

Finding Sustainability, Joy, and Connection in Teaching Through Mindfulness and Self-Compassion

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Documenting my learning journey and what it's meant for my teaching practice.

The first years and expectations: A recipe for burnout

Throughout my first years of teaching, I found myself on a roller coaster of exhaustion, enthusiasm, self-doubt, and burnout. I went from finishing my teacher preparation program on a Friday to starting a full time high school biology position the next Monday, with 150 students in my classes by Wednesday. I remember going to a movie at 7:00 p.m. with my husband at the end of my first week of teaching, only to fall asleep 10 minutes in and sleeping through the entire thing.

This form of immediate exhaustion became a norm, but something I was good at working through. I attempted to get ahead by using my Sundays to map out the week to come and construct curriculum and reproducibles. Realistically, this got me only through the first couple days, and I would have to put in time in the evenings to plan for the week. On top of that I was grading, writing letters of recommendation, prepping for labs, and more. At the same time, I was getting to know my students, working on developing my own identity as a teacher in a new school, and participating in California's Beginning Teacher Support & Assessment Program (BTSA). That first year was about survival. I was working 60–90 hour work weeks and constantly felt like I needed to be doing more professional learning and bettering my classroom instruction.

I went from physical exhaustion and survival in my first year to head games during my second year, spiraling back and forth between burnout and booms of motivation around a new lesson/curriculum/technique/process only to come to the same conclusion over and over again: "this isn't working the way I want it to." As a result, I felt a strong need to balance personal self-care and the high expectations that I had for myself as a teacher. I also noticed in myself a need to understand how my teacher identity influenced these expectations and how to sustainability work with that. All of these experiences allowed me to seek out a mentor and start a journey into mindfulness and self-compassion practices that have greatly sustained me in my teaching practice.



I've been able to shift my own inner self-critic and feel more connected and joyful in my work as a result of practicing mindfulness and self-compassion."

I came into the teaching profession with a desire to ignite student curiosity. Having spent seven years doing outdoor education, my mantra for teaching was based off of a Rachel Carson quote: "If a child is to keep alive his inborn sense of wonder, he needs the companionship of at least one adult who can share it, rediscovering with him the joy, excitement and mystery of the world we live in" (1998, p. 55). My teacher preparation program, which left me prepared but also holding extremely high expectations about how to be a teacher, was another strong influence. During my program, I built a strong pedagogical foundation and learned to be continuously reflective on my teaching practice and student learning. I wanted all my students to be engaged in each lesson, feel safe and supported, challenged in my class, and show wonder and curiosity about science. I wanted lessons that were long, project-based, meaningful to students, integrated into local community/natural history, and impactful. These visions strongly shaped my teacher identity and, therefore, my motivations and expectations as a high school science teacher. I expected I could magically accomplish this in my first years of teaching.

My journey using mindfulness and self-compassion tools began as a way to support myself in continuing to feel joy from my profession. After five years, teaching is still incredibly challenging, so please keep in mind that my journey with mindfulness and self-compassion is not a panacea that makes teaching miraculously amazing and easy. It is also not the only path. However, I've been able to shift my own inner self-critic and feel more connected and joyful with my students and their learning as a result of using these tools.

I share my journey with you in the hopes that you will glean something helpful from it or feel a sense of calm and connection for yourself. And, to all my teacher readers, I hope this story provides a space of reflection about your own self-care and maybe even shifts you into a place of hope.

Shifting expectations and the inner self-critic using mindfulness

At the end of my first semester of teaching, I was at a district training and reached out to one of my mentor teachers from my student teaching with my

feelings of burnout. He recommended a Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) course at University of California, San Diego, based on the work and research of Jon Kabat-Zinn, professor emeritus at the University of Massachusetts Medical School (see the list of resources at the end of this article for more information). I went home that night and read about it. It sounded perfect!

During the eight-week course, I was introduced to many tools, including formal meditation, where I would sit or lie down and notice where I was holding tension by systematically scanning the parts of my body. I also listened to an audio track or sat in silence just noticing what was going through my mind and clearing it out for 15–30 minutes a day. Other tools in the class included informal mindfulness, such as bringing mindful attention when eating, driving, washing dishes, and other daily tasks. I journaled and documented my habits, such as how I responded to unpleasant or pleasant moments. The course was a large time commitment in the midst of my first year of teaching, but I felt committed to learning how to make teaching sustainable for myself and found ways to make time for the weekly sessions and daily meditations.

The type of mindfulness I was learning to practice comes from Jon Kabat-Zinn's definition: "awareness that arises through paying attention, on purpose, in the present moment, non-judgmentally" (Kabat-Zinn, 2013, p. 136). Mindfulness is a type of engaged commitment. For me, this manifested into an intentional practice of pausing and bringing non-judgemental awareness to specific moments in my life, especially with regards to my teaching expectations. For example, when I start to notice myself going down the road of "I'm not doing enough" or "I am not doing ___ well," I have learned to let the thoughts pass through or to simply change my language to "I am doing as much as I can right now" and "I am learning how to do ___ better." I try to take

on a mindset of not judging, striving, or solving, but shifting. This has come about through practice with formal mediation, yoga, and informal mindful attention throughout my daily tasks. I have also found that over time, I have had to make a recommitment to my personal vision for myself, not just my vision for myself



professionally. This has been especially important during moments of low motivation with career, life, or my commitment to mindfulness practice (which happens too).

Research shows that when we practice this type of intentional mindfulness, our brain actually changes. Ricard, Lutz, and Davidson (2014) summarized the findings of recent studies of the effects of this type of intentional mindfulness on our brains, noting increased grey matter/cortical thickness in the anterior cingulate cortex (behind the brain's frontal lobe), the prefrontal cortex, and hippocampus. These areas of the brain are associated with self-regulation, attention, cognitive flexibility, executive functioning, emotion regulation, problem solving, and learning/memory. Additional studies have shown that mindfulness practice can reduce the size of the amygdala, the area of our brain responsible for the "fight or flight" response and where fear and anxiousness originate. Mindfulness practice has also been connected to decreased activation of our Default Mode Networks, allowing us to develop neural pathway patterns where we don't fixate as readily on events over time.

The bottom line is that your brain is evolutionarily built to hold information, update awareness, and seek stimulation and is continually juggling these three parts of your attention. Rick Hanson, a neuroscientist, writes that each of us balances these three aspects of attention (i.e., holding, updating, and seeking) differently, depending on our temperaments, life experiences, and cultures (2009). A table in Hanson's book (2009, p. 181) shows how someone can be working in hyperdrive or at low levels across these three aspects of attention. When I am feeling burned out by teaching, I find that I am in hyperdrive and/or lowdrive, which puts me into behaviors associated with the "high" and/or "low" aspects of attention. The result for me is over-fixating on events, feeling sensory overload, being easily distracted, and sometimes feeling stuck, apathetic, and/or lethargic. I have noticed that since starting to practice mindfulness, I am able to rebuild my brain's patterns (i.e., neural pathways) to shift myself more easily into the moderate zone for all three types of attention, whereby I have better focus/concentration, higher mental flexibility, adaptability, and enthusiasm. I believe that this has made me become a more present teacher much of the time and limits the time my mind is in hyperdrive and/or low drive.

I learned much in the MBSR course, but the material was dense and felt stressful at times. I was still overwhelmed with teaching and expected to see results sooner. I was not immediately doing all the practices, and teaching did not magically become less overwhelming. Again, my expectations for my rate of

personal learning were high and created conflict for me.

However, little things shifted in me. I started to learn how to read the signs of my burnout, stress, and anxiety with teaching. I also felt a higher frequency of empowerment; I felt I was able to attain the tools to support myself through the complex challenges of teaching. Additionally, learning some of the science behind mindfulness was motivating for me because it meant that practicing mindfulness was having a direct impact on the way that my mind handled input and how I physiologically responded, even if I couldn't see it shifting all at once.

Because they addressed my feelings of burnout, these elements of the course were enough to hook me to continuing my mindfulness journey, and I incorporated them into my school day in small ways. For example, I started taking my lunch breaks more seriously and practicing mindful eating. This was different from before, where I would book myself with students at lunch or do some last minute running around the school and sometimes not even remember to eat.

In addition, I built in a five-minute self-check right before my students came into first period and sometimes at the end of the day. These moments helped me center and relax myself for a new day with students or decompress from a rough day in order to let some negativity drift away. I also found ways to infuse mindfulness into my lessons when teaching about the circulatory and nervous systems by having students participate in a breathing exercise, measure their heart rate before and after, and then compare this to other activities. During these lessons, I taught about some of the brain science around mindfulness. Looking back, these small steps were essential for me to start integrating mindfulness into my school routine, but I still wanted to do more.

In my second year of teaching, I felt like I had a good sense of the school community, and my mind was less consumed by questions like "What am I going to teach tomorrow?" or "Who can I ask for help on ...?" or "What is my school's process for ...?" As a result, I found more opportunities for connecting with students and colleagues. These sorts of connections allowed me to have more patience because they gave me a broader perspective on the growth of a teacher and students over time.

The only problem was I still found myself struggling with some of the same student learning challenges that I had experienced the year before. Wasn't I supposed to be a pro now and have it all figured out? I still had some students who were disengaged in lessons, occasionally disrespectful, failing my class, or whose trust I was

not able to gain. I found myself internalizing this, and my old negative self-talk and self-doubt about my competencies as a teacher started to creep in at higher frequency. This translated into me putting in more hours and not taking time to exercise, eat well, or practice the mindfulness that I had learned in my MBSR course. I began to spiral in a way similar to my first year. Even though I had the tools of mindfulness, I found the habits unmanageable. Mindfulness became another thing I had to do but didn't have time for.

Over my winter break, I referred back to a book that I had read over the summer called *Teach, Breathe, Learn: Mindfulness In and Out of The Classroom* by Meena Srinivasan. The book had inspired me to start thinking about how I might share my learning with my students, but at the time I thought, "I have to get this down for myself first before I share." I had also developed a desire to explore self-compassion for myself in concurrence with mindfulness.

Looking back at the book made me realize that both of these goals were about the intention of connecting with my students and with myself in a compassionate way. I also realized that, just like with teaching, I had to develop community around using mindfulness and self-compassion if I wanted to make them part of my daily life. This encouraged me to sign up for a Mindful Self-Compassion (MSC) course and a local conference, *Bridging the Hearts & Minds of Youth*. I also intended to share the work I was doing with my students and open up to them about these struggles.

During the eight-week MSC course, I was introduced to Kristin Neff and Christopher Germer's work on self-compassion (see resource list). They defined self-compassion for us as our ability to relate to our own suffering in a kind, caring manner. Neff specifically breaks this down into three parts: mindfulness, common humanity, and self-kindness. Her research argues that striving for higher self-esteem, a common strategy for self-help, is flawed because it requires someone to constantly be thinking about themselves as above average (which of course is impossible) in order to feel good. Striving to be above average can also close someone down to recognizing the importance of a community of people that bring different strengths and struggles to the table, fueling narcissism, bullying, prejudice, ego-defensive anger, and social comparison. Self-compassion, on the other hand, is linked to developing skills in altruism, empathy, intrinsic motivation, increased resilience and coping, and personal accountability (Neff, 2011).

The MSC course for me felt less formal than the first course and more about increasing the frequency

of incorporating mindfulness and self-compassion informally into my daily life and teaching practice. During this course, I did a combination of journaling activities, creating personal affirmations, and practicing skills of giving and receiving compassion to self and others. I also continued my practice of formal mindfulness exercises. These elements felt like the missing links and just what I needed to help shift my expectations of myself more, without just limiting myself to formal mindfulness.

One of the MSC sessions that hit home for me was about transforming relationships with self and others. We explored the impact of mirror neurons and the role of empathy fatigue (Winerman, 2005) to think about transforming relationships. Mirror neurons have been found in primates and some birds, and they respond to the actions of others, or "mirror" them. For example, when you yawn, someone else does. This "contagion" is a function of mirror neurons at work. Evolutionarily, these neurons are an adaptation that enhances cooperation and helps groups stay connected. A good example of this might be how you emotionally respond when you see a little kid fall off their bike or when you learn someone has lost a loved one (Winerman, 2004).

In teaching, responding this way can become a problem because we care about our students and their well-being. When you have a student that came to school without eating, how do you respond? When you have a student whose parent is in jail? What about a student who comes to you describing abuse received or witnessed? The list goes on and on.

The concept of empathy fatigue, coined by Mattieau Ricard (2013a; 2013b), takes into account the biological workings of mirror neurons that respond to external stimuli and recognizes that when one is in a position of caregiving (e.g., teacher, nurse, counselor, doctor, etc.), it is common to feel a sense of fatigue because of the suffering you are witnessing and therefore experiencing. In fact, when these events repeat over time, this empathic resonance can lead to distress, exhaustion, or burnout (Ricard, 2013a; 2013b). These ideas transformed my own thinking and set the stage for a movement towards more internalized self-compassion in my relationships with myself, students, and others.

The session described above, in addition to the entire MSC course, started me thinking more about ways that I could use self-compassion as a tool in moments of emotional distress to be present without taking on the emotional drain, especially if the biological response of my mirror neurons was naturally trained to do this. As a result, I found greater balance for myself between my school and personal life. I found myself using strategies

such as loving-kindness mantras at school and at home, as well as gratitude journaling at home. This allowed me to be kinder to myself and step away from internalizing events that happened with students. It also allowed me to begin to notice the high frequency of great things that happen at school among the frustrating events. Most importantly, these practices allowed me to gain perspective that helped me to realize I wasn't always the cause or center of the frustrating events.

During or after a tough or fast-paced class, I would take one or two minutes to scan my body with compassionate phrases noticing where I was holding tension and let it go. I would also take self-compassion breaks, often including a two-minute series of positive affirmations to myself, recognition of a tough event, and breathwork. On most days, I would also make time at school to get out and take a walk or stroll away from people. If you want to learn more about this, I strongly recommend reading *Self-Compassion: The Proven Power of Being Kind To Yourself* by Kristin Neff. Each of these strategies were small, but they added up to big shifts in my approach to my students and my place in the classroom.

Using mindfulness and self-compassion to connect with students

In my first two years of teaching, I used my learnings of mindfulness and self-compassion to care for myself and to create a larger sense of personal sustainability around teaching. I had noticed a shift in my mind and recognized strong connections between mindfulness and self-compassion and a developing growth mindset in myself. I started to think about how teaching the skills I'd learned to my students might support me in connecting with my students—and support my students in connecting with themselves and their learning in turn. I made it a goal in my third year of teaching to start doing mindfulness and self-compassion practices with my students.

My third year of teaching brought another new class and added responsibilities, as well as some minor health issues and major life changes on the horizon. I had intended to do mindfulness and self-compassion with all my classes in the same way, but this was not realistic.

Therefore, I focused on doing it with two of my classes, while also starting an after school club that met for two hours weekly over the course of the year. This way, I would be able to practice using it as a classroom tool, but also go deeper into the practice through the club with students who were motivated to take mindfulness and self-compassion practices further. In order to prep myself, I did a series of trainings.

First, I completed an online Mindful Schools Curriculum Training (see resource list). From this training, I learned how to facilitate 18 quick mindfulness and self-compassion lessons in my science classes. I started with the intention of doing one lesson per week, but realistically it happened once every two weeks or once a month, with some repetition of a lesson or other practices based on student needs. The immediate response from most of my classes was, "Why are we doing this in a science class?" and some students were uncomfortable the first time. It took most of my students about two sessions to buy in to the ideas, but there were still one to three students in each class that I am not sure ever fully accepted them.

As I built a routine of practicing mindfulness and self-compassion with my students, the atmosphere of my classroom changed tremendously to become an environment where the emotional well-being of both my students and myself was valued. For example,

after one month of doing the lessons and practices in my science classes, I started to have students request that we take time as a class to do some mindfulness or self-compassion. I also had students that would self-regulate and request to go to another part of the room or step outside to do one of the practices. Additionally, I noticed that my classroom became a safe place for discussing social and emotional needs, both for students and myself. In the past, I felt like there wasn't room for this, even for myself. As a result of these shifts in my classroom culture, I felt more connected to students.

It wasn't always rosy, and there were times I felt like I didn't have time to stop and do this mindfulness and self-compassion stuff—I had to retrain my thinking to "if I invest in this mindfulness, self-compassion stuff there will be better space for the learning that is going to happen today." I also had to realign my expectation



of wanting these practices to be an everyday or weekly thing, at least for my first run at it, and focus on an attainable frequency.

One of the coolest things that came out of taking the time to share these practices in my classroom were shifts around group work and the types of language students used about their own learning process. Of course, this wasn't the case for all my students, but there were many students that started to take on leadership roles when working in groups and used mindful or compassionate phrases to pull group members into a group learning process or during personal reflections. Some students also took more risks to give and receive feedback from their peers using non-judgemental language. This was incredible to see my efforts surface in areas that I had not predicted and solidified my commitment to keep incorporating and teaching these practices to my students.

Meanwhile, my mindfulness/self-compassion/yoga club was meeting once weekly for two hours at a time. We focused on mindfulness/self-compassion skills the first semester and then emphasized yoga during the second semester. We were a small group, between two and 10 people, depending on the week. Sometimes, teachers or spouses of teachers would come. I had written a grant to get towels and yoga mats so that the experience could be more formal. For this club, I used a fusion of lessons from Patricia C. Broderick's *Learning to Breathe: A Mindfulness Curriculum for Adolescents to Cultivate Emotion Regulation, Attention, and Performance* (see resource list) with other resources I'd accumulated. I had also completed a yoga teacher training course to help with facilitating yoga in my club and incorporating more mindful movement into my classroom curriculum and used ideas from that experience.

Some profound learning came out of these meetings for myself and my students. I realized that many of my students didn't have skills to self-reflect, making this a very uncomfortable and new process for them. Additionally, the practices we did together revealed that my students were carrying with them a depth of stress, anxiety, worry, and tiredness that was illuminating for me. Because of this, I felt invigorated to keep teaching them mindfulness and self-compassion tools to help them bring awareness and support for themselves in the midst of these strong emotions. This process resulted in a deeper connection with my students because I began to feel like I was connecting to them in a way that I couldn't in my biology classroom and was able to see them as whole people. For me, the club experiences outside the classroom brought great insight and compassion for my students inside the classroom, and I brought higher attunement to supporting students' social and emotional



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needs in both spaces. With this recognition, I also noticed a greater self-compassion for myself and my teaching practice.

Moving Forward

I would like to leave you with a quote from Brené Brown (2010, p. 1) that embodies where I find myself in my teaching practice after all this learning:

*Wholehearted living is about engaging in our lives from a place of worthiness. It means cultivating the courage, compassion, and connection to wake up in the morning and think, *No matter what gets done and how much is left undone, I am enough.* It's going to bed at night thinking, *Yes, I am imperfect and vulnerable and sometimes afraid, but that doesn't change the truth that I am also brave and worthy of love and belonging.**

I am now halfway through my fifth year of teaching. Looking back on my journey, I realize that learning about mindfulness and self-compassion practices is one of the major reasons that I am still a teacher today. These practices helped me to shift my own expectations and to change the voice of my inner self-critic, allowing me to step into the type of teacher I wanted to be with joy and patience in my own learning.

I also realize that my expectations can help drive me towards a goal, but were acting as hindrances to engaging in teaching in a way that was sustainable and meaningful to me. Taking the time to learn skills in mindfulness and self-compassion allowed me to be kind with myself around these expectations.

Mindfulness and self-compassion practices also helped

me transform my classroom into an emotionally safe place for myself and my students, and increase my overall feelings of connectedness with the work we do. Sharing these practices with my students influenced their behavior when they engaged in group work in my classroom, motivating me to keep teaching these practices to my students so they could build higher autonomy and capacity in learning with others.

I now feel like a stronger, more resilient, more playful and loving teacher who prioritizes relationships with my students before academics. Teaching is still a challenging and exhausting endeavor, but it is one that I feel good at and that I am meant to do.



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Resources for teachers exploring mindfulness and self-compassion

Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) course

at University of California, San Diego

health.ucsd.edu/specialties/mindfulness/programs/mbsr/Pages/default.aspx

Mindful Self-Compassion course through the Center for Mindful Self-Compassion

centerformsc.org

The space between self-esteem and self compassion:

Kristin Neff speaks at TEDxCentennialParkWomen

www.youtube.com/watch?v=lvTZBUSplr4

Bridging the hearts and minds of youth: A yearly conference of educators, healthcare providers, psychotherapists, researchers and administrators of programs providing care and education to youth

bridgingconference.org

Mindful Schools: Curriculum training for educators

www.mindfulschools.org/training/mindful-educator-essentials

Learning to Breathe: A mindfulness curriculum for adolescents

learning2breathe.org/about/introduction

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