

Left Brain Buddha

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Sarah Rudell Beach

Early in my teaching career, I read that to be a successful high school teacher, you have to be able to *motivate a sofa*.

Fortunately, the adolescents that I work with generally have more drive and initiative than a piece of upholstery. But it might take some work to convince teenagers of the value of slowing down, disconnecting, and breathing.

I often share practices for [teaching mindfulness to young children](#), but I have been asked many times for ideas for those of you who work with or have older children. Today, we're starting with square one: getting "buy-in" when teaching mindfulness to teens.

1. Model Mindfulness

We won't be able to convince adolescents of the benefits of a mindfulness practice without modeling it ourselves. It doesn't mean we always need to be paragons of contented bliss, but we should demonstrate our ability to manage stress and *respond*, not *react*, to setbacks.

A few months ago, as I handed out a revised course calendar with changes necessitated by losing five days of school to the cold weather, one of my students said, "You seem so stressed out about this! Normally you're so chill!"

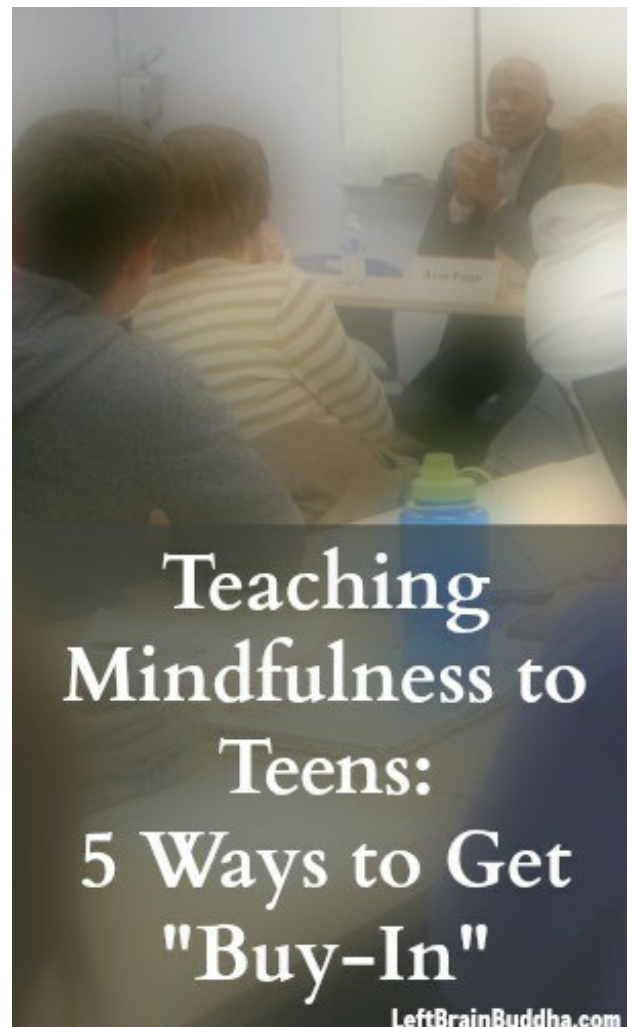
Her comment actually surprised me. I'm pretty intense and active when I teach {who *wouldn't* get fired up about European history?} and I have high standards in my classroom, but apparently I still demonstrate a "chill" demeanor.

If we want students to take mindfulness seriously, they need to see it in action. Those millennial Holden Caulfields can spot a phony a mile away.

2. What's in it for Them?

Teenagers may see mindfulness as completely unrelated to their busy and connected lives. But there are many ways that adolescents {and adults!} can benefit from a mindfulness and meditation practice. A few research nuggets that you could share with them:

- studies show that students who meditate before an exam perform better than students who do not
- meditation helps improve performance on standardized tests, such as the GRE
- meditation can improve concentration
- meditation can help with anxiety, stress, and depression {three things I see all too frequently in my students}



For more information about the benefits of mindfulness and meditation, [click here](#).

3. Teach Teens About Their Brain

I also teach Psychology to juniors and seniors, and they are fascinated with learning how their brains work. We can teach teens how mindfulness can help their brains function more skillfully. [This TEDx talk by Dan Siegel](#), author of *Brainstorm: The Power and Purpose of the Teenage Brain*, has a great demonstration that you can use with teens {or even younger kids} to teach them about the parts of the brain, using their hands as a model.

The demonstration focuses on three structures of the brain: the **brainstem** (our “reptilian” brain, responsible for breathing, heart-rate, etc.), the **limbic system/amygdala** (our “mammalian” brain, involved in emotion and memory), and the **cortex** (our “human” brain, responsible for thinking and self-regulation). The hand model reveals how close the amygdala is to the pre-frontal cortex, and how mindfulness can help the thinking part of the brain process the raw emotion of the limbic system. And that can lead to better decision-making – it allows a **mindful pause, a skillful response instead of an unthinking reaction**.

We can teach teens that mindfulness is a form of **training** for their brains: meditation has actually been shown to increase gray matter in the portion of the brain responsible for self-awareness and compassion. Meditation can play a role in the *neuroplasticity* of the brain – our experiences can actually transform our brains, the way exercise can transform our bodies.

4. Teach Teens About Their Mind

When I teach mindfulness to students, I use the analogy of the **monkey mind**. I give examples of how they can be sitting in class, but their mind wanders to their job, or thoughts of the weekend, and then they realize after a few minutes that they have been miles away.

When I did a meditation exercise with my students during the stressful week of finals before spring break, I explained that a lot of our anxiety is truly “in our heads” – our stress comes from our worrying brains ruminating on all the worst possible scenarios. I gave this example: “You may think, *‘I’m going to fail the final, my parents will be furious with me, I’ll never get into a good college, and I’ll be homeless in five years!’*” One student exclaimed, “Omigosh, have you been inside my head!?!”

When we practice mindfulness, we learn that much of the chatter of the mind is just that: chatter. It’s not reality; it’s worry, it’s anxiety, it’s baseless projection. Mindfulness teaches teenagers to recognize the downward spiral of thoughts before it gets out of hand, perhaps learning to label it as simply “worrying.” They can acknowledge the anxiety without getting caught up in it, without it leading to the rumination that ultimately ruins their mood.

Adolescents may think that’s just what minds do ... and it is. But there are ways to approach the mind skillfully. This is often eye-opening to teens!

5. There’s an App for That!

I realize there's a bit of irony in recommending apps to practice mindfulness, especially to get teens to practice disconnection from their uber-connected cyberworlds. I use the **Insight Meditation Timer** {at right} when we do meditations in class, and students always want to know what app I am using. They love seeing the map graphic on the Insight Timer that shows all the locations worldwide where people are meditating. And they love that once they've disconnected, they can quickly reconnect by posting their meditative accomplishments on Twitter and Facebook. It's probably not how the Buddha intended it, but I don't think he'd mind.

Here are some of my favorite meditation apps for teens:

Insight Meditation Timer. This is the app I use ... I guess I love seeing the map of all the meditators in the world, too!

Stop, Breathe, and Think. My students were excited when I showed them this app because it opens with a short "interview" where the user selects several words to describe how they are feeling, and then the app recommends guided meditations for their current state.

Smiling Mind. Designed for adolescents {and my students generally love anything with an Australian or British accent!}

Take a Break! Not necessarily just for teens, but it provides short guided meditations for stress relief. Young people just starting out with meditation may prefer guidance. And this comes from The Meditation Oasis, which is awesome!

I am wholeheartedly convinced that **we can all benefit from incorporating mindfulness practice into our busy lives**, especially teenagers. You don't need to be able to motivate sofas, but I'm hoping these tips help you encourage the adolescents in your life to get on a cushion, or even a couch, and spend some time in **digital detox, in stillness, in mindfulness.**

Namaste.

*Are you looking for ways to
reduce your stress
and find more joy?*

Yes!

no thanks -- I'm managing fine!

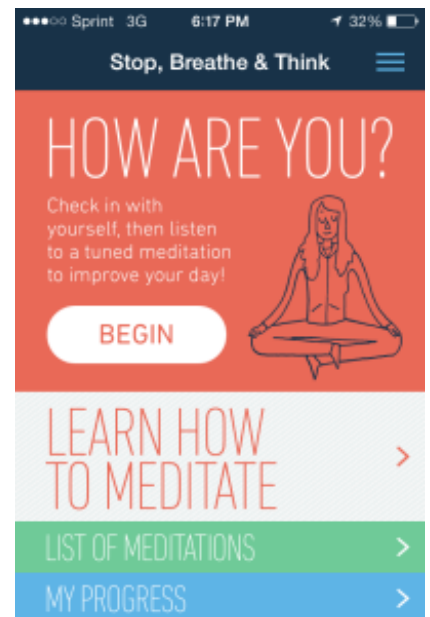
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Sarah is a writer, teacher, and mother. At Left Brain Buddha, she writes about her journey to live and parent mindfully, joyfully, and thought-fully in her left-brain analytical life. When not working, she enjoys dancing, reading, and hanging out with her little Buddhas.



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