

Learning to Pay Attention:

How Mindfulness Practices Can Provide Benefits in School and Life

By Robb Gaskins, Ph.D.

We live in a complex and ever-changing world. Functioning effectively in such a world requires a robust combination of cognitive strategies, conceptual knowledge, and executive skills. However, even more fundamentally, functioning with optimal efficiency and effectiveness also requires that we consistently demonstrate focus and clarity. Consequently, the development of focus and clarity is an integral part of the Benchmark instructional program. As such, the promotion of mindfulness practices that cultivate the development of focus and clarity was determined to be the topic we wanted to feature in our inaugural speaker event presented by the new Benchmark School Center for Empowered Learning.

The Speaker: Michael Baime, MD

Given the topic of mindfulness practices, there was no question as to whom we wanted to speak. We are fortunate to have one of the nation's leading experts in mindfulness right here in Philadelphia. Dr. Michael Baime is a Clinical Associate Professor of Medicine at the Perelman School of Medicine at the University of Pennsylvania. In addition, he is the Director of the Penn Program for Mindfulness and the Director of Mind-Body Programs for the Abramson Cancer Center at the University of Pennsylvania Health System.

Since founding the Penn Program for Mindfulness in the early 90s, the program has enrolled more than 15,000 individuals in an acclaimed eight-week mindfulness-based training course. As stated on the Penn Program for Mindfulness website, this course is focused on helping participants:

- manage difficulty and stress
- reduce depression and anxiety
- cope with trauma and loss
- increase focus and mental clarity
- improve communication in relationships
- find purpose, meaning, and beauty in life

As if that weren't enough, Dr. Baime has also published significant and compelling research on a range of the benefits of mindfulness practices, and his tireless commitment to improving the quality of life of every individual has resulted in his being the 2016 recipient of the



Dr. Michael Baime presented "Mindfulness for Life: How Learning to Strengthen Attention Creates Lifelong Benefits" on November 9 in the A. Palmer West Performing Arts Center.

American College of Physicians' Award for Distinguished Contributions in Behavioral Medicine. Given this background, it was clear that Dr. Baime was the person we needed, and we were thrilled and honored that he accepted the invitation to speak.

The Talk: Mindfulness for Life

More than 300 educators, parents, and community members from across the tri-state area packed into the A. Palmer West Performing Arts Center on November 9 to hear Dr. Baime present a talk entitled, "Mindfulness for Life: How Learning to Strengthen Attention Creates Lifelong Benefits."

Dr. Baime described mindfulness using the definition provided by the person widely considered to be the most influential proponent of mindfulness practices in the United States, Dr. Jon Kabat-Zinn—"Mindfulness means paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally." This definition highlights three critical characteristics of mindfulness:

1. **Intentionality** — Mindfulness entails consciously choosing the focus of our attention rather than allowing our attention to wander where it pleases. By focusing our attention on our breath, a sound, or anything, we gain an appreciation of just how

untamed our mind is. In the process, we begin to realize that the vast majority of mental activity is comprised of thoughts and feelings that are separate from experience. By being aware of when our attention is drifting and redirecting our attention accordingly, we strengthen our ability to sustain our attention where we intend it to be.

2. **Being present** — While we only ever exist in the present moment, we spend an inordinate amount of time preoccupied with the past or future or attending to considerations outside of our immediate experience. As a result, we can become distanced from the world rather than genuinely experiencing it the only way we truly can—in this moment. Consequently, through mindfulness, we seek to return our attention to the present moment.
3. **Acceptance** — Due to our preconceptions and expectations, we are quick to evaluate and emotionally react to our interpretations of our experience. This includes self-criticism as we struggle to maintain our attention as we seek to do. Through mindfulness we dissipate judgment in favor of embracing our reactions.

While this description establishes the theoretical foundation of the concept, the only way to develop a true understanding of mindfulness is through experience in practice. Thus, Dr. Baime led the audience through a guided meditation experience. In doing so, he provided us with first-hand knowledge of the initial challenge of staying focused as well as some of the overarching and pervasive benefits of mindfulness practice, such as reduced stress and an enhanced sense of calm. It was a powerful experience.

Dr. Baime's talk also included a review of quite a number of studies indicating various positive effects of mindfulness training. For example, he shared studies that have demonstrated that mindfulness training has led to increases in concentration, working memory, resistance to distraction, and GRE scores, among other benefits. In addition, Dr. Baime shared how engaging in mindfulness reduces stress over time. Essentially, with practice, mindfulness creates a buffer between events and one's reaction. Where previously an event would lead to an immediate reaction, with repeated practice, adversity would be met with awareness and non-judgmental recognition of the event and a thoughtful response.

The Response: The Reaction of Audience Members

The evening of the presentation there was clearly an energy and excitement in the room as Dr. Baime spoke.

This feeling was reinforced by the outpouring of positive responses after the event. For example, Benchmark parent Caren Lambert shared, "Michael Baime was a terrific speaker. I liked that part of his presentation was giving us a feel for what mindfulness practice is. [In addition,] I was very interested in the information he provided that showed the improvements in working memory." She also noted that, "the brain scan images he showed during the presentation made his points more understandable to me."

Angela Furtaw, another Benchmark parent, shared similar appreciation for the quality of Dr. Baime's presentation. Like Caren, she particularly appreciated when Dr. Baime guided the audience through mindfulness practice. "It actually had a calming, de-stressing effect..., and I left the auditorium without the back pain I had been experiencing for days. I hope to continue to remind myself and family to try be in the moment and present, especially when we are together as a family."

Reading Specialist and alumni parent Lisa Rhome was also impressed by Dr. Baime's presentation. In fact, she hopes to take a course with Dr. Baime in the future. "Dr. Baime's presentation was particularly appealing to me because his mindfulness strategies increase attention and focus and decrease anxiety. I shared the information I learned from his presentation with my sons (both Benchmark alumni) and, hopefully, we can all one day have the opportunity to take one of his seminars."

Conclusion

At the end of the evening, Dr. Baime had made a clear and compelling case for the profound and far-reaching benefits of mindfulness practice. He made his point theoretically, empirically, and experientially—mindfulness provides benefits for life. 

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The Benchmark School Center for Empowered Learning is dedicated to serving as a vibrant hub for discussions of innovative ideas and research-based practices that inspire, support, and empower success in school and life. The Center addresses this mission by providing presentations, forums, workshops, and resources by thought-leaders in education, technology, counseling, and creativity.