

3

What
Did I Think
Behind, Impression
and on!

How Often Be in
Illness with
her?

Individual
Individual
Individual!

A Deep Dive into Mindfulness

Radically defying the stereotype that they can't sit still, teens come year after year to Inward Bound Mindfulness Education programs to rest in silent retreat. It gives them a chance to find quiet in the midst of intensity, to see themselves more clearly, and to get past biases and see others for who they really are.

By Victoria Dawson

PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF IBME

It is time to say goodbye. Soon, planes and cars and vans and trains will usher them along interstates and railway tracks back to their adolescent lives—to the so-called real world of noise and notifications, social stress and parental pressure. Now, a final hour remains for farewells. The 40 teenagers and a dozen adults, ensconced in a retreat center in the rural hush of upstate New York, are arrayed on chairs, mats, and cushions in a ceremonial circle. A girl rises from the floor, leaving a small hollow between the new friends who flank her. She approaches the center of the room and bends toward the rug to claim a mallet. The collective gaze of the circle embraces the young woman.

Meditation is at the core of the teens' retreat experiences. On the previous page, a morning practice period at a New Year's retreat, January 2016, North Andover, MA.

From left to right: Gabe J, Leilah C, Armani M, Onaje E, and Drew G.

There's also time to play. At right, participants cool off after a hot morning of meditation. 2015 summer retreat, Old Chatham, NY.

From left to right, Doryn L, Timothy S, Keishantelle B, Chasidy N, Nanette M, Keenan B, Jai'Dyn L, Charlie D, and Whit W.

"I feel this community will always exist," she says quickly, her shy glance cast downward. With a small mallet, she taps the rim of a gong—a gong that has marked the many meditative beginnings and endings of the last five days. A vibrant tone mingles with sporadic snuffles and the snaps of her friends' fingers.

The community she refers to is a mere five days old, the powerful creation of a teen mindfulness retreat. Held during the summer months and throughout the country in Virginia, Colorado, California, and elsewhere, these residential retreats are the work of Inward Bound Mindfulness Education (iBME). Adolescents aged 14 to 19, some nudged by parents, some acting on their own initiative, seek the silence and structure in which to develop or to deepen their practice of mindfulness. While the program is not therapy, it often is deeply therapeutic. The hidden struggles that afflict teens—depression and self-loathing, anxiety and abuse, racial violence and doubts about gender and sexual identity—find a kind of hospitality that is the mark of mindfulness.

The teens awaken each morning at 7, in silence, and move—some reluctantly, some groggily—toward the meditation hall for a 30-minute silent sit. From there the day unfolds: breakfast in silence, community chores, free time, sitting meditation, walking meditation, small group meetings, lunch, more free time, workshops, yoga, dinner, kindness meditation, wisdom talks, more small group meetings, meditation, and lights out at 11. On the first night, the teens commit to holding to five precepts during the retreat: to protect life, to speak truthfully and kindly, to take only what is freely offered, to abstain from drugs and alcohol, and to remain celibate. →



PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF IBME



Above, teens join staff in a Primal Practice workshop that incorporates movement, sound, and play. Old Chatham, NY, summer 2015.

Clockwise, starting at 9 o'clock, Richardson L, Gabe J, Jazmin L, Danielle M (staff), Gabriel B (staff), Stephen J, Whit W, Caitie D, and Sunny C.

For the novice, the adjustment can be wrenching. The buoyant reunions of returning retreatants set off anxieties in newcomers about cliques and exclusion. Homesickness sneaks up on the uninitiated. In the span of three days, one teen, Ciara, has overcome an acute case of homesickness and found, instead, a keen appreciation for silence: “I come from a loud place. I never learned to discover the quiet side of me. I need this time.” Another teen, Richardson, recalls the shock of his first retreat: “Everything felt strange. There were a lot of white people, and just a few people of color. ‘Whoa, where am I? What’s going to happen to me?’ I thought, ‘I’ve got my phone. I’ll be all right.’ Then, whoa, I had to give them my phone? *Oh, my god.* ‘I’ve just got to get through this.’” But in that first iBme retreat and two subsequent ones, Richardson recognized a space where, he says, he could “face the feelings, emotions, and questions that were all bundled up inside.”

The demanding schedule, the mindfulness practices and precepts, and the extended periods of silence create a container that encourages reflection, curiosity, attention to the present moment, and above all an ethos of kindness:

“Everyone feels loved and comfortable,” says Torii, a veteran of the iBme retreats. “That’s not how things work in the real world. There, people will talk about you for something as simple as your hair color or because you are wearing a shirt they don’t like. You have to be put together all the time or people will give you that crazy look: ‘What’s wrong with her?’ Here, you can burst into tears at any moment and people are fine. ‘Yeah, that’s cool.’ I can totally be myself without having fronts.”

Time and time again, the teens talk about the iBme retreat as a place—the only place—where they can stop worrying about being “on top” or “cool,” where they can remove their masks and begin to figure out who they are. “The beautiful thing is that there is no room for lies,” says Keanan. “If you’re trying to lie and pass yourself as someone you’re not, we’ll figure it out quickly and you’ll stop, because it’s not helping you. Because of self-confidence issues, I’ve struggled with lying and trying to build myself up in people’s eyes. But baring your soul and having people completely accept you and applaud you for it feels good.”

PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY OF IBME

For many teens, a week of mindfulness-infused attention, curiosity, acceptance, and support from their retreat peers is life changing. It is this loving gift of space, perhaps more than the habits of formal practice, that endures. The success of the program is not measured by hours at home on a cushion, but by a transformed sense of self. “For teens, establishing that daily practice is difficult,” says Jessica Morey, iBme’s executive director. “They need ongoing support. As they get older and develop the lifestyle and discipline to practice on a regular basis, some will come back to it.” What teens carry with them, then, are the experiences of unconditional positive regard from their peers and adults, the insights about their inherent lovability, and a belief that they can work with their hearts and minds to feel more peaceful. They learn to not believe every thought that forms in their minds. “It’s like planting seeds,” Morey says. “They are in there. Even if dormant, they will bear fruit.”

One of the staff volunteers, Gabriel Baldwin, 29, attended his first retreat when he was 15 years old, returned each summer thereafter until he turned 19, and then moved into a leadership role. As a teen, he had suffered through an extended and excruciating period of bullying. Depressed, he lingered in a place that was “neutral and lonely,” eating lunch each school day in the safe company of a teacher. At his first mindfulness retreat, he was shocked: “Being cared for and listened to—receiving kindness from my peers—in many ways, it was the first time I felt included, seen, and appreciated by people my own age.” In the past decade, Baldwin has returned almost annually as a staff volunteer. He has also abandoned a career as an energy-efficiency consultant to teach mindfulness in the Boston area. “The first teen retreat was filled with the most joy I had experienced up to that point. In some ways, I’m still chasing after that.”

But no gathering of mindful teenagers—or adults, for that matter—is without its moments of resistance. One afternoon, four teens go for a long walk; two return, but an amorous pair lingers behind. Another teen excuses himself from a small group session, taking refuge in a nearby gazebo. Another chatters with a neighbor during sitting meditation. On one walking meditation, the teens leave the retreat house, single file, gingerly carrying saucers of water. It is an exercise in slowing down and being present in the moment. As they process into a nearby meadow, water sloshes onto the grass. Eventually, to the amusement of his peers, one boy perches an empty saucer atop his head. A girl giggles.

“The first teen retreat was filled with the most joy I had experienced up to that point,” one former participant says. “In some ways, I’m still chasing after that.”

Another boy stacks two saucers on his head.

“It doesn’t feel as if the teens are testing the boundaries or trying to determine how much they can get away with,” says Khalila Archer, the program director. “It’s more like ‘Are you there? Are you paying attention?’ The answer, which reverberates, is ‘Yes, we are, and we will hold this.’” The staff of four teachers and eight volunteers maintains and models a constant level of attention and curiosity, drawing from their own retreat experience and their deep practices of mindfulness to remain present—able to redirect rather than react. The usual adult exhortations of “no!” or “knock it off!” never arise.

“Our discipline is not about ‘don’t do this,’” says Rod Owens, one of the four senior teachers. “It’s about reminding young people of the example they’re setting and asking them if they are OK →

Moving meditation is also key to the retreat experience. Below, morning yoga exercises before breakfast. Summer 2015, Old Chatham, NY.



MINDFUL RECOMMENDS

What's Up with Teen Brains?

THE TEENAGE BRAIN

A Neuroscientist's Survival Guide to Raising Adolescents and Young Adults

By Frances E. Jensen with Amy Ellis Nutt
Harper • 2015

AGE OF OPPORTUNITY

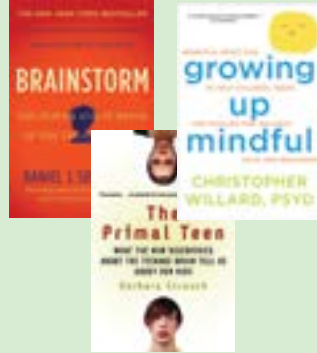
Lessons from the New Science of Adolescence

By Laurence Steinberg
Eamon Dolan/Mariner Books • 2015

THE MINDFUL TEEN

Powerful Skills to Help You Handle Stress One Moment at a Time

By Dzung X. Vo
Instant Help • 2015



BRAINSTORM

The Power and Purpose of the Teenage Brain

By Daniel J. Siegel
TarcherPerigee • 2015

THE PRIMAL TEEN

What the New Discoveries about the Teenage Brain Tell Us about Our Kids

By Barbara Strauch
Anchor • 2004

GROWING UP MINDFUL

Essential Practices to Help Children, Teens, and Families Find Balance, Calm, and Resilience

By Christopher Willard
Sounds True • 2016

with that. Are you OK with disturbing people in the hall or talking when you shouldn't? Is that OK with you? It's a way we trust young people to make their own decisions."

And the teens respond to that trust. The more experienced retreatants understand that any lapse from the five precepts is felt by all. "We come together and build a community. We are all invested in it," Richardson says. "We think

about each other; we care about every single person we see. A sexual or romantic relationship with someone? You're putting energy into a specific person, instead of into the group. That energy pushes away everyone else. We build this space for each other; we make this space safe for each other; to bring that kind of energy into it—to make it about two people—is a risk."

"The arc of the retreat is downward," Morey says. The first day or two can be bumpy, with signs of tightness and guardedness. But by mid-retreat, the emotional tenor is deep and raw: The teens are learning to be present with difficult feelings or mind states. And there is nowhere to go. "We bring them to a certain space of openness," says Morey, "which often means we are touching on things that we live our lives trying not to feel: sadness, anger, shame. There can be tears and deep sharing. They start to reveal what's going on."

Indeed, tears flow. In the evening, as the closing meditation ends, a teen begins to sob. His friends embrace him and quietly escort him from the hall. Later, on a couch in the rec room, another group of teens gathers to help a friend in crisis. An adult approaches, asking for permission to sit with them. He finds himself observing "a beautiful intervention" for a teen who urgently wants to self-harm. He hears the teens remind their friend of a loving-kindness meditation focused on benefactors—sources of love and wisdom in our lives. He listens as one teen suggests, "Maybe you can't resist for yourself, but you can resist for the benefactor you were thinking of? And if you can't think of a benefactor, then think of me." Eventually, the struggling teen asks the adult to hold the sharp objects. "If this were a typical camp situation," the staff member says, "You would tell the teens, 'You, go talk to the guidance counselor, and you, go to sleep. That would be the supportive model. But sometimes supporting the youth in their practice means letting them support each other.'"

At the heart of the retreat is the small group, in which six or seven teens meet twice daily for 75 minutes. Each group is facilitated by two adults, who check in with the teens about their practice: *How is it going? What are you using as your anchor? What's happening with your mind?* The small groups can be playful or they can be raw, full of giggles and games or full of intensity and self-revelation. But the vital function is to connect: "With adolescents what is so helpful is seeing that they are not alone and having this authentic intimacy with their peers," Morey says.

A popular small group activity is the "hot



PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF IBME

seat" exercise, during which one teen fields questions from his or her peers. "We've been cultivating our attention—with breath, body, and sound. Now, we're placing that attention onto another person, with kindness and curiosity," Archer says. The volunteer begins by offering three "if you really knew me statements." The teens then give full rein to their sometimes-blunt questions, nudging the volunteer to a degree of openness that can be stunning and cathartic. The exercise concludes with each teen offering appreciation for their friend on the "hot seat." "It's nice for people to have a curiosity about who you are," says Torii. "It makes you feel special when people are listening attentively and kindly: They look at you as if they love you."

But openness and vulnerability are not the culture of the world to which the teens must return, the so-called "real world." So, as the arc of the retreat begins its descent, the formal structure loosens, a deliberate effort to ease re-entry. "When they go back into the world, it's going to feel speedy, intense, less sensitive, and less kind: It can be jarring and difficult," says Chris Crotty, one of the retreat teachers.

So, on the last night, the schedule opens up, meditation and wisdom talks giving way to a celebration that includes a community share—songs, skits, and poetry—and a dance. When the dance ends, the teens stretch themselves out on the floor, cushioned on yoga mats and covered with blankets. With the lights dimmed, the staff serenades the youth with a lullaby of sorts and sends them back to the dorms. When the teens gather in the hall next morning, the silence and meditation have almost fully receded, like the deep exhalation of breath.

It is, truly, time to say goodbye.

A boy hoists himself up to a standing position. He moves toward the gong in the center of the circle. He takes the mallet in his hand, and says, "A year ago, I stood here and talked about how I wanted to work on finding out who I was. I talked about how I wasn't quite there yet, but that the week had started me on that journey. I've spent only a few weeks with some of you guys, but I feel closer to you than I do to anyone in my life. These weeks have done more to help me figure out who I am as a person than the other sixteen years have." ●

It's not easy to say goodbye. Above, staff and teens gather for hugs and photos at the close of a retreat, North Andover, MA, January 2016.

For some participants, the retreat is a once-in-a-lifetime experience they'll never forget. Others try to make it a yearly pilgrimage.

From left to right: Richardson L., Leilah C., Sam N., Kate J (staff), Whit W., and Gabriel V.

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Victoria Dawson is a freelance writer based in Washington, D.C. She regularly contributes to *Mindful*. Her most recent piece was a profile of rapper JusTme in the October 2016 issue.



UNDERSTANDING THE TEEN BRAIN

We need to give it the space—and the safety—to grow

Some 36 million people in the US are between 12 and 24 years of age—a vital period of development many neuroscientists call the age of the adolescent brain, or the teenage brain. We've recently seen a profusion of books (see page 68) pointing out that many of us—and our institutions—have misapprehended the teenage brain *and* the human beings carrying one around. One high school board member put it to me that “Teenagers are idiots. They need to be protected from themselves.” Idiots? Ouch!

What’s really going on, according to brain scientists, is a vitally important period of heightened receptivity (so one seeks out novel experiences), risk taking (to stretch limits), social sensitivity (to form bonds and alliances), and high plasticity (allowing for rapid skills development), to name a few. These features are

necessary for a next generation to pave new pathways for the future. But they also make teenagehood a high-wire act that carries big risks. To balance these positives and negatives, the authors of the books say, we need to give teens lots of room, while paying enough attention to helping prevent risks to physical and mental health with potential consequences that are hard to recover from. All generations benefit when a new generation is given room to grow and change the world, while being offered some protection that avoids smothering.

Drawing on the books on page 68, here we summarize a few key neuroscience findings and highlight challenges and opportunities associated with this naturally wild and crazy time of life.

—Barry Boyce, Editor-in-Chief

A TIME OF RAPID AND RADICAL BRAIN DEVELOPMENT

- The **stimulation-seeking** part of the brain, the reward system, is highly sensitized during a time of hormonal surges. Emotion is heightened. As Laurence Steinberg writes, “Nothing...will ever feel as good as it did when you were a teenager.” Or, as *bad*—when rewards prove elusive and hopes are unfulfilled.
- The self-regulatory systems develop slowly. **Risk-taking** in pursuit of rewarding feelings is likely. It’s not a lack of intellect: risks are understood, but rewards loom large.
- A **highly sensitized social brain** is deeply attuned to others’ expressions, feelings, and opinions.
- Steadily **growing capacity for reasoning and abstraction** can lead to bold creativity. It’s not a stage to “get over,” says Dan Siegel. “It’s a stage to cultivate well.”

ILLUSTRATION BY MINDFUL, WITH SOURCE FILES FROM ISTOCK.COM/EXDEZ AND ISTOCK.COM/DANIEL RODRIGUEZ QUINTANA

A TIME OF VOLATILITY AND RISK

Drinking and Drugs

1 in 5 American high-school seniors abuses alcohol at least twice a month. Illegal drug use continues to rise.

Violence

40% of high-school boys have been in a physical fight in the past year.

Pregnancy

Nearly a third of young women will get pregnant by age 20.

Suicide

8% of high school students try to commit suicide.

Crime

Adolescents commit most of the crimes in the US; nearly \$6 billion is spent every year incarcerating them.

Fatal Accidents

Nearly half of adolescent deaths are in accidents, and 6,000 are in car crashes.

WHAT CAN HELP TEENAGERS FLOURISH?

Understanding

Getting to know their brains: why they might be experiencing what they’re experiencing; knowledge is power.

Trust and Respect

So they can trust and respect in return, and gain independent decision-making power.

Room to Take Risks

To be steered away from high risks, without aggression. And given room to take moderate risks. Preaching doesn’t help.

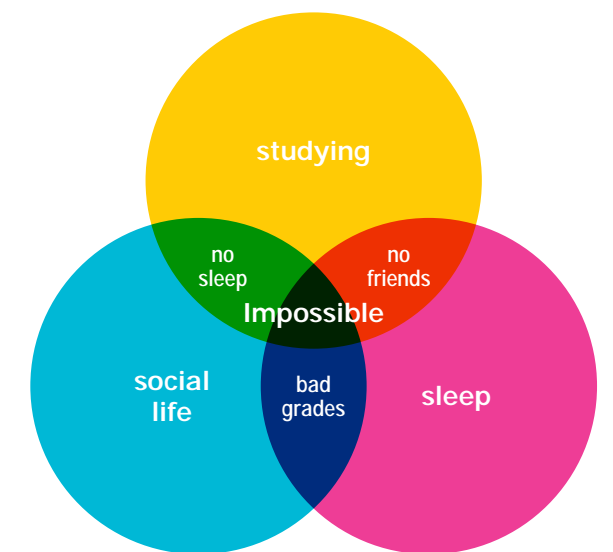
Engage Body and Mind

Chances to develop more than their cognitive skills, so they can engage their whole body and mind: mindfulness, yoga, art, music, sports...

To Be Listened to

Deeply and consistently. Teens have novel, fresh ideas that the world needs. And they will inherit the earth.

THE TEEN TIME DILEMMA



To get a copy of this graphic suitable for printing as a poster, and to see all of *Mindful's* stories in our ongoing coverage of teenage empowerment, visit [mindful.org/teenagers](https://www.mindful.org/teenagers)

More Sleep!

Because they're learning so much so rapidly, the teen body and brain get a huge workout. They need refreshment: about 9-10 hours of sleep daily. But as the diagram above illustrates, many teens are expected to pull off a juggling act that wears them out. The resulting sleep deprivation can lead to a downward spiral of poor choices and weakening resilience.

Getting Real, One Moment at a Time

Interview by Victoria Dawson

Jessica Morey, 37, is the executive director of Inward Bound Mindfulness Education (iBme), a nonprofit organization that offers in-depth mindfulness programs for teens and young adults. Morey herself annually attended mindfulness retreats as a teenager. After college and graduate school, she embarked on a career in clean energy, climate policy, and finance, remaining connected to teen retreats as a volunteer staff member. In 2011, she stepped away from her career in public policy and accepted her current position with iBme.

What draws you to work with teens? They're incredible beings. They don't have the rutted mental habits and views that adults can develop over time. There's so much potential in them for changing and shifting and redirecting. Even those teens who arrive with a tough-guy swagger or a hard defensiveness—we've seen them soften in such profound ways in a week's time. The openness of childhood and sweetness of heart are still so close to the surface in teenagers. On retreat, they become so kind and loving with one another.

The retreat setting must provide a rich glimpse into their spirit. They care about the world. They see what's wrong, and they aren't OK with it. They want to do something about social justice, climate change, animal rights, and other global issues. They have an un-jaded activist spirit. With this generation in particular, what's so cool is that they couldn't care less about our issues around gender, sexuality, and race. What's

the problem, people? It's particularly striking around sexual orientation and gender. The youth we work with are like, "OK! Cool!" They don't want to be defined in binaries. Everyone seems open and not shocked: There are a million options to choose from. Why can't people choose who they are and whom they want to love? I feel incredibly hopeful for the future, for these reasons.

How does iBme negotiate the issues that afflict so many teens?

This is a tough subject for us. Mindfulness has become more popular and mainstream, in part because of research on the therapeutic benefits for depression, anxiety, and addiction. Parents are discovering us through a therapist or a counselor, wanting to send teens to us so that we will fix them or solve their problems. That's not what we are doing.

The retreat involves long periods of silence. The teens have to be motivated and have a certain degree of stability to manage that. We have teens who deal with normal stresses, like grades and sports, but we also see depression, cutting, and anxiety, and they all find the practice hugely beneficial. They see their own essential goodness and lovability reflected back to them.

So, why a retreat?

If you just start sitting daily for 15 or 20 minutes, you don't get that taste of peace and insight that you can have on a retreat. Nothing is happening. It doesn't work for me. So you give up. Most people on a weeklong retreat will have some experience of peace or have insights into their own minds and hearts that can motivate them to keep practicing.

You also live with teens, correct?

My husband is the director of the mindfulness program at a boarding school in Concord, Mass. He created the program, beginning as a volunteer and then becoming more and more embedded. This year the school offered him a fulltime position, and we live in an apartment in a boys' dorm.

What is your daily routine?

Lately I've been doing a lot of heart practices, cultivating loving-kindness and compassion. I practice first thing in the morning, for about an hour. If I really don't want to get up and practice, I'll start by lying down, and after about 10 minutes I'll come up to seated position. It's a great way to convince myself to practice—one of the tricks that I share with my students.

Has working with adolescents changed your own practice?

I had always struggled with the daily practice, but when I started staffing teen retreats, I got super serious about my practice. Teenagers have the best bullshit meters—I love that about them!—so you have to teach only what you know. You have to be authentic. I thought, "Oh man, I've got to get real, to get more serious and intense about my practice and study, so that I can say, in a way that is potentially faith inducing, 'Yes, this is a truly beneficial way to spend your time, and these are the results.'"

What results do you observe?

For me the big shift has been around being OK with myself. It's a much friendlier internal environment—more loving, kind, accepting, forgiving, spacious, not judgmental or harsh with my own thoughts, experience, and behavior. ●

PHOTOGRAPH BY MICHAEL PIAZZA