Reducing Stress and Anxiety in Gifted Children: The Role of Contemplative Practice

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Stress:
A term coined by endocrinologist Hans Selye; his definition:
“The non-specific response of the body to any demand placed upon it.”

He also described stress in two ways:

• Distress (caused by negative situations)
• Eustress (caused by positive situations)

Implications:

• Life is filled with change and adaptation
• Stress is universal and experienced by everyone
• Stress is physical; however, reactions are unique
• Awareness of personal reactions is essential
• Identifying sources of change and resulting stress can be helpful
Signs of Stress

Physical
- Sleep difficulties
- Loss of appetite
- Chronic fatigue
- Vague stomach upset
- Low grade infection
- Rashes
- Frequent colds
- Headaches

Emotional
- Nightmares
- Anxiety
- Apathy
- Panic
- Inappropriate laughter
- Feelings of failure
- Feelings of unworthiness

Signs of Stress

Behavioral
- Fighting
- Stealing
- Refusing to do school work
- Loss of interest in appearance
- Yelling/significant & frequent tantrums
- Running away from school or truancy
- Attention-seeking behaviors (significant)
- Arson

Spiritual
- Loss of meaning and purpose
- Confusion about feeling connected to self and others
- Feeling rudderless; without a moral compass
- Loss of compassionate nature
- No sense of belonging
- Abandonment of spiritual practices (meditation, visualization, prayer, mantra)


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Sources of Stress for Gifted People

- SITUATIONAL
- SELF-IMPOSED
- EXISTENTIAL
Situational

- conflict between our values and the values of others
- interpersonal disharmony
- lack of intellectual stimulation or challenge
- challenges beyond our capability to respond
- threats to emotional or physical well-being
- lack of resources to accomplish a task
- time constraints
Self-imposed

- setting excessively high standards for ourselves
- fear of failure
- fear of success
- negative self-talk
- emotionally loaded/highly evaluative beliefs about ourselves and our environment
- believing that everyone should love, respect, and praise us
- buying into others' negative evaluations of us
- catastrophizing
- worrying

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Existential

- global concerns (e.g., nuclear disaster, war, poverty, world hunger, apartheid, the environment, etc.)
- idealism
- anger at fate
- Isolation
- need for meaning and purpose
Focus on Executive Function

The capacity to have a goal, follow through to the completion of the goal, and not be put off by or distracted by competing interests.

The ability to revise plans in the face of obstacles, setbacks, new information or mistakes.
Executive Function Processes

THE FUNNEL MODEL

- Planning
- Organizing
- Prioritizing
- Shifting
- Memorizing
- Checking

(Meltzer, 2004)
Functional Tasks

- Getting and staying organized
- Turning in homework
- Math problems; extended response
- On time to class; meeting deadlines
- Completing long term assignments
- Prioritizing of work
- Control emotions

(Mach, Vatcha & Harris, 2008)
Two things heard in schools/homes

CALM DOWN

PAY ATTENTION

Can we teach our kids to do these things?

Can they learn to find a quiet spot inside and focus?

YES they can!!
What are Contemplative Practices?

- Contemplative practices quiet the mind in order to cultivate a personal capacity for deep concentration and insight.

- Contemplative practices have the potential to:
  - to bring different aspects of one’s self into focus,
  - to help develop personal goodness and compassion, and
  - to awaken an awareness of the interconnectedness of all

Source: http://www.contemplativemind.org/practices/
Contemplative practice have the potential to:
- help people develop greater empathy and communication skills,
- improve focus and concentration,
- reduce stress, and enhance creativity.

Over time, these practices cultivate insight, inspiration, and a loving and compassionate approach to life.

They are practical, radical, and transformative.

Source: http://www.contemplativemind.org/practices/
Cognitive Science Agrees

“Neuroscience supports the idea that developing the reflective skills of mindsight activates the very circuits that create resilience and well-being and that underlie empathy and compassion.”

(Mindsight, p.iv)
“Perfectionism, sensitivity and intensity are three personality traits associated with giftedness. They are derived from the complexity of the child's cognitive and emotional development. According to Dabrowski's theory, these traits—related to overexcitabilities—are indicative of potential for high moral values in adult life. The brighter the child, the earlier and more profound is his or her concern with moral issues. But this potential usually does not develop in a vacuum. It requires nurturing in a supportive environment.”

Source: http://www.gifteddevelopment.com/What_is_Gifted/learned.htm
Differentiating Characteristics-Giftedness

- Unusual emotional depth and intensity
  - need to have philosophical discussions; guidance

- Idealism and sense of justice, which appear at an early age
  - need to transcend negative reactions by finding values to which he/she can be committed

- Advance level of moral judgment
  - need to receive validation for nonaverage morality

- Strongly motivated by self-actualization needs
  - Need to be given opportunities to follow divergent paths and pursue strong interests

(Clark, 2008)
Why is Contemplative Education Necessary for Gifted Children?

- Gifted kids dwell on things that create internal dissonance (e.g. global issues, natural disasters)
- Existential angst appears earlier in the developmental process for many gifted kids
- Executive functions of the brain (planning, organizing, self-regulation) may lag behind cognitive development; education/training helps
- Intensity and sensitivity may create significant emotional turmoil for gifted kids
Why are these relevant issues for gifted kids?

Research by Dabrowski and others suggests that the gifted have greater developmental potential for higher level moral development as well as unique ethical sensitivity.

- May relate to the complexity of moral issues and the intellectual demands involved in ethical judgments.

The potential for high level moral development cannot develop in a vacuum.

- Without help, the gifted are no better equipped to grapple with ethical concerns than they are to solve problems in non-Euclidean geometry.

(Silverman, 1993)
Contemplative Practices

- Quiet the mind, focus attention, adopt a receptive attitude
- meditation
- mind-body connecting; walk the labyrinth
- visualization
- practice imagery/fantasy
- deep breathing, progressive muscle relaxation
- Tai-chi; Brain Gym
- bibliotherapy, cinematherapy
- journaling
- experiences in nature
- time with pet
- artistic practices (calligraphy, mandalas)
A Zen Story
“Mindsight is a kind of focused attention that allows us to see the internal workings of our own minds. It helps us to be aware of our mental processes without being swept away by them....”

(Mindsight, p. 1 of the introduction)
“Cultivating mindsight in ourselves and in one another, we can nurture this inner knowing in our children and make it a way of being in the world.” (Mindsight, p. 261)
“Being mindful, having mindful awareness, is often defined as a way of intentionally paying attention to the present moment without being swept up by judgments.”

(Mindsight, p.83)
Movement

- Feldenkrais
- Mindful walking
- Thich Nhat Hanh
  - Mindful Movement (experiential activity)
- Labyrinth
- Yoga; Tai-chi; martial arts
- Brain Gym
- Progressive muscle relaxation
Mindful Movement

Breathing in I bring in the blue sky....

Breathing out I smile to the blue sky..

Enjoying our body and breath while being mindful in the present moment
Loving-kindness Meditation

May the hearts of all beings be filled with happiness and peace (free from suffering and distress).

May all beings be safe and secure (free from fear and harm).

May all beings be healthy and prosperous (free from pain, illness, and lack).

May all beings live joyfully and with ease (free from struggle and conflict).
Meditation

- Breathwork-overview and experiential activity
- Visualization-activity for kids (experiential activity)
- Meditation practice (walking, seated) activity (bring peace, joy, contentment leaving sorrow, anxiety, fear behind)
- Focused experiences in nature
- Centering
- Deep listening
- Silence
Loving Kindness Meditation

May I be filled with loving kindness.

May I be well.

May I be peaceful and at ease.

May I be happy.
Creative arts

- Mandalas
- Chanting; singing
- Storytelling
- Collage-soulwork
- Music (experiential activity)-Inspirational quotes
- Journaling
- Beauty; flower arranging, gazing at pictures
- Vision quest or building sacred spaces
“Practiced in the East and the West, in ancient times and in modern societies, mindful awareness techniques help people move toward well-being by training the mind to focus on moment-to-moment experience.”

(Mindsight, p.83)
Service Learning (Activism)

- Volunteering
- Pilgrimages to social justice sites
- Gardening; growing plants, flowers
- Providing relief, aid directly and through fund-raising
How can adults help?

- Model mindful behaviors to myself and for others; participate and practice.
- Provide opportunities to experience mindfulness in educational settings.
- Foster inner growth by sharing stories/anecdotes of spiritual pathfinders.
- Demonstrate to those who are "intense" the many ways to seek peace and inter-connectedness.
- Explore the different pathways of experiencing mindfulness with gifted youngsters.
Do not believe what you have heard;
Do not believe in tradition because it is handed down many generations;
Do not believe in anything that has been spoken of many times;
Do not believe because the written statements come from some old sage;
Do not believe in conjecture;
Do not believe in authority or teachers or elders.

But after careful observation and analysis, when it agrees with reason
and it will benefit one and all, then accept it and live by it.

- Buddha (563 BC - 483 BC)


Website Resources

Mindfulness in Education Network
www.mindfuled.org

The Center for Contemplative Mind in Society
http://www.contemplativemind.org/

Bibliography of mindfullness resources
http://marc.ucla.edu/workfiles/PDFs/MARC_mindfulness_biblio_0609.pdf

Health and peace methodology for schools
www.dreamofthegood.org

The Science of a Meaningful Life
http://greatergood.berkeley.edu/

Mindfulness Assessment
http://devtestservice.org/mindfulness/m-intro.html
All you need is deep within you waiting to unfold and reveal itself. All you have to do is be still and take time to seek for what is within....

Eileen Caddy