really are alarming and really indicate the clear benefits offered by mindfulness that we really need to use this and incorporate it into the classroom setting. In England, mindfulness actually part of the curriculum. And I know a lot of schools here are trying to develop that in their social emotional plan.

So, how does it actually work? What's the psychological context and what's the physiological mapping of mindfulness? Is there a physiological mapping? Well, studies really show us, if you look at brain scans, that who people practice mindfulness show a thickening of the gray matter in the prefrontal cortex and the hippocampus. And this is the area that's responsible for attention, self-regulation, executive functioning and planning. Those who practice mindfulness also show reduced activity in the amygdala. And if you recall, the amygdala is associated with distractions, fear, anxiety, depression and stress. And it's also the default mode network associated with worry,
rumination, depression and schizophrenia. So what it does mindfulness strengthens executive functioning, and then it lowers the reactivity of this sort of fight and flight response. For these two reasons, mindfulness leads to better attention, memory and regulation and self awareness, I guess.

So in turn these improvements can lead to reduced stress, better academics and social skills. And really what it does, it gives us a more relaxed brain. And like anything that is relaxed, you have an even keel brain activity which results in relaxation and more clarification with thinking and thoughtful responses. A relaxed brain really sort of tones down those primitive reactions like emotional, reflexes, fight or flight responses. That’s what mindfulness does to the brain and then that’s how you’re able to make more appropriate decisions. When your brain is stressed, we’re in that fight or flight response and that’s often why we have some reactive responses. But mindfulness also causes an actual change in the brain structure and activity. And if you pair it with the science of neuroplasticity, the advantages, these brain changes become permanent versus just behavioral changes. This is actual changes in the brain. And when you're mindful, you're very aware of what's going on and you're just not labeling those emotions. So you might still be sad but you're not reacting to that emotion of being sad. It’s more of a positive context that you’re creating and positivity can really change our brains, the neurology shows that it actually produces some amazing neural connections.

So, if you think about all these connectivities, and when they all come together, it produces a positive aura and impact and that is what we see when we use it in patients with depression, and also in chronic pain management. So for us as pediatric OTs, specifically working in the academic setting, it’s important to understand the positive impact of mindfulness in schools. Readiness to learn, social emotional learning, suffering, regulation and decision making are some factors and areas that mindfulness can really address. There’s no doubt in schools today we’re facing serious
mental health, engagement and academic challenges. One in five students are actually disengaged from school. School engagement is a huge concern, although it’s not very surprising. Students are so vulnerable because they just don’t possess that full range of emotional, behavioral and attention regulation skills to overcome some of these personal factors and social issues that they face at school and of course, the academic challenges. We see that as OTs all the time in schools. But mindfulness can really help in several ways. The three ways that I’d like to point out: first of all, mindfulness improves attention. This means that students are able to focus on learning. So a lot of your students who have ADHD anxiety can really benefit from mindfulness. If they have improved attention, they are more capable of taking in new information without being distracted by internal reactions or by perspectives from peers and teachers. Second thing it does, it improves working memory. Provides cognitive flexibility, reasoning, planning and self-regulation. And these are so important, especially when you’re trying to learn new information, having that flexibility and it reduces emotional reactivity. That’s the third aspect. The emotional reactivity that we see with a lot of our sensory students, it can really help with that, behavioral issues, anxiety and depression. So this just basically means that students have fewer potential obstacles standing in the way of their learning. All this essentially means that if they’re able to do these things, engaging in school is a positive experience and it feels good. And if it feels good, then students are more likely to engage.

So the other thing that mindfulness does, which is so incredibly profound, is that mindfulness improves the student’s ability to learn. Why? Because they’re actually thinking about the fact that they’re thinking, right? They are so much more aware of their own thinking style. They think about their own way of learning, and therefore can improve learning not just in one subject but across the board in various other aspects and domains. Mindfulness also impacts social emotional learning. According to a meta analysis of more than 70 students who were compared, it was a study of I think 6000
school age students who practice mindfulness, they showed a 60% increase. Approximate 60% increase in all these areas, better emotion, behavior regulation, academic performance, social skills and lower depression and anxiety. So the data is quite profound. Mindfulness provides a brilliant foundation so that we can build personal and social capacities for these students. So then you might ask, "Well, how often do we need it?" Well, based on the research, just 90 minutes a week, 18 minutes per day, which is essentially 6% of the school day.

So if you as an OT are seeing students perhaps once a week for 30 minutes or 15 minutes, even 20 minutes, you could feasibly incorporate mindfulness into your sessions. Typically, I start mindfulness with all my students and depending on how much time I've been allocated, I might do just two minutes or some students I do up to 10 minutes, just depends, but you could easily incorporate it. And because as OTs we engage in such sensory activities, and activities that often are positive experiences for students, it's quite easy to put mindfulness in there to just sort of sprinkle it in. But 6% to me is not a whole lot and this is an optimal situation, obviously. The biggest thing about mindfulness, especially in the school setting, or if you decide to do at home with your own children, it's got to be a whole game plan, right? It can't just be a one enough thing. So mindfulness is driven by increased performance by everyone, all the key players. So it's teachers or therapists, and also their well-being plays into mindfulness. It's a very, very ethereal sort of concept. And you don't realize how much it's impacting, but it's like that positive glow and it glows into other aspects of your life.

So the more mindful we as therapists, the more we can contribute to mindful practices in a whole school, a whole parenting approach of well-being. What mindfulness does as far as well-being, it shows self-awareness, social awareness, self-management, relationship skills and decision making. For the purpose of this presentation, I'd really like to focus on relationship skills and decision making because these two are concepts that as an OT not only impact us professionally but can impact us personally.
So I want you to think about a situation that you’ve encountered in the past few weeks or months. For example, somebody made a snide comment or sent you a nasty text or an off-color remark. What was your reaction? Are you the type of personality that reacts really fast and then regrets it? Or are you a thinker, do you step back and go, Okay, "I'm just not gonna respond right now, "I'm going to wait it out and then respond." The more we can practice that sort of decision making the better we are.

So without mindfulness, a lot of people encountered a situation and they may have an aversive reaction or an impulsive reaction which they may regret. With mindfulness, there's the space that's created where someone sends you a text that you don't quite agree with. You take that time to be mindful and go, "Okay, I'm feeling these feelings, "I'm going to acknowledge what I'm feeling "but I'm not going to make a decision right now, "I'm just gonna acknowledge everything "and then I'm going to make an informed choice "and an appropriate response." That's so profound and so helpful for students to learn because students don’t have that capacity of regulation, especially students we work with who already has sensory processing difficulties, if you can create that space, that can really be a game changer for them.

So then we might say, Well, how does this work in OT? Is it within our scope of practice? And it absolutely is. Our aim as OTs is to provide holistic perspective, we really do a good job of integrating complementary alternative medicine-type wellness participation programs into our practice. And we are so well suited to integrate to holistic therapies into practice because we are trained in psychology and biology, and have the understanding of mind, body, spirit connection. OTs address the whole person and understand the context and the influence of the whole person. So if for example, if you did an occupational profile on a student or a client, and it shows you that mindfulness might be an intervention that therapists can use for this client, we are keeping in line with the client-centered approach. Perhaps for older clients, you might see that mindfulness again is meaningful and that intervention itself can be improving
occupational performance. So it’s certainly within our scope of practice just given that we are so holistic in nature. Mindfulness also increases awareness of performance patterns and engagement. The value of mindfulness for both patient and therapists is increasingly recognized in OT.

There was a study by Olson in 2007. And they quoted that weaving mindfulness into treatment session is an evidence-based approach, it enhances engagement in occupations which really, I thought was brilliant because it is about integrating and weaving integrative practice. Mindfulness is also used with practitioners for themselves. There was a recent article in 2014 where OT students used mindfulness to determine their own stress level, but also OT practitioners who are experiencing burnout, we’ve all been there where we feel like the workload is too much or we just need a break. So mindfulness really helps us in that arena too as practitioners. And I noticed this quote in one of the research articles by Stew in 2011. It was an OT student who was practicing mindfulness. And she said, "I was shocked at how busy my mind was "and the continuous chattering, "even in the shower "I was rehearsing conversation with friends." It was so poignant to me because I do it myself, I find myself rehearsing scenarios and situations and I’m like, "Why am I wasting my time on that? "It’s completely irrelevant."

So the point here is to let you know that mindfulness is not just for our patients, it’s actually for ourselves too. There are three types of mindful practices. The first one is mindfulness-based stress reduction. This is the one I was introducing in the beginning. This is where mindfulness really originated in the medical field but it's more about doing mindfulness within yoga, tai chi, meditation, body scans, et cetera. It can be informal or formal. Then there’s general mindfulness. Now, this is really where OT comes in. It’s all about doing it while you’re engaged in an occupation, doing something. And lastly, there’s acceptance commitment therapy. Now this is more of a structured sort of psychological intervention. And it stems from behavior analysis, the
field, and it’s really about having that cognitive psychological flexibility of accepting situations and being quite linear in your thinking and not branching out into more emotions. That too is a very profound program, often used in applied behavior analysis. So mindfulness in the rehabilitative process is fairly new in some areas. I think chronic pain and TBI were the first few fields to use mindfulness and adapted to illness and disability. But there are various aspects that are coming into fruition now. Motor coordination is another area that mindfulness has addressed and helped. Eating disorders, that’s another one that I’ve seen some articles written on. There’s no doubt we need more research and more applications of mindfulness in different areas and rehabilitation but we do know that it improves the lives of the practitioner and the client. Sensory processing is another area that mindfulness really is infiltrating.

There were two recent studies that I found but I haven’t found a lot on sensory processing. I think this is an area that needs to be explored more. But the two studies that we did find indicate that mindfulness can really help control the distractions and awareness of an individual’s ability to process sensory information. So what are the general guidelines? What should we as practitioners be thinking about? Well, when you have students, the earlier you can start the better. Three to five years is the general guideline of when to start. Middle school and high school students are the most vulnerable and then encouraging therapists and teachers to practice alongside, be the model. Again, consistency. And five to 10 minutes of mindful practice for five days a week is what is recommended to start off with. If you haven’t tried mindfulness yet, or if you think the whole thought of keeping your mind still and focused for five minutes seems absolutely mad, it is hard. For some students and some people it’s really hard.

So when I encounter students I use this visual when I first introduce mindfulness and it’s just about slowing down your life and sometimes what I’ll have them do like if I have an activity set up, say it’s Legos or something. I’ll be like, okay, I want you to do this but I want you to do it in slow motion so just stop, take a breath, observe your
feelings and thoughts and now proceed but I want you to do it in slow motion and see how slow you can go. And this really sort of centers and organizes students. So I thought we could give it a try. If we could go to the little video I have, it's just a little audio clip with video. That would be great. So sometimes, people like to have sounds, nature sounds can really get them into the mindful practice and I'll give you an example here, I'm gonna turn this on. So having this sort of background sound can help them be in the present and really get into the mindful moment. I personally like to just do it in the stillness of life and just focus on the natural sounds of the environment but you know what you should experiment with it, try it with sounds, try it without sounds and see how it feels. That would be my suggestion.

So this is just an example of a nature sound that you could use. We're actually going to practice mindfulness right now just for a few minutes. I'm not going to use the video, I think we'll just do it in the natural setting. One of the other reasons I like to do it in the natural setting without added elements is because you know what? Having that versatility of doing mindfulness anywhere where you don't need anything, is really what we want. So we're gonna go ahead and give it a try now. So I really want you to get comfortable in your chair, perhaps loosen any tight clothing, remove your glasses, put your pencil down, take your watch off and settle into your seat. Try to sit with an erect posture, straight but relax and really try to get into it, relax your shoulders. Notice how your sit bones are on the chair cushion. Find a balance between your bones so there's equal pressure. Try to get centered, balanced and relaxed. Now allow your arms and hands to rest comfortably on your lap. I would like you to gently close your eyes now. Or if you prefer, you can keep your eyes open and just gaze either down onto the floor or ahead of you. But try not to look at anything. I want you to partially close your eyelids and look with a very soft and gentle gaze. It should be neutral and relaxed. You want to allow your body now to become very still. As you want to focus your attention inwards, your chest, shoulders, stomach, should all be relaxed. Bring your awareness now to your breath. Take a deep breath through your nose and gently out through your
mouth. And I’d like you to continue these breaths as I narrate through this practice. You’re not trying to control or manipulate the breath in anyway, but notice your breath as it enters through your nose and moves all the way down to your belly back out again. One breath following the other. The in breath, the out breath.

Notice how each breath follows one after the other in a never ending cycle. Letting everything else move into the background. Allow the breath to be your focus for your awareness. It might be a deep breath or a shallow breath. Your awareness might be at the tip of your nose, where you’re noticing the air is cooler or your awareness might be on the breath that is warmer when you breathe out. It might be in the back of your throat as you feel the breath move through this channel to support your entire body. Or it might be at the belly, where you notice wave-like movements as it rises and relaxes. Allowing your attention to rest on the path of the breath that is most comfortable for you now and rest there in this moment of silence. You may notice that the mind wanders away from the breath, perhaps into thoughts, emotions, sounds, body sensations, no problem, this is to be expected. This is what minds do. Whenever you notice that your mind has wandered off gently but intentionally bring your attention back to the breath. It is this paying attention to the breath, noticing how the mind tends to wander, coming back to the breath and noticing that the mind wanders again and again.

And once again, coming back to your breath and the moment to end. This is the practice. And every time you find that the mind wanders off, be aware of it as soon as you can be and gently bring it back. Bring your focus back to the breath. In this practice, you’re using the breath as an anchor, a way of refocusing your attention and bringing you back to the present from wherever your mind has drifted. You may find yourself experiencing emotions, a sense of anxiety, perhaps sadness, perhaps impatience. Just allow your emotional experience to be what it is by simply observing with curiosity. Notice how the feeling may shift or change and be ready returning your
awareness to the breath in this present moment. Simply be patient with yourself and with your body, noticing the experience of a busy mind, emotional ups and downs of boredom, sounds, or physical sensations and let go of whatever is trying to capture your attention again and again. Just keep bringing your attention back to the breath and rest there in this moment, fully awake and alive. Open your eyes.

And that is an example of a meditative practice. Now, some of you probably did brilliant. Some of you might have struggled. I can't lie, I struggled the first time I did it. I remember my mind wandering to, oh, I've got to clean the curtains, or I've got to buy this or I need to pick up this or the laundry or... And how difficult to was. But I promise you, the more you do it, the better and easier it gets. I actually find myself doing it on my way to work when I'm driving. I'll just be in the present. How does my hand feel on the steering wheel? I will try to notice things I didn't notice on my way to work. And it really does anchor you and ground you. So we can go back to the slides now. That was just an example of mindful practice and it can be used with older students and of course with adults, but younger students are a little different, right? How do you explain mindfulness to these little children? Well, the mindful jar is a nice sort of metaphor for how your mind feels. And sometimes I'll put something inside the mindful jar, so that when the glitter settles that they can actually see the item, or the words written some things because it just sort of symbolizes that when you can calm your mind, you can really see what's going on and make good decisions.

Cartoons and TV shows. I've noticed recently there are several shows that really highlight mindfulness. Specific one is the panda bear who does karate, how he talks about his choices, and if you watch some of those episodes, you'll see there's a lot of underlying mindfulness information in there that you can use to explain to students, sometimes we'll watch those clips on YouTube and then talk about was that a mindfulness activity or example? Check yourself, your zones of regulation, your own weather report, and of course model the behavior. So for older students, it can also be
a bit challenging to get the buy in, right? Because they’re like, "Why do I have to do this?" This is rubbish. Well, I sometimes use the Kawa Model which was developed by Japanese OTs, and the Kawa Model uses a natural metaphor of the river to depict how someone's life journey and the river is your life flowing. So sometimes I use that because I tell them look, in your life you're going to have circumstances that stop that river from flowing. They'll be challenges and barriers and it's so important for you to have skills and assets for mindfulness to help you through it. So I mean that you can use the Kawa Model in many different ways, that's just one example that I use with students.

So let’s move on to mindful activities. Well, there're a bazillion. If you do some searches there’re books written on it, some my favorite ones are "Spidey Senses", act like Spider-Man, what can you hear with your eyes closed that sort of thing. The other one I really like is eating a raisin. Like, you've never eaten a raisin before. Really close your eyes and tell me like the texture, the flavor, the size. Those are brilliant. But there's so much out there on the internet that you can look at. And actually in OT, we sort of do these any way, right? We do a lot of these strategies but I think it's about knowing the language to reflect on mindfulness within these activities. One of the activities I use a lot is the bell. And there's so many apps out there for mindfulness with listening sort of strategies, but I use an actual bell, and I'll ring the bell and then I'll say, "Okay, everybody close your eyes "and I want you to focus on the sound of the bell." And you know how it sort of reverberates for a while and then the first person, they have to put their hand up when they don't hear the bell anymore. And so they really have to listen. And then the first person to put their hand up after the bell, they get a reward. So this is just another example.

Body scan meditation is a very common method used, progressive relaxation. And if we can play this slide, this is another little short clip. Really, it’s kind of a fun thing to use with little kids because when I work on breathing they say they're reading slowly
but they're actually really fast. And so I'm like, "No, you need to slow down." So having this image really helps them 'cause I'll say, "Okay, don't blow the candle out." So that means you got to really be slow in your breath. And then it also provides a nice visual because sometimes students have a hard time with either focusing on something, they get too focused, or they don't focus on one particular thing. So it's a nice visual to help young students with that strategy. And we can go back to the slides. The other thing I want to mention is with a candle and your breath. The thing about your breath, I've read some article about in Buddhist schools, the first six to eight weeks all students do is learn how to use their breath which I thought was phenomenal. And it was just because your breath is what you always have with you. It's a sensory tool that you always have with you. So, really training students to use their breath is really profound in its application. And that's one of the reasons I've really used that as an anchor.

So there are plenty of mindfulness games, worksheets out there, I just listed a few. Pennies Game, I think this is kind of a fun one where basically everyone gets a penny, they have a minute to really look at their penny and then you put all the pennies in a basket and then they have to find their penny based on what they remember. But you can really elaborate and this is where OTs are great with being creative. There're also curricula out there that you can use for mindfulness. There's several that I really like, one of my favorite is the MonkeyMind and Me because it's a mindfulness course specifically for children and it talks about the chatter and how your mind is just becoming like a monkey and just all over the place. So I really do like that. There are several books out there that you can read. There's also actually a certification for mindfulness that you can do, but there's so much out there now. I think the key here is really making sure that you're on board before you start teaching it to students. So, the thing I really want to point out that mindfulness is not a synonym for relaxation. Mindfulness is something that is a byproduct of mindfulness. Actually I just remembered something. I have one student who we were doing mindfulness with and he was really having a really hard time with it, and he was getting frustrated. So it's
actually the opposite of relaxation. And so I was like, okay, this is not working. And I was trying to find another way of helping him with mindfulness, and he had sensory issues. So it was very difficult for him to do any sort of body awareness. So one of the strategies I used, it’s called a starfish hand meditation. I’m not sure if you’ve heard of it but basically you hold out your hand and spread out your fingers, and then you close your eyes, take a deep breath, then you take your index finger from the other hand and trace around your fingers of that open hand. And you do this and you concentrate only on how it feels and you let the other thoughts float away. And that worked for the student with SPD.

So there’s such a plethora of information and knowledge out there that you could really look into different strategies if it doesn’t work, especially for our sensory students who may have a harder time. Like for example, if a student has auditory defensiveness, the bell may not be the best thing, you know? Or I’ve had a situation where I used some white noise to help students. And I had a student who fell asleep because he got so relaxed and for him that white noise was a sensory calming strategy and so we couldn’t even get into mindfulness because he just fell asleep. So, I think OTs are in a really brilliant place where they can say, "This is what mindfulness is, "this is what sensory is "and this is how I can incorporate it together "to make it meaningful for this client or student."

So anyway, in conclusion, the demands placed on us as OTs and parents and individuals continue to mount. The introduction of mindfulness-based training for students and therapists like us is quite timely. The research suggests that mindfulness is such a viable tool for self-care and well-being. And the generally positive response and the exploratory evidence-based studies suggest that it is great in it’s efficacy. But naturally, we need more in depth research specifically for rehabilitative and sensory aspects. The inclusion of mindfulness-based training in OT education is quite justifiable because of the growing body of evidence that supports its efficacy. And especially for
the health and well-being of healthcare professionals like us. What I do want to leave
you with is a quote from Dalai Lama. And it goes like this, "Man sacrifices his health to
make money, "then he sacrifices money to recuperate his health, "and then he's so
anxious about the future "that he does not enjoy the present. "The results being "that
he does not live in the present or the future. "He lives as if he's never going to die "and
then he dies never really having lived." Hopefully, this quote gives you some
perspective on how you live your life and the content of this presentation helps you
decide if mindfulness is something you should ponder and incorporate into daily
practice. And that's all we have. Happy to take some questions. Let's see.

- [Fawn] Thank you, Dr. Mehra. That was a great talk. Let's look and see what we have
here. The first question is, would mindfulness be taught? I'm sorry, I just lost it. Let me
pull up another one.

- [Aditi] Oh, I actually saw it. It's can mindfulness be taught in groups? I believe this
was the first question. And absolutely, I think in a group setting, they would have to be
older students or adults, children, it's a little bit trickier but I have done it within groups
of two or three. I haven't done more than three. And depending on the age, it might just
take longer to refine the process but yes, you can do it in groups.

- [Fawn] Another question coming in is what age range is the MonkeyMind program
intended for?

- [Aditi] The MonkeyMind program, I believe it starts in elementary school but I can't
recall honestly, because there's so many programs out there now. I feel like it gets a bit
muddied but I wanna say there's definitely an elementary school but I wanna say
there's also probably one for three years and younger, or, nothing younger than three
but three to five years. It is one of the most popular, at least in England. I haven't seen
a lot of schools use it here.
- [Fawn] Okay, another question is could you recommend any other YouTube videos that are helpful for introducing and practicing mindfulness with elementary age students? Do you have any particular area you’d like to look or keyword?

- [Aditi] I would just do mindfulness for children. When I do a keyword search for that there are a plethora of YouTube videos but like I mentioned in my presentation, I try to use videos that are already familiar to students in a form of cartoon characters that they're already seeing and the panda is the best one. They can relate. Like I remember there was a scene where he was like, "Well, I'm just not good at fighting. "Maybe I should just sell noodles." And he went through this entire thought process and then came up with a response. So, as funny as it is, those type of shows, I think it's called Kung Fu Panda is really, really profound and accurate in depicting some of those. I would start with that and then there's so many on YouTube.

- [Fawn] Okay, and do you have any resources or examples of mindful activities you've done for staff training in schools to reduce stress and anxiety?

- [Aditi] I haven’t done a lot with staff training, I've done it more with students, myself. However, I can, there's so many resources out there, some of the books that I've mentioned, I would look into those. But they also have YouTube videos and the example that we just did today that we practice, I think just starting there, because I don’t know if you found it hard, but it is hard to do and if you have a formalized training, sometimes doing too much, it turns people off. So really starting very slow and doing a very simple snippet and then building on that. But these books are great resources, anything by Jon Kabat-Zinn, who obviously was the founder. But even "The Mayo Clinic" has some great ideas. This is an interesting one and I can combine a couple of these together. One was, you ever tried school overhead announcement system with older kids to stop and reframe type moments in the school day? And then
someone else asked, are there certain times of the day that are better for students? So you could kind of combine that at the beginning of the day or the end of the day.

- [Aditi] Well, again, it depends. I'll first of all turn to the first part of the question. I have not tried the over, the speaker, that would be a brilliant idea though if we could get the whole staff and everyone on board. But as far as the time of day, it really depends if you're trying to do formal practice, or you're trying to embed it into your daily schedule. So I'll give you an example. When the students that come to me, they know they're doing it right off the bat, they get used to it, and they'll ask me, if when we don't do it, they're like, "Oh, can we do that?" So it really is about forming that routine just like exercising. Initially, nobody wants to do it but once you have a routine and it feels good, then it becomes part of your lifestyle. I do it at home, I have three children. I do it right before dinner and it's just for a few minutes but when they do that it becomes a routine and it doesn't take a lot of time. So, to answer your question, it depends if you want to do formal or informal practice, my suggestion would be with children, or with novices, do informal practice because it's a lot easier to handle.

- [Fawn] Take one more here. How do you convey the benefits of mindfulness to younger kids who might not have been exposed to it before? You said the jar that you use, was there any other tips or tricks?

- [Aditi] The jars is a huge one but I also use thought battles where I'll tell them tell me what you're thinking about a situation like we might read a story where there was a student angry with another student, and where do you think he was thinking and what do you think the student was thinking? And then, okay, which thoughts do you think are important to focus on and which ones are not? Those sort of strategies. But there are lots of mindfulness worksheets that you can access online. There's a plethora of them. Another one that you could do is just labeling mindfulness tasks, like if Susie
leaves her clothes on the floor, was that mindful or not? Giving examples and non-examples is a really good way to teach younger children.

- [Fawn] Okay, I think we'll wrap for today. Thank you so much for a great talk Dr. Mehra. These are some great suggestions and I actually look forward to trying to do some of these things and I hope everyone else gained some useful tips and tricks as well.

- [Aditi] Brilliant. Thank you so much.

- [Fawn] I hope everyone has a great rest of the day. You join us again on continued and occupationaltherapy.com. Thanks, everyone.