

# HOW TO TRAIN YOUR DRAGON: Mindfulness and Your Brain

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**H**as P.E. changed at your school? Are you now sitting quietly instead of running around? Has your teacher said, "Let's spend a few minutes doing mindfulness before we start the class"? Do you know what mindfulness is? Have you ever tried it? Do you know how it affects you or how it impacts your brain? Then read on...

Your teenage brain is glorious - if you didn't know that already. Neuroscience has shown that the brain goes through critical periods of growth and development - while in the womb, the first year of life, and the early years; right into adulthood. What scientists have more recently discovered is that the brain undergoes a "secret mission" of change during the period between the ages of 12 to 19 years that is truly unique.

## What is Mindfulness?

Let's start with what mindfulness is - put simply it means being aware of all you are experiencing at any given time. It's a process of looking inward and focusing on what is happening around and within you. Closing your eyes and listening to what environment you are in, what thoughts, feelings, and body sensations you are experiencing and without judgment. So what, I hear you say. What all the fuss about, and why should I practice mindfulness?

## Benefits of mindfulness

There is a growing body of research showing the benefits of mindfulness, officially known as Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR). An ancient practice combining present-moment awareness that leads to deep relaxation that eliminates stress. You are likely under a great deal of pressure and stress - school, homework, tests, friendships, social media, growing up, virus outbreaks, you name it! Stress and anxiety are detrimental to your physical and psychological well-being. Stress compromises the immune system and makes you more likely to get sick. Mindfulness is a great tool to cope with stress and anxiety.

Research has shown that mindfulness improves your interpersonal relationships and grows your social-emotional skills - making you more compassionate, kind, and empathic. Basically it makes you a better human. Researchers followed kindergarteners over several decades as they matured into adulthood, and found that good social skills in childhood were associated with improved academic results and employment prospects, reduced substance use and depression, even rates of criminal behavior. There are no known side effects or dangers associated with mindfulness, anyone can practice mindfulness, anywhere at any time. No one needs to know you are practicing mindfulness!

## Brain Impact

Mindfulness literally grows your brain, brain imagery using MRI machines shown increased gray matter density in people that practice mindfulness. Increased gray matter volume is associated with improved cognitive abilities. The impact of mindfulness is what I like to call the 3 amigos. The (1) amygdala (2) hippocampus and (3) prefrontal cortex. These 3 structures continually send and receive messages about the state of the union. Let each other know who needs the most resources at any one time.

The amygdala is like a screaming toddler demanding all the attention. As you already know if you have a younger sibling, there's no reasoning with a screaming kid. The amygdala is the emotional epicenter of your brain and is continually monitoring your emotions. It likes to speak loudly and control all the other areas of your brain. It's the brain's dragon blowing fire across all

the other brain areas. Mindfulness helps you to train your dragon. By practicing mindfulness your brain becomes less reactive to emotions and can remain calm. When your brain is not being hijacked by your amygdala it can allow the hippocampus and the prefrontal cortex to do what they do best - help you focus, learn, remember, and make good decisions.

## Start your practice

Notice that I said "mindful practice" and not "learn mindfulness." The process of being mindful is a journey not a destination. The only rule is to be compassionate with yourself. Acknowledge what you are feeling and thinking without judgement. There are no good or bad thoughts or good or bad feelings, they are all part of the incredible person that is you. You can start a regular mindful practice anytime, for now just start by finding a couple of minutes to sit and take in all that surrounds you. Where are you and with whom? What are you snacking on? Is it salty, crunchy, sweet, chewy? Do you feel tired, relaxed, worried, happy? Just be aware of the wonder of all the sensations and be in awe of all that you are capable of feeling.

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## Mindfulness Practice Brain Benefits

