

New study shows benefits of mindfulness for middle-school teachers

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Mindfulness training can reduce symptoms of anxiety and depression in middle-school teachers while boosting their self-compassion and classroom management skills, according to a new study by researchers at Penn State and Portland State University.

"Middle-school teachers have a unique window of opportunity to affect their students' life paths and trajectories in a profound way. At the same time, they face unique challenges because their students are changing so rapidly," explains Robert Roeser, Bennett Pierce Professor of Caring and compassion and lead author of a new paper on the study published in the *Journal of Educational Psychology*. "Early adolescents need supportive non-parental adults, and they want to have a little more input into decisions that affect their lives."

During the study, middle-school teachers from across the Portland Public School district participated in a three-month training program held in a local school called "Mindfulness-Based Emotional Balance for Teachers," where they practiced mindfulness and compassion meditation practices and learned skills related to focused attention, emotion regulation, and compassion and forgiveness for self and others.

In follow-up surveys, teachers reported learning these skills, as well as feeling less job-related stress, fewer feelings of anxiety, less emotional exhaustion and fewer symptoms of depression as compared with teachers in the control group. The program also improved how teachers managed the classroom they perceived to be their "most stressful" at the beginning of the following school year.

"It's somewhat surprising that there were changes in classroom management because this program doesn't actually ask the teachers to make any changes in their classrooms," Roeser notes. "We found that the teachers who participated in the program tended to be more proactive in managing student behavior and supporting students' autonomy. We also found that the newer teachers seemed to benefit more in this regard. This makes sense because one of the primary jobs of a newer [teacher](#) is to learn how to manage the learning environment.

The program gave teachers the experience of learning in warm and

supportive [classroom](#) that focused on building their sense of autonomy, well-being and calm. Roeser hypothesizes that they incorporated some of these elements into their own classrooms.

Caring for the caregivers

"In every study we've done, teachers reported feeling isolated, especially in the U.S.," says Roeser. As a result, prominent researchers including Roeser and Mark Greenberg, founding director of the Edna Bennett Pierce Prevention Research Center, are turning their focus on whole-school change and how to create caring communities of learning in schools for teachers and students.

Just as it's said that teachers create the "weather" for child development, Roeser said, school principals and leaders create the "organizational weather" for teacher well-being and success.

"It's critical for those who care for others to have the experience of being cared for," Roeser concludes. "And practicing mindfulness and [self-compassion](#) can help caregivers to be better at their trades, whether it's forming young minds or nursing the sick back to health."

More information: Robert W. Roeser et al, Mindfulness training improves middle school teachers' occupational health, well-being, and interactions with students in their most stressful classrooms., *Journal of Educational Psychology* (2021). [DOI: 10.1037/edu0000675](https://doi.org/10.1037/edu0000675)

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