

## Chapter 7

# An Integral Analysis of Mindfulness and Self-Compassion Among Adolescents

**Bernita Wienhold-Leahy**  
Thompson Rivers University, Canada

### ABSTRACT

*This case study focused on teaching self-compassion to adolescents through a mindfulness program. Self-compassion involves being kind towards oneself, understanding that we are all part of common humanity, and mindfulness. This multi-methods study was grounded in integral theory, which examines self-compassion through multiple lenses with both qualitative and quantitative methodologies. The findings indicated that a mindfulness program teaching self-compassion had many benefits to students, including increased mindful awareness and focused attention; emotional awareness and regulation; self-awareness, self-kindness, and self-acceptance; resiliency and growth mindset; compassion, acceptance, and forgiveness for others; and a belief it could reduce bullying in schools. Mindfulness programs in the school context will need to be introduced slowly over the next several years as students, parents, teachers, and administrators all have to understand the importance of these skills before they can be implemented into the classroom.*

### INTRODUCTION

Social and emotional difficulties often manifest early in students' lives, and these difficulties can have a direct effect on their academic, emotional, and social wellbeing (O'Connell, Boat, & Warner, 2009). In fact, half of the lifetime cases of psychiatric disorders are evident by the age of 14, and three-fourths by age 25 (Kessler, Berglund, Demler, Jin, & Merikangas, 2005). These problems can persist into adulthood and create psychological burdens for the individuals and economic burdens for society.

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Prevention of social and emotional difficulties can benefit both the individual and society; subsequently, educating for building resiliency may prevent or lower these emotional difficulties. Given the statistics noted above, it would seem logical that by building resilience during adolescence, the rates of mental health issues may be reduced. Recent research has found that self-compassion helps build resiliency and increases psychological wellbeing (Neff, Kirkpatrick, & Rude, 2007). In fact, a meta-analysis of fourteen studies on self-compassion has shown that an increase in self-compassion lowers levels of mental health symptoms (Macbeth & Gumley, 2012).

Teaching self-compassion, if built within the regular school curriculum, could become a critical method of instilling resilience and wellbeing in adolescents. Mindfulness can help adolescents reduce emotional distress, promote emotional balance, improve attention, and contribute to motivated learning (Broderick, 2013). This case study combined multiple developmental perspectives to study self-compassion in a high school context. This study could inform school districts to include mindfulness programs into the regular school curriculum.

## **Context**

The British Columbia (BC) curriculum is currently undergoing a change, and the teaching of social and emotional learning, which includes increasing emotional regulation, attention, and stress management skills, has been included in cross-curricular competencies and also within subject-specific curricula (BCEd, 2014a). The “big ideas” in the new physical and health education curriculum are building an awareness of how the body works so that students are more knowledgeable about how to increase physical, mental, and emotional wellbeing. The goal is to teach students to take responsibility for their actions, be self-regulating, make ethical decisions, accept consequences, empathize with others, recognize and appreciate diversity, defend human rights, and contribute in social, cultural, and ecological causes. Intervention strategies that connect the teaching of self-compassion to these cross-curricular competencies and “big ideas” in subject-specific curriculum can be powerful ways to increase wellbeing and resiliency in adolescents.

## **Purpose**

The purpose of this case study was to assess the impact of a mindfulness program on self-compassion with adolescents in one school in British Columbia. Self-compassion involves three main elements: self-kindness (being kind to oneself rather than self-critical), common humanity (seeing oneself within a larger society), and mindfulness (being aware of one’s thoughts and feelings in the present moment and not allowing them to overwhelm) (Neff, 2003a). Self-compassion also enhances compassion for others by recognizing connectedness with others and by promoting prosocial behaviours, and it is an important aspect of emotional intelligence by monitoring one’s emotions to guide thinking and behaviour to help cope with stress.

In mindfulness practice, one learns to pay attention and focus the mind on the present moment non-judgementally and with acceptance (Kabat-Zinn, 2003). A core part of mindfulness programs is to be aware of and regulate thoughts and emotions and build an awareness and understanding of oneself with compassion for oneself and others. This awareness has resulted in students having more emotional self-control, displaying an increase in prosocial behaviours, and displaying a decrease in problem behaviours (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011).

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