



Why and How to Teach Mindfulness

As a coach or parent, you may have heard that mindfulness or meditation has been shown to be a highly effective, free tool for calming nerves and decreasing stress levels. And that research doesn't just apply to adults: Much has been reported in recent years on how important mindfulness can be to the mental health of children as well. On the playing field, visualization and other mental techniques have even been shown to improve performance.

Here, Professor John Gabrieli, PhD, a researcher at MIT, explains why it's important to help young athletes develop a mindfulness routine and how to do it.

Why

Understand the Importance

"We've been struggling against a rising tide of anxiety and depression in adolescence," he says. "In the last 10 years, there's been an estimated 50 percent increase in depression. We don't know why this is happening, but we're trying to find ways to work towards lessening that. School-based mindfulness was one of the ways we wanted to approach it. As far as interventions go, it's arguably the cheapest and easiest one to try." Gabrieli tested mindfulness practices in a school setting, and the results were promising: Students reported greater feelings of calm and focus, and lowered levels of stress.

It's Not All in Their Heads

For Gabrieli, the most exciting outcome of his research was the result of brain scans done on the children who began a

mindfulness practice. Not only were they reporting feeling less stressed, their brains were actually changing as a result. "Children who practiced mindfulness showed changes in the brain in the areas involved in emotion and cognition," he adds. "Often, people dismiss meditation and mindfulness as something that's perceived versus factual, so it was important to see these brain changes that corresponded to their subjective feelings of stress."

Keep Their Heads in the Game

Teaching mindfulness doesn't just keep athletes calm before a big competition, it can also help them pay better attention during the game, according to one study that found meditation helped children ignore distractions—like parents shouting in the stands—and concentrate better. Researchers explained that this is because mindfulness teaches people how to pay attention to the present moment without judgement, so a young athlete can focus in on the task at hand and ignore outside stimuli.

How

Teaching Present Focus

"We want to encourage focus on the present moment, as opposed to the past or worries about the future," says Gabrieli. "We start with focusing on one's breath." In its simplest form, this can mean taking two minutes at the beginning of practice for athletes to sit with their eyes closed simply counting breaths. It doesn't need to be a guided meditation or involve diffused essential oils, specific pillows, or postures. Keep it simple to start.

There's an App for That

Gabrieli is quick to note that not every coach or parent will feel comfortable teaching mindfulness to children, but there are plenty of free resources available. He recommends using apps, including *Inner Explorer*, *Calmer Choice*, and *Headspace* as a simple starting point appropriate for most ages.

It Doesn't Take Much

You don't need your team to take up full practices meditating, Gabrieli says. "The people I know who are the most enthusiastic about mindfulness believe that if you do 10 minutes a day, you're good," he says.



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