



Elisha Goldstein, Ph.D.

Mindfulness Training Workshop

February 4, 2016

"Wherever you are, that's the entry point!" -Dr. Elisha Goldstein

Mindfulness expert Dr. Elisha Goldstein facilitated a mindfulness workshop for Common Ground parents, educators and children, offering practical strategies to calm our anxious minds, transform negative emotions, and facilitate greater self-acceptance, freedom and inner peace. Dr. Goldstein is a psychologist and co-founder of the Center for Mindful Learning in West Los Angeles, and the co-creator of the Connecting Adolescents to Learning Mindfulness (CALM) program. He is also the author of [Uncovering Happiness: Overcoming Depression with Mindfulness and Self-Compassion](#) and [The Now Effect: How This Moment Can Change the Rest of Your Life](#).

Unlike other animals, humans spend a lot of time thinking about what is **not** going on around them: contemplating events that happened in the past, might happen in the future, or may never happen at all. In fact, mind-wandering appears to be the human brain's default mode of operation. One of the original pieces of research on the subject of mind wandering was completed by psychologists Killingsworth and Gilbert of Harvard University. Their research concluded that **people spend 46.9% of their waking hours thinking about something other than what they're doing**, and this mind-wandering typically makes them unhappy.

THE BREATH AS AN ANCHOR PRACTICE

"So," said Dr. Goldstein, "we are basically not here for about half of our lives!" He then introduced 'The Breath as an Anchor Practice.' Also referred to as 'See Touch Go' – the idea is SEEING when your mind is wandering off something; being able to TOUCH the thought or image that is there for a moment; and then gently GO back to where your intention is. He has a 3-minute video introducing the practice on his website: <http://elishagoldstein.com/videos/breath-as-an-anchor/>. He asked the audience to apply this intentional practice during the duration of his workshop.

Pulling two children from the audience, Dr. Goldstein gave each of them a glass of water. He told them to simply hold the glass in front of their body. Dr. Goldstein continued to talk to the audience about the benefits of mindfulness, all the while with the kids holding their glasses of water. Dr. Goldstein then paused to ask the kids to rate the heaviness of their glass. Dr. Goldstein then continued his talk for another three minutes and finally paused to ask the kids whether the glass was getting heavier. When the kids told him that yes, the glasses were getting heavier, he asked if they wanted to put the water glasses down. Both kids agreed that putting down the glasses was a good idea. The kids then returned to their seats. Dr. Goldstein explained that he used this example to teach the audience that when things get too heavy, or too stressful, we need to learn to put things down. We need to learn to put our minds down. One way to put down our minds is through mindfulness.

WHY BE MINDFUL?

Mindfulness is the ability to cultivate awareness of the present moment while putting aside our programmed biases. It is being in connection with the direct experience of the present moment, the here and now. When we connect to the spaces of our lives with mindfulness, we can experience "The Now Effect," 'aha' moments of clarity where we are in touch with an awareness of what really matters. An accelerating amount of research is showing that engaging with mindfulness can help us heal our stress, anxiety, depression, addiction, chronic pain, and open us up to joy, love, self-compassion and a greater sense of connection with ourselves and others. There is even evidence that it can help us nurture a stronger and healthier brain. When we teach ourselves to be aware of our emotions and name what is happening to us, we can begin to de-escalate our amygdala and bring more blood flow to the prefrontal area of the brain. We can literally start to balance our brains.

THREE ELEMENTS OF MINDFULNESS

Dr. Goldstein used the metaphor of the three-legged stool to illustrate the implementation of a mindfulness practice. All three elements are necessary in order for the practice to work:

- A HEART to care
- A MIND to think
- ACTION to cultivate it to make it real

THE STOP PRACTICE FOR CALMER BRAINS

To nurture stronger and healthier brains, Dr. Goldstein encourages practicing mindfulness regularly. Dr. Goldstein's STOP Practice (Stop, Take a breath, Observe, Proceed) is a popular starting point because it is so short and simple. An audio version of STOP is available at: <http://elishagoldstein.com/videos/the-stop-practice/>. Dr. Goldstein suggests that as you open your eyes in the morning, instead of jolting out of bed, try and see if you can make room for a [STOP practice](#).¹ This effort tends to start the day off differently with great calm and present moment awareness, setting the stage for you to be more calm and steady during challenging moments throughout the day.

THE IMPORTANCE OF PLAY

Additionally, the key attitude to optimize learning is having a PLAYFUL mindset – that way we do not get stuck in self-judgment. When we are playful, we are relaxed and have the cognitive flexibility to facilitate learning by allowing the brain to take in information. Dr. Goldstein stresses that we need playtime and we need it daily. One of the first scientists to embark in the field of neuroplasticity, Marion Diamond, showed how rats that have toys and playmates inevitably ran mazes more efficiently and also [showed growth in an area of their brain \(the cerebral cortex\)](#)² involved with cognitive processing. Play [enhances social bonds and social learning](#),³ key areas for generating happiness. Dr. Goldstein addressed the children in the room and told them that as they grow, and life gets more intense and serious, they may lose the desire to play. It is important to reintroduce play into the adolescent life AND into the adult life. He ends with the statement: 'The opposite of play is not work, it's depression.'

THE NEGATIVITY BIAS AND THE 'NOW EFFECT'

Dr. Goldstein reported that our brains are wired to pay attention more frequently, and with great veracity, to what is negative. This 'negativity bias' does not mean that the good moments in life are not happening, we are just not wired to pay attention to them. We need to choose to be happier by using mindfulness and choosing where we focus our attention. Here is a short practice one can come back to again and again at work or at home as a way to prime the mind for good – experiencing more of the "Now Effect" in daily life.

The Practice:

- Think of a moment of receiving in the last day or week. You may have received something physical, or maybe a meal, the beauty of the sun, a smile, support from a coworker or the help from a stranger. It could be something that you may normally consider mundane.
- Revisit the memory like a movie in your mind, picturing where you are, who you are with and pausing the reel in the moment of receiving.
- As you are recalling the memory, have awareness that you are receiving it, feeling into a sense of gratitude. Noticing how it feels in your body and allow it to get as big as it can get. As one client of Dr. Goldstein's said, "allow the glow to grow."
- In your mind, picture who or what is giving you this gift and intentionally express thanks.
- Be on the lookout for moments of gratitude throughout today.

REMINDER FOR PARENTS AND EDUCATORS - IT STARTS WITH US

Dr. Goldstein commented that we are incredibly fortunate to live in the Bay Area with a plethora of mindfulness resources. As it takes about six months to make a habit, so Dr. Goldstein encouraged everyone in the audience to start to build a mindful practice as soon as possible. The earlier children start this practice, the more likely they will lay down a foundation for their entire lives. Dr. Goldstein assured the audience that if you retain curiosity, compassion, and playfulness as you explore mindfulness, you **will** get better and better – little by little. Soon, you will experience a more enduring sense of happiness. And, the best news about happiness, according to Dr. Goldstein, is that it is contagious! Eventually, your happiness will spread throughout your family and then into the larger community. "Wherever you are, that's the entry point!"

¹ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EiuTpeu5xQc>

² [http://education.jhu.edu/PD/newhorizons/Neurosciences/articles/Response of the Brain to Enrichment/](http://education.jhu.edu/PD/newhorizons/Neurosciences/articles/Response%20of%20the%20Brain%20to%20Enrichment/)

³ <http://www.journalofplay.org/sites/www.journalofplay.org/files/pdf-articles/2-3-interview-science-of-brain-jaak-panksepp.pdf>