**Morning Mindfulness Brings Clarity, Focus to Albion Middle**

Barry Johnson’s second-period science class has fallen silent. The lights are dimmed and the students are all sitting forward and upright in their chairs with their feet on the floor and eyes closed.

The only sound that can be heard is the soothing voice of a woman who is inviting the class to take a few moments —eight minutes, to be exact—to “just be right here” as the students “breathe in and breathe out, breathe in, breathe out.”

In today’s hyper-connected, always-on world, eight minutes is a long time for anyone to sit still with their thoughts, let alone an entire classroom of energetic preteens (try it sometime). But these digital natives have been practicing, taking up to 10 minutes every other day to disconnect and clear their heads as part of a mindfulness program being implemented at Albion Middle and a handful of other Canyons District schools.

Albion has only been doing morning mindfulness practices for about a month, but early results are promising. Already, teachers are observing fewer behavioral problems and signs of anxiety and stress in their students, which they say, helps learning happen more efficiently. “Teachers also are feeling the benefits as many practice mindfulness with their students,” says Albion counselor Cathy Nelson.

What is mindfulness? There is no single definition, which is why it has been difficult for scientists to put reported benefits to the rigorous test of randomized [clinical](https://urldefense.proofpoint.com/v2/url?u=https-3A__www.scientificamerican.com_article_wheres-2Dthe-2Dproof-2Dthat-2Dmindfulness-2Dmeditation-2Dworks1_&d=DwMFaQ&c=fGrSkuu3YyS91PacIZP0XfO0GRH7JgL5znLEO6-CQG0&r=FgokWuryYFWine8DcjMt0WRIzvQPsh7V4Yr-SZbEMz4SO-vgBL9-0YWbSuA3BA1K&m=OUXq7vpwfw_C5wyj3OQCfAdgOiz0vWqcYd2OBeOOpeI&s=e_z6R9Jlx6MS4XA9wGhi_lQ1ucVKzX0V5XInMrCKbEk&e=) trials. But in the trials that have been done, mindfulness-type attention training has been shown to change the brain activity of [depressed patients](https://urldefense.proofpoint.com/v2/url?u=https-3A__news.harvard.edu_gazette_story_2018_04_harvard-2Dresearchers-2Dstudy-2Dhow-2Dmindfulness-2Dmay-2Dchange-2Dthe-2Dbrain-2Din-2Ddepressed-2Dpatients_&d=DwMFaQ&c=fGrSkuu3YyS91PacIZP0XfO0GRH7JgL5znLEO6-CQG0&r=FgokWuryYFWine8DcjMt0WRIzvQPsh7V4Yr-SZbEMz4SO-vgBL9-0YWbSuA3BA1K&m=OUXq7vpwfw_C5wyj3OQCfAdgOiz0vWqcYd2OBeOOpeI&s=ZuJD-3Y9RlHIl5WIlha1YgSWJf3ZQn5nynkhlwbPG7Y&e=) and reduce perceived feelings of stress. And there are plenty of [observational studies](https://urldefense.proofpoint.com/v2/url?u=https-3A__greatergood.berkeley.edu_article_item_the-5Fstate-5Fof-5Fmindfulness-5Fscience&d=DwMFaQ&c=fGrSkuu3YyS91PacIZP0XfO0GRH7JgL5znLEO6-CQG0&r=FgokWuryYFWine8DcjMt0WRIzvQPsh7V4Yr-SZbEMz4SO-vgBL9-0YWbSuA3BA1K&m=OUXq7vpwfw_C5wyj3OQCfAdgOiz0vWqcYd2OBeOOpeI&s=Nz1D00P8btSLes53_aimwuOLieCxM84oWAbseIJFHKc&e=) suggesting mindfulness also helps with impulse control, empathy, attention and focus, resilience, productivity, and stress and pain management.

With rates of teen [anxiety and depression](https://urldefense.proofpoint.com/v2/url?u=https-3A__www.johnshopkinshealthreview.com_issues_fall-2Dwinter-2D2017_articles_the-2Drise-2Dof-2Dteen-2Ddepression&d=DwMFaQ&c=fGrSkuu3YyS91PacIZP0XfO0GRH7JgL5znLEO6-CQG0&r=FgokWuryYFWine8DcjMt0WRIzvQPsh7V4Yr-SZbEMz4SO-vgBL9-0YWbSuA3BA1K&m=OUXq7vpwfw_C5wyj3OQCfAdgOiz0vWqcYd2OBeOOpeI&s=_1pvgv-k0v2VMyy5Kem1awtn8ZUbfbNYG01kBm8ccag&e=) on the rise, schools are looking for ways to support the social-emotional needs of students, and mindfulness is something that’s being explored by classrooms across the country, says Canyons District counseling coordinator Tori Gillett. “Students can’t learn when they’re overwhelmed and this gives them coping mechanisms for dealing with emotional stressors. It primes their brains for learning and trying hard things.”

As it’s typically practiced, mindfulness is about being present in each moment, and creating a relaxed and aware state of mind while noticing thoughts and feelings without judgement.

Canyons District’s schools use a grant-funded program called [Inner Explorer](https://urldefense.proofpoint.com/v2/url?u=https-3A__innerexplorer.org_&d=DwMFaQ&c=fGrSkuu3YyS91PacIZP0XfO0GRH7JgL5znLEO6-CQG0&r=FgokWuryYFWine8DcjMt0WRIzvQPsh7V4Yr-SZbEMz4SO-vgBL9-0YWbSuA3BA1K&m=OUXq7vpwfw_C5wyj3OQCfAdgOiz0vWqcYd2OBeOOpeI&s=WnDtx8dTPP_mdZhdbPJwvnLjNHYzREzII-yp3AipOx0&e=), a series of pre-recorded, age-appropriate guided meditation practices that teachers play in their classrooms following the school’s morning announcements. Some students more actively participate than others, but all are asked to be quiet and respectful.

Each day’s recording starts with taking stock of your breathing and noticing how your body feels. Often, there are even a few academic lessons thrown into the mix.

“Consider the importance of breathing,” the disembodied voice encourages Johnson’s class. “As you breathe in and out, consider how we can live more than 50 days without food, and about seven days without water. But we can only live about five minutes without breathing in and breathing out.”

The recording goes on to discuss belly breathing and the vagus nerve, which runs from our brain stem to our stomach and controls the heart, lungs, and digestive tract. “As you breathe in through your nose, breathe slowly to the count of five, and as you breathe out, breathe slowly to the count of 10 through a small opening in your mouth. Your exhale will be longer than your inhale, and this is what stimulates the vagus nerve and the relaxation response,” the voice prompts.

One or two of the students fidget and seem bored. But most sit quietly the entire eight minutes and report feeling “calm” and “relaxed” afterward. They describe the experience as rewarding and say they like starting the day this way.

Johnson has even used some of the strategies he’s learned at home with his own children. “It has really helped reduce anxiety and build focus,” he says, “and like anything else we do in school, the students get better at it with practice.”