



8 Principles for Teaching Mindfulness to Teens

- 1. Practice relational mindfulness:** Relational mindfulness is the intentional act of relationship-building using mindfulness principles to increase your relate-ability (i.e., presence, attunement, compassion, etc.). It is thinking of the relationship as an organic living entity, rather than a passive aspect of your experience with the youth you work with. Practicing relational mindfulness increases trust and emotional safety, and will influence youth to be more receptive to you and the mindfulness practices you share. This is a must!
- 2. Clearly define mindfulness:** Clearly defining mindfulness is critical, as most teens (and people for that matter) will think of mindfulness as simply meditation, let alone some of the primary effects of meditation (i.e., relaxation). It's imperative to clearly define mindfulness as it is inevitable that teens will sometimes practice and not feel relaxed as a result of the practice. We do not want them thinking they failed or are "not good at mindfulness" simply because they have a lot of mental chatter or can't calm down. We use the lion mind metaphor which you can learn more about in our free course, and a simple one-liner definition that we continuously return to. **Mindfulness is: Present-moment awareness with an attitude of non-reactivity.**
- 3. Start with tangible, easy-to-understand practices:** Some research has shown that practices that are physically tangible and easy to understand are a good place to start when teaching mindfulness meditation to teens. *Mindfulness of deep breathing* and the *body-scan* both tend to activate the relaxation response and although the goal of the practice isn't relaxation, it does offer an immediate positive consequence which can increase teen buy-in. These meditations also tend to be easy-to-understand and often don't result in teens thinking "what am I supposed to be doing right now?" Other practices may be introduced as appropriate.
- 4. Increase length of practice over time:** If the teen you're working with hasn't ever meditated before, it would be unskillful to try and first share a mindfulness meditation that lasted over 20 minutes, or even 5 for that matter. When first sharing mindfulness, start with short windows of practice (i.e., 2-4 minutes) and then increase over time as proficiency of practice and rapport continues to grow.

5. Make the practice applicable to real life: Although mindfulness meditation itself can be transformational, it's critical to dialogue with teens about how it can authentically be applied in their lives. For some it may help manage stress, anger, depression, anxiety, or other strong emotions. For others it may be a medium into deeper self-awareness. Have explicit conversations with teens about how a practice like mindfulness can impact their lives. Discuss that mindfulness meditation is a form of mental training and in order to gain proficiency and benefit from it ongoing practice will be necessary.

6. Take into account culture and trauma: It is extremely skillful to learn about the backgrounds of the teens you work with. If a young person is from a culture that has particular contemplative practices, be sensitive when sharing mindfulness with the intention to not offend or present mindfulness as "better than." Likewise, although you may not know a young person's trauma history when you first meet them, be sensitive to lookout for any signs of trauma as you may need to significantly alter the way you share your mindfulness practices or not share them at all.

7. Don't over-emphasize logistics: There's no need to force a young person to close their eyes, sit in a certain position, hold their hands a certain way, etc. That will only create impasse if a youth feels out of place and it's not necessary to practice mindfulness. Trauma can be triggered by something as simple as closing one's eyes, so we want to invite with our meditation instructions rather than treat them like pre-requisites.

8. Mindfulness beyond meditation: Mindfulness is so much more than mindfulness meditation. Remember, there are a plethora of practices within the daily or informal mindfulness umbrella. Learn those and have them in your tool kit. Sometimes meditation is just too intense for a teen who's been adversely impacted by trauma or has severe anxiety. Don't try and force it. Use the power of mindfulness beyond meditation. Mindful check-ins, mindful eating activities, and mindful movement are all forms of mindfulness beyond meditation.



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<https://centerforadolescentstudies.com>

