



PROGRAM SUMMARY

2014 Spring Forum

The Langley School

April 9, 2014

Using Mindfulness to Cultivate Resilience, Focus, and Compassion at Home and at School

President Joan Levy welcomed attendees and thanked The Langley School for hosting the program. Ms. Levy highlighted upcoming events planned to celebrate Parent Council's 50th anniversary this year and introduced Dr. Elinor Scully, Head of School of The Langley School who also welcomed participants. Board Member Lynn Maloney then introduced the program speakers.

Jesse Torrence is Executive Director of MINDS, Inc., a company that specializes in teaching mindfulness in D.C. area schools. Mr. Torrence opened the presentation by sharing his personal story of recovery from a heart transplant, pushing through self-pity and slowly noticing and discovering the pain he felt as well as the sounds and objects that surrounded his hospital bed. He described in detail hearing the noises from his ventilator, from the nurses' footsteps and distant typing, seeing the light framing the window, defining the location and texture of his pain, observing the space between heartbeats and seconds ticking by on the clock. He realized that infinite space exists in the world when you look for it, something he was oblivious to before. He began to feel compassion for his family, for the nurses taking care of him. He questioned if space could be what heals us, me, my community? He resolved at that moment that if he can

create space and live there, that would be enough. It takes courage to make space in our lives, to transform ourselves to notice richness. It's not about adding something new to the agenda. It involves concrete skills to notice things, sounds, and techniques every day and remembering what we know about our lives and stories.

David Trachenberg, Program Director of MINDS, Inc. described mindfulness as a gift to ourselves. We work hard at our jobs and return home to our second job of parenting our children. He led attendees in a soothing exercise useful to take a moment to feel and pause. He guided everyone to place their feet flat on the ground and close their eyes. This provides connection and rootedness and allows you to have your own space for the moment. He asked the audience to feel the rise and fall of their breath and to let their bodies respond. Mindfulness is where we place our awareness. He encouraged everyone to feel their breath in different places: the torso, chest, lungs and abdomen areas.

Most members of the audience found the experience relaxing and calming. Some felt their minds wandering during the exercise. When we feel stress or difficult emotions such as sadness or loneliness, we tend to lose ourselves and feel off kilter. It's important to put those thoughts forward by focusing on the moment and find our authentic selves. If we honor our thoughts, it will have an affect on our brain.

Joslyn Hills of Slow Lunch, a company that offers mindful eating training to individuals or groups in schools and corporations, spoke of the benefits of mindfulness as an emotional regulation that gives us more energy. Mindfulness is the pause or reset button to calm that allows us to breathe and find refuge and space from all that we do. It breaks the activity cycle and provides the space needed to focus and consider the next action calmly instead of impulsively reacting. This is an important tool to teach our children.

The brain is capable of structure and function and responds to stress. In this world of modern technology, our brains contain more adrenaline and it is difficult to find ways on how we can practice mindfulness. By lessening tension and improving sleep, we can center ourselves more. Ms. Hills led participants to slouch in their seats and breathe. She asked them to take notice of their bodies, the quality of their minds. She directed them to then sit up straight, to feel their feet on the floor, their bottoms on the chair, their hips, shoulders, necks, and heads. She guided them to again notice how their bodies felt. Most felt more alert.

Ms. Hill then directed everyone to close their eyes or avert their gaze, to feel their body on the chair. In this body scan exercise, she asked them to focus on their foreheads, to be aware of their temples, ears, noses, teeth, chins, jaws, neck and feeling their feet on the floor, grounded. She asked them to feel their shoulders, triceps, elbows, wrists, fingers, and hips drop into their bodies. She told them to think about middle school or

high school, walking down the halls, sitting in the cafeteria and she asked what people were feeling. Anxiety? Excitement? Worry? She asked them to take those feelings and respond to them.

A bell sounded at that time and Mr. Trachenberg explained interruptions happen, but mindfulness brings steadiness to our lives. Chaos teaches us how to react. He continued by highlighting what happens to the brain during the body scan exercise. The different types of brain movement induce a sense of focus. Alpha or theta waves are emitted. The vibe and connection of alpha waves are the focus piece-athletes in the zone or students taking a test.

It's normal for the mind to wander. Thinking of the future or past events can create anxiety. When this occurs, Mr. Trachenberg mentioned that we should honor the thoughts, but gently refocus. This strengthens the brain and improves executive functioning by creating memory, empathy and decision-making. The act of stopping to "check-in" with our feelings and ourselves for 30 seconds severs the cord that induces stress.

Mr. Trachenberg shared the story of a high school basketball player who practiced mindfulness techniques when he felt stressed about a game. Instead of resisting the fear, he sat with it and embraced it. When he took the time to notice his feelings, he walked into the game with calm, confidence and a renewed sense of empowerment. For younger students, understanding the awareness of themselves leads to more awareness of those around them which in turn wires the brain to build empathy, compassion and kindness. By showing kindness to someone who is not nice, that person notices how it feels and will be more aware to pause and recognize in someone else next time and make the decision to be nice. Children start to own mindfulness. They learn the ability to choose how to act and are provided with the tools to self-regulate and breathe and check-in with others.

Alison Shulman of Slow Lunch stepped up next to share one additional exercise involving the way we eat food. Mindful eating focuses attention in a direct way. The body tries to send messages through thoughts and mind and we tend to miss the cues due to distractions. As caregivers and parents, we are bombarded and tugged in different directions. A bag of chips sits empty... we arrive at our destination without realizing how we got there. Slow Lunch developed a program to relax, focus and distress by strengthening the mind and body connection through workshops. The workshops provide the opportunity to talk about nutrition and hydration. What we ingest in our bodies impacts energy, sleep and focus and has a massive ripple effect. Participants learn to notice physical hunger and fullness sensations in the body and identify the signs

such as stretch in stomach, increase/decrease in energy or concentration, shakiness, gnawing pain or emptiness.

To bring full attention to eating, Ms. Shulman distributed Hershey kisses to each person in the audience and instructed them to place the wrapped kiss in the palm of their hands. She asked what did everyone notice about the wrapper? Is it shiny? Does it look like a volcano, mountain or ice cap with a flag on top? Is there any history associated with the kiss? Does it bring special memories to mind? The next steps include the following:

- Unwrap it and carefully listening to the sound of the foil
- Touch it with your fingers and feeling its texture. Is it waxy? Soft, rough, firm or smooth? Be aware.
- Smell it. What are the flavors you detect? Vanilla? Earthiness, milky, coffee?
- Notice what is happening with your mouth anticipating tasting the kiss.
- Smear a light coat of the kiss on your bottom lip. What physical sensations are going on?
- Close your eyes. Focus on the physical sensations that heighten the experience.
- Place the kiss in the middle of your mouth. Let it rest and melt. Notice the flavor, texture and the disappearing size.
- If your mind starts to wander, bring it back to the physical sensations. Notice the body's inclination to swallow, the signal from the throat that it wants to receive the chocolate, the way the body is trying to tell you that how to eat and when to stop. Does it have the desire to hurry up or to make it last longer?
- Open eyes.

Ms. Shulman explained that children love this experiment. It allows them to slow down and be mindful and she encouraged everyone to imagine incorporating part of the experience with family at dinnertime. Children today are growing up in a different world and have the ability to make changes. Going about our day, the quality of time we give to our children really matters. When there are no distractions, it feels good. Take time to slow down, find pause and be with our children and we will see big changes in the way they respond to us. Some ways to help them notice things around them include watching a crackling fire, stopping to smell the roses. By practicing mindfulness ourselves, we can then give the gift to our children.

All four speakers provided many useful resources that you can [here](#).