

PTS 😊

The PTS Guide to...
Mindfulness in the Classroom

Introduction

Welcome to the PTS Guide to Mindfulness in the Classroom.

Mindfulness is increasingly being used in UK schools. It has a wide variety of benefits which we will explore in this guide. They include improved learning retention, better ability to deal with high-stress situations (such as SATs tests) and increased attention in lessons.

We hope that you find this guide useful.

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Part 1

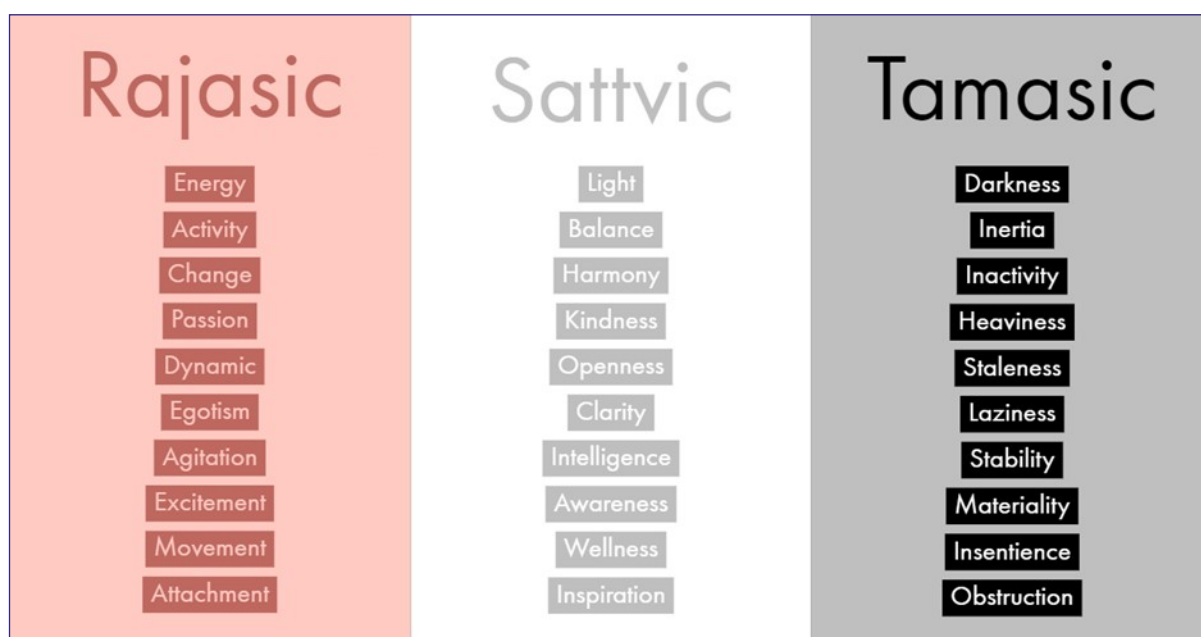
Energy, Emotion and Activity: Creating an Optimal Learning Environment

Classroom energy levels can vary greatly depending on time of day, subject, activity, school events and even the teacher's mood. But energy levels are incredibly important for retaining information. So, how can mindfulness help you to create the right kind of energy in your classroom?

The yoga-lovers among you may be aware of the three Gunas. A key concept in many Hindu philosophies, Gunas are the three stands or qualities that make us who we are. They are:

- Rajas – Passion, action and confusion
- Sattva – Goodness, construction and harmony
- Tamas – Darkness, destruction and chaos

The philosophy says that all three Gunas are present in everyone, in differing proportions. The interplay of the Gunas defines our character and our behaviour.



But what has this got to do with classroom energy?

The three gunas can also be seen in different levels of energy; rajasic, sattvic and tamasic. Whilst rajasic and tamasic energies have their place, to maximise learning retention, sattvic energy is what we need to aim for.

The Three Energy Levels

Rajasic

Whilst rajasic energy is high-energy, i.e. when we feel excited and fired-up, it is hard to control our minds in this state. Rajasic energy can also be frantic or angry. It can make us feel like our mind is all over the place, jumping from one idea to another, with little consideration or thought-process behind it. Imagine an excitable puppy running around causing chaos – this is your mind when you are running on rajasic energy.

Tamasic

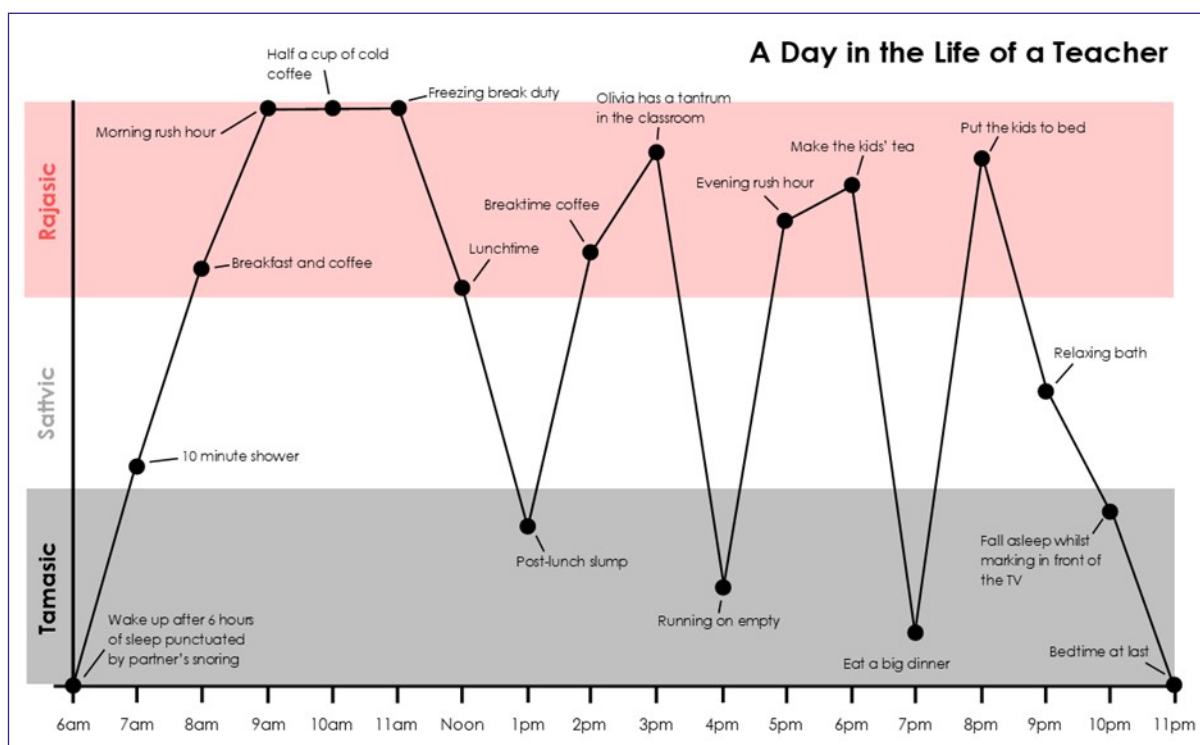
Feeling sluggish, anxious and withdrawn? No doubt you are in a tamasic mind-set. Whilst we can feel content in a tamasic state, for example, after a satisfying meal or when we're cozy in bed, it can also make us feel slow and lazy. Do you have pupils who are often 'away with the fairies'? Chances are they are in a tamasic energy state. This is your puppy mind in sleepy whining mode.

Sattvic

In between the rajasic and tamasic energy levels, is sattvic energy. This is when we feel calm, mindful and 'in the moment'. This is the best energy state to learn in as our concentration and retention levels are at their highest. To have a productive classroom this is the energy level to aim for. In this state, your puppy mind is well-trained, observant and under control.

Modern life often influences us to be in a rajasic state. In the graph below we can see that a typical teacher's day can be mostly spent at a rajasic or tamasic energy level, with only the small amount of time taken for yourself at a sattvic energy level. But if we are consistently in a rajasic energy state in the classroom, how can we expect pupils to be in a sattvic one?

By becoming more mindful, and adding mindfulness to our daily routine, we can become more sattvic ourselves, which will in turn influence our pupils too.



Classroom Energy Levels

Getting from a tamasic to a sattvic energy level is difficult, it's much easier to get to sattvic level from rajasic. So, to avoid a slump after lunch, why not try a five-minute high-energy activity followed by a five-minute mindfulness exercise. This should help the majority of pupils be in a great state of mind for afternoon lessons.

Struggling to get to a sattvic energy level yourself? Try these great tips for adding a mindful energy boost to your day from [Huffington Post](https://www.huffpost.com):

1. Meditate When You Wake Up

Meditation - staying present with emotions, thoughts, and body sensations without passing judgment or reacting - is a way to increase energy and reduce stress. There have been countless studies at the UCLA Mindfulness Centre about the value of meditation to health and wellness.

2. Drink Green Drinks

A green drink can boost your energy 10 times more than caffeine. They also contain minerals which are vital to health and survival.

3. Stretch

Stretching reduces stress and clears your mind. Do some stretching with your pupils in the classroom for a quick energy boost during the day. When you're stuck in an afternoon slump or waking up, try an invigorating Sun Salutation, it could be exactly what your body needs to fight fatigue.

4. Take a Break from Electronics

Humans are connected on an electronic grid that pretty much controls the way we think, feel and respond. Step away from electronics at night and take quiet time to embrace your inner life and surroundings. Enjoy nature, speak face to face with a friend, and don't look at your phone when dining or conversing. In 2015, a Swedish study found that young people who used technology heavily had a pronounced risk for mental health problems like depression, stress, and sleep disorders.

Becoming more conscious of classroom energy levels and trying to maintain a sattvic level is a great way to start adding mindfulness to the school day. In part two of our mindfulness series, out next week, we'll be looking more closely at ways to integrate mindfulness into your classroom on a deeper level, and at some of the statistics that show that mindfulness can aid learning and improve behaviour.

Part 2

Introducing Mindfulness in Your Classroom

In part two of our brand-new blog series on mindfulness, we take a look at introducing mindfulness into your classroom. Firstly, we'll take a look at the basics of mindfulness and why it works well in the classroom, before we move on to how to make paying attention a positive, how to set your mindfulness ground rules and your first full mindfulness activity for your pupils.

What is Mindfulness?

'Mindfulness is the basic human ability to be fully present, aware of where we are and what we're doing, and not overly reactive or overwhelmed by what's going on around us.'

www.mindful.org

Sounds simple, right? But how much time do we spend reflecting on the past or worrying about the future? It's no different for children. Whilst their worries may seem insignificant to grown-ups, when you're young, problems often seem overwhelming. Bring playground politics and bullying into the mix and it's no wonder that some pupils struggle to concentrate in the classroom. In addition, up to one in ten children suffer from diagnosable mental health problems, on average that's three pupils per classroom.

So, using mindfulness in the classroom can be a useful tool to help pupils to focus. In its simplest form, mindfulness is:

- Paying attention
- On purpose
- In the present moment
- Without judgement

A simple way of thinking about the effect that mindfulness has on us, is that we become a witness to our thoughts and feelings, rather than letting them embody who we are. From a 'witness position' we can see the impact that events and people have on us, but by taking a step back and looking at it as a witness without judgement, it gives us a choice on how to react.

A great way to explain this to pupils is through the puppy mind analogy. When we first bring a puppy home, they are untrained, naughty and disruptive. This is our mind before we practice mindfulness. But with patience, kindness and repetition, our puppy will become well behaved and in control of its own actions. This is how we train our minds with mindfulness too.

Why mindfulness?

There is increasing evidence that having a mindful classroom can have many benefits for pupils and teachers; '[studies demonstrated...] a range of cognitive, social, and psychological benefits to both elementary (six studies) and high school (eight studies) students. These include improvements in working memory, attention, academic skills, emotional regulation, and self-esteem, as well as self-reported improvements in mood and decreases in anxiety, stress, and fatigue' [Integrating Mindfulness Training into K-12 Education: Fostering the Resilience of Teachers and Students](#).

The Mindfulness in Schools Project splits the benefits for pupils into four key areas:



Wellbeing and Mental Health

As well as helping them to recognise worry, manage difficulties and cope with exams, developing a more mindful awareness also helps children and young people to appreciate what is going well and to flourish.

Concentration and Cognition

Mindfulness trains us to understand and direct our attention with greater awareness and skill. This may improve the capacity of children to concentrate and be less distracted, as well as their working memory and ability to plan.

Social and Emotional Learning

Mindfulness is often taught in the context of PSHE. It helps to develop a greater awareness of relationships and how to manage them (including difficult ones at home), as well as offering a richer understanding of things like self-esteem and optimism.

Behaviour

Mindfulness may help the young to self-regulate more effectively, manage impulsivity and reduce conflict and oppositional behaviour. It should not, however, be used as a disciplinary tool.

Discussing Attention

For some pupils being told to 'pay attention' may seem to be as punishment, as they only hear it shouted at them when they are distracted or messing about. For this reason, it's good to discuss attention in a positive way before you start to practice mindfulness in the classroom.

What do your pupils pay attention to without thinking about it? The TV, video games, books, their friends? By pointing out that 'paying attention' isn't only a thing that they do in the classroom, but that it is something that they do naturally all the time, you can remove any feeling of punishment from the term.

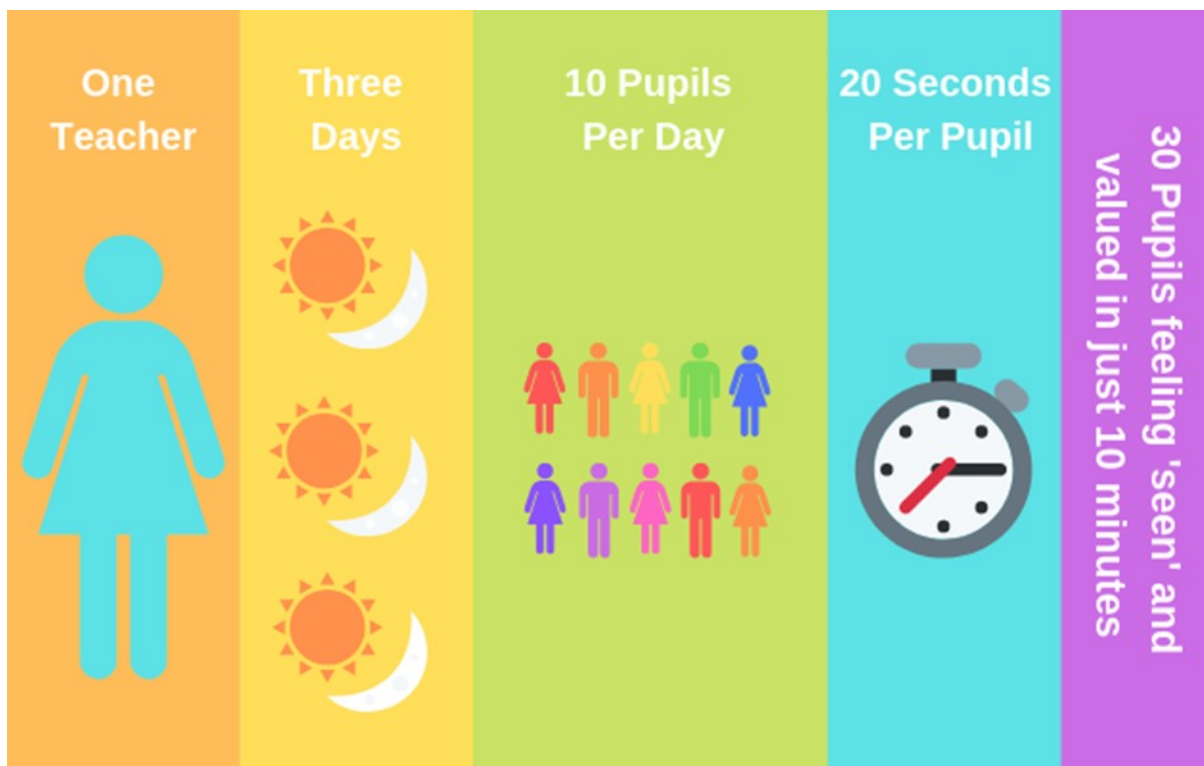
Using 'mind anchors', e.g. something to pay attention to, can help pupils to focus during mindfulness exercises. Here are six anchors to try with your class:

- A part of the **body**, e.g. feet resting on the floor or fingertips resting on the desk
- **Breath**; either counting breaths or noticing the way the air travels in and out of our bodies
- An **object**; use all five senses to properly look at an object (see [The Raisin Meditation](#))
- **Movement**; ask pupils to pay attention to the sensations as they make particular movements
- A **sound** (or mantra); concentrating on a sound is an easy way to help children focus
- **Nature**; paying attention to a particular area e.g. birdsong or the way leaves move in the breeze

Giving Attention

Pupils can benefit not only from paying attention, but from receiving attention too. Spending even a short time with a pupil can boost their mindset and make them feel 'seen' and valued. Why not try the following activity with your class:

Over the course of three days commit yourself to spending 20 seconds with each of your pupils, without trying to teach them or change them. This could be as simple as complementing their pencil case, asking them what they did at the weekend or asking them their favourite colour. The important thing is to give them your full attention for that 20 seconds without any judgement. In a class of 30 pupils, this means that you could speak to 10 pupils per day. Over the course of the three days, you will have made all of your pupils feel more valued in just 10 minutes.



Setting Your Mindfulness Ground Rules

Before you start to work on mindfulness with your pupils, it would be a good idea to set some ground rules. You could discuss these as a class before you start. Here are some ideas:

Personal Bubble – ask your pupils to image that they are surrounded by their own personal bubble of mindfulness. They should try not to pop anyone else’s bubble by distracting them whilst you are doing mindfulness exercises.

No Judgement – pupils will not be judged by you, or other pupils, for their experiences or thoughts whilst being mindful.

Eyes Closed/Open – whilst the class has their eyes closed, you should keep yours open for fairness and safety. Explain this to pupils before you start.

Silence – Encourage pupils to enjoy the silence of mindfulness.

Sharing – Taking part in post-mindfulness discussions about their experiences or thoughts during exercises should be voluntary.

Respect – Pupils should be open minded and respect each others’ experiences.

Your First Mindfulness Classroom Activity

Once your pupils have an understanding of the concepts of mindfulness and the rules that you have set, it’s time to do your first mindfulness activity. There are lots to try, and some great guided videos on YouTube too, but why not start with a nice simple one like the 4-7-8 breathing exercise created by Dr Andrew Weil:

How to do it

Adopt the ‘noble’ posture: feet flat on the floor, hands on lap, spine relaxed but upright.

Prepare by resting the tip of your tongue against the roof of your mouth, right behind your top front teeth. You’ll need to keep your tongue in place throughout the practice. Exhaling during 4-7-8 breathing can be easier for some people when they purse their lips.

The following steps should all be carried out in the cycle of one breath:

- First, let your lips part. Make a whooshing sound, exhaling completely through your mouth.
- Next, close your lips, inhaling silently through your nose as you count to four in your head.
- Then, for seven seconds, hold your breath.
- Make another whooshing exhale from your mouth for eight seconds.

When you inhale again, you initiate a new cycle of breath. Practice this pattern for four full breaths.

The held breath (for seven seconds) is the most critical part of this practice. It’s recommended that you only practice 4-7-8 breathing for four breaths when you’re first starting out. You can gradually work your way up to eight full breaths.

Part 3

Metacognition: Thinking about Thoughts and Learning From Them

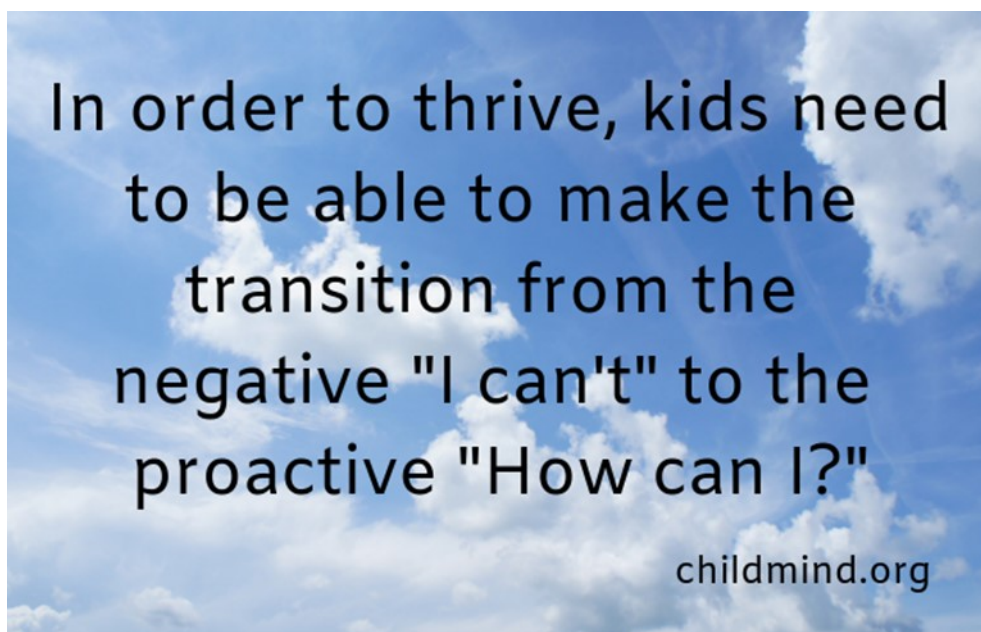
In part 3 of our blog series on mindfulness, we take a look at metacognition. We're going to discuss how to introduce 'thinking about thoughts' to your pupils and how to get them to harness their thinking processes to improve their learning and overcome obstacles.

What is Metacognition?

In its simplest form metacognition is 'thinking about thinking'. But really it goes much further than this. Metacognition, or reflecting on our thoughts, gives us an insight into our feelings, needs and behaviour. It also helps us to learn and adapt to new experiences, challenges and setbacks. Metacognition allows us to take notice of the ongoing conversation we have inside our heads. Teaching pupils to use metacognition proactively can help them to overcome obstacles, and become a powerful tool in their skillset.

'Metacognitive thinking teaches us about ourselves' say Tamara Rosier, a learning coach who specialises in metacognitive techniques. 'Thinking about our thinking creates perspective – perspective that leaves room for change.'

So, using metacognition can help pupils to become independent learners, as well as being more resilient. By recognizing thought patterns when they hit an unexpected obstacle, pupils can develop ways to overcome them that are personal and effective.



Thinking About Thinking

Asking pupils to think about their own thought processes can be daunting, some of them may never have thought about their inner conversations in depth before. Here is an easy exercise to get your pupils started.

Put up a paragraph of writing (preferably non-fiction) on the board in your classroom. This could be linked to your current topic work or be something that you find interesting. We like to use this simple mindfulness explanation from greatergood.berkeley.edu:

‘Mindfulness means maintaining a moment-by-moment awareness of our thoughts, feelings, bodily sensations, and surrounding environment, through a gentle nurturing lens. Mindfulness also involves acceptance, meaning that we pay attention to our thoughts and feelings without judging them - without believing, for instance, that there’s a “right” or “wrong” way to think or feel in a given moment. When we practice mindfulness, our thoughts tune into what we’re sensing in the present moment rather than rehashing the past or imagining the future.’

You can choose a simpler and/or shorter paragraph for younger pupils. Ask your pupils to read through the passage in their head once or twice. Now ask them whose voice did they hear reading the passage to them in their head? Was it their own? Was it yours, their teacher? The majority will probably say that it is their own. Now ask your pupils to read the passage again, in their head, using the voice of someone of the opposite gender. Was this difficult? Whose voice did they hear this time? Was it a friend, parent or someone famous?

This is a great way to draw pupils’ attention to their inner voice and acknowledge the thought processes that goes into a seemingly simple task such as reading.

Using Metacognition to Question Negative Thoughts

How do we use this awareness to quieten our inner critic and become more resilient? We do this by questioning our negative thoughts. Instead of a pupil thinking ‘I’m really nervous about the maths exam, I think I’m going to fail’, we need to encourage them to consider why they are nervous and what they can do to change this.

‘Kids who are taught to think of themselves as being “good” or “bad” at a particular task can have a fixed mindset that makes them passive in approaching a challenge: either they can do it or they can’t, but they aren’t likely to think they can change that outcome ... Teaching kids to become more metacognitive helps them move from a mindset that leaves little room for change to a mindset which promotes self-awareness and resilience.’ childmind.org.

Encourage your pupils to work on their metacognition by asking them questions. Your questions should be:

- **Open-ended** – give your pupils the opportunity to reflect on their thinking – can you tell me why you think that?
- **Non-blaming** – asking pupils to think about their behaviour or thinking can help them to learn to manage difficult situations more ably. Why do you feel nervous about the test?
- **Solution-focused** – Encourage pupils to think about how they can use their new understanding of their thought processes in the future – how will you prepare for the test next time?
- **Process-oriented** – Ask them questions that will give them a better understanding of their thought processes – How will you know when you’re ready for the test?

Pupil Self-Assessment

As your pupils become more familiar with metacognitive techniques, they will become able to self-assess their thinking processes and their learning progress. They will be able to build up a personal toolkit of things that help them to learn and help them to handle unexpected or high-stress situations more calmly and systematically.

PTS has some brilliant self-assessment stampers that can help your pupils to consider their classwork and make steps to improve their learning, as well as giving feedback to their teacher. Take a look [here](#).

Part 4

Mental Disorders and Mindfulness

Taking stock of our mental wellbeing is a key facet of mindfulness. By becoming aware of any mental ill health as it develops, we can take steps to remedy the problem before it manifests fully. Mindfulness can also help to calm any anxiety.

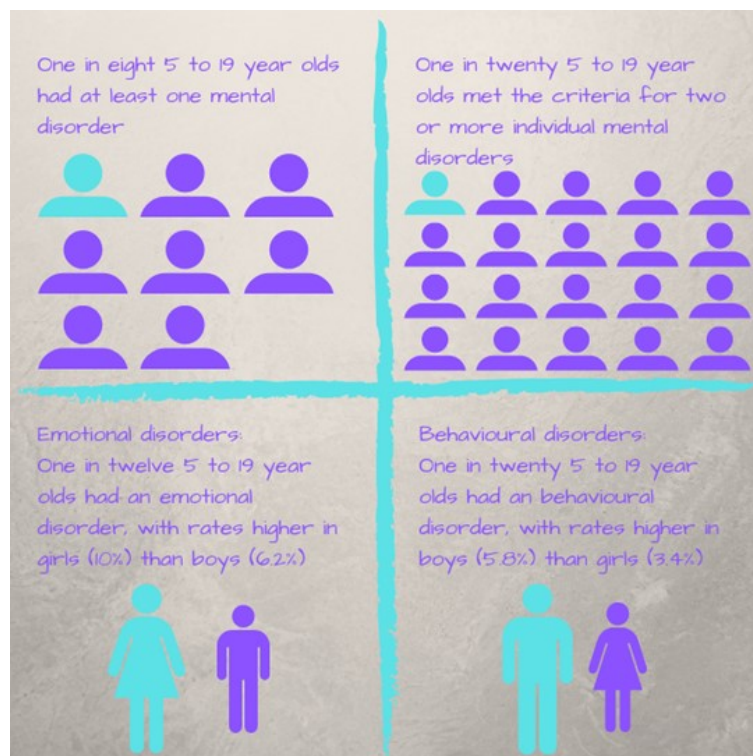
There is evidence that emotional mental health disorders are on the rise for children and young people. We take a look at the latest statistics below, before discussing how far mindfulness can help to reduce the impact of mental ill health.

The Statistics

In November 2018, the NHS revealed a new report on the state of children's mental health in England. The study compared new data from 2017 against earlier studies from 1999 and 2004.

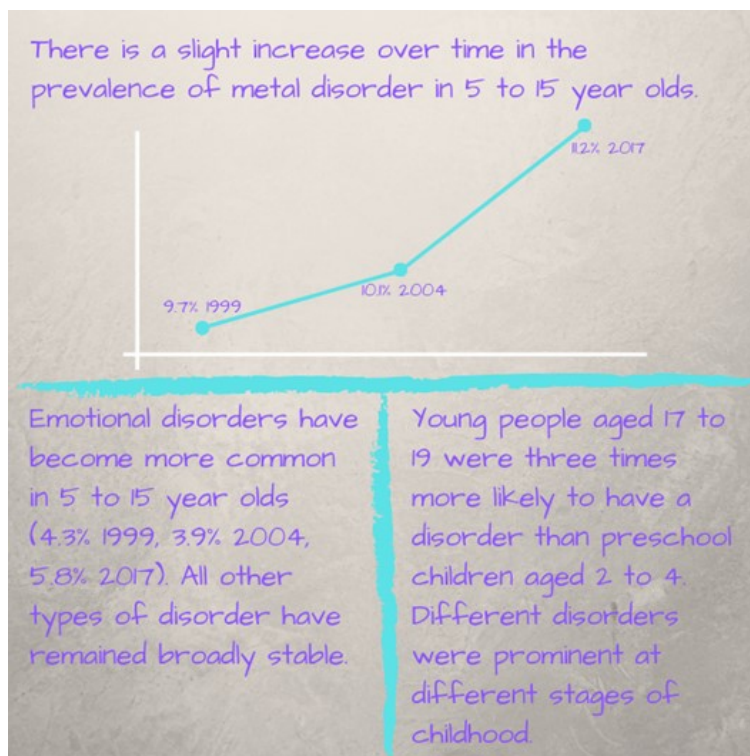
[The Mental Health of Children and Young People in England, 2017](#) report found that one in eight 5 to 19 year old children and young adults had a mental disorder. This equates to approximately four pupils in every classroom. One in twenty 5 to 19 year olds met the criteria for two or more individual mental disorders.

The two most common types of disorders were emotional disorders and behavioural disorders. One in twelve 5 to 19 year olds had an emotional disorder (including anxiety and depression). The rate was higher in girls (10%) than boys (6.2%). Roughly one in twenty 5 to 19 year olds had a behavioural disorder, with rates higher in boys (5.8%) than girls (3.4%).



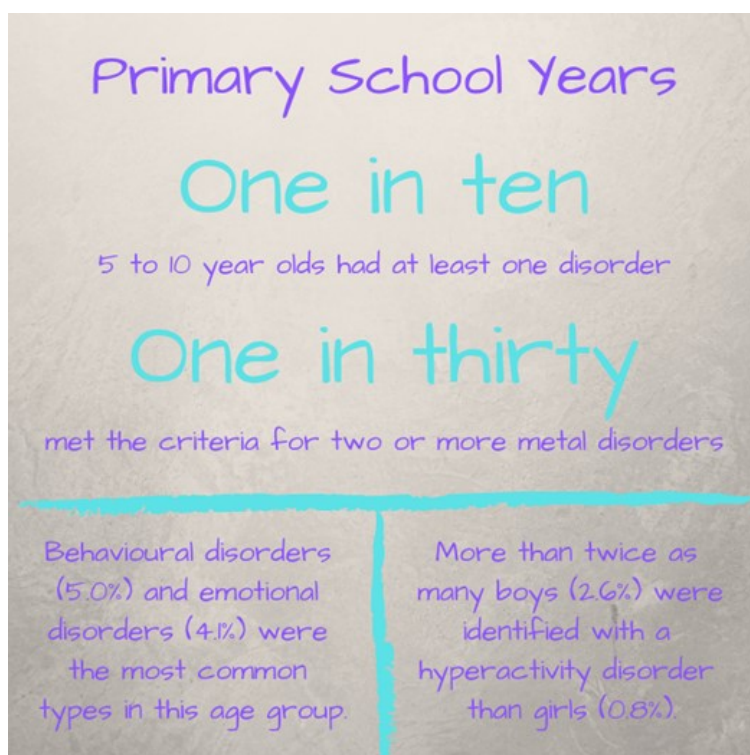
There is a widespread perception that children today are more troubled than previous generations. The data in the survey reveals a slight increase of mental disorders over time for 5 to 15 year olds, rising from 9.7% in 1999, to 10.1% in 2004 and 11.2% in 2017. Whilst emotional disorders have become more

common in this age group (4.3% 1999, 3.9% 2004, 5.8% 2017), all other types of disorder have remained relatively stable.



Around one in ten 5 to 10 year old children had at least one disorder, equating to roughly three children in every classroom. About one in thirty met the criteria for two or more mental disorders. Behavioural disorders (5.0%) and emotional disorders (4.1%) were the most common types in this age group.

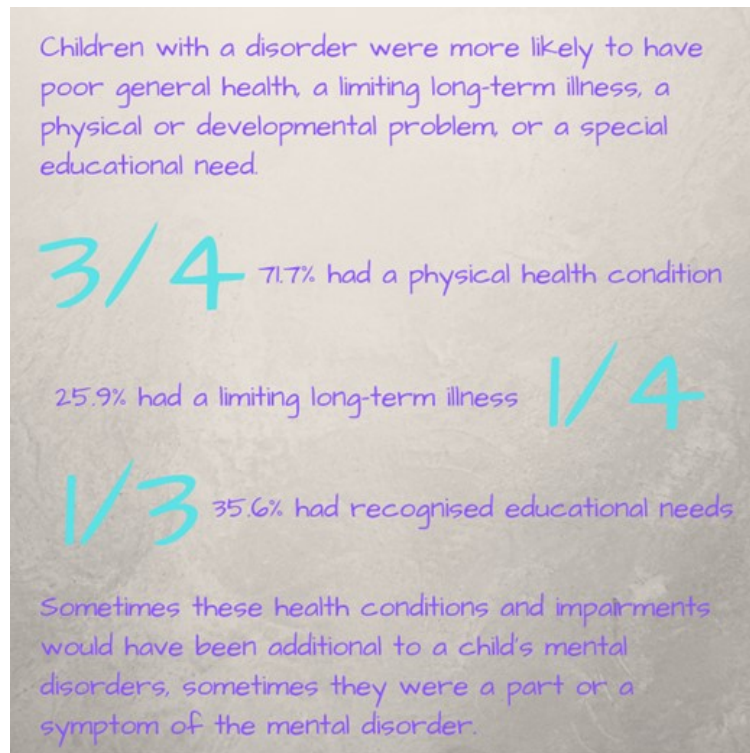
At this age, the number of boys (4.6%) and girls (3.6%) with emotional disorders was similar. However, other types of disorder were more than twice as likely in boys. For example, 2.6% of 5 to 10-year-old boys were identified with hyperactivity disorder, compared with 0.8% of 5 to 10-year-old girls.



Children with a disorder are more likely to have poor general health, a limiting long-term illness, a physical or developmental problem, or a special educational need.

- Nearly three-quarters (71.7%) had a physical condition or developmental problem
- A quarter (25.9%) had a limiting long-term illness compared to 4.2% of children without a mental disorder
- A third (35.6%) had recognized special educational needs, compared with 6.1% of children without a mental disorder

Sometimes these health conditions and impairments are additional to a child's mental disorder, sometimes they were a part or a symptom of the mental disorder.



Mental health problems are prevalent, with one in ten primary aged children having a mental disorder. This means that there are roughly three pupils in every classroom with a diagnosable mental health issue.

So, can mindfulness in the classroom help these pupils?

Can Mindfulness Help?

According to [mentalhealth.org.uk](https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk): 'Mindfulness exercises are ways of paying attention to the present moment, using techniques like meditation, breathing, and yoga. Training helps people to become more aware of their thoughts, feelings, and body sensations so that instead of being overwhelmed by them, they are better able to manage them'.

'Mindfulness is recommended as a treatment for people with mental ill-health as well as those who want to improve their mental health and wellbeing ... There are also different sorts of mindfulness meditation which can help people in different ways. Evidence shows compelling support for Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR), which helps people to cope with stress, and for Mindfulness Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT), which is designed to help people with recurring depression. They provide a flexible set of skills to manage mental health and support wellbeing'.

There is also evidence showing mindfulness to be effective for children and young people, with school-based interventions having positive outcomes on wellbeing, reducing anxiety and distress as well as improving behaviour. Evidence also suggests that children who used mindfulness practices more frequently reported higher wellbeing and lower stress scores (W Kuyken et al, “Effectiveness of the Mindfulness in Schools Programme: non-randomised controlled feasibility study”, 2013).

So, there is evidence that mindfulness can help people to prevent recurrent mental health disorders and cope with anxiety should it arise. In fact, NICE recommends it as a preventative practice for those suffering from depression.

Part 5

Improving Memory and Learning with Mindfulness

In the final part of our mindfulness blog series, we're going to take a look at how mindfulness can improve memory and learning in the classroom. As always, we would love to hear your thoughts and ideas. Please let us know in the comments section at the bottom of the page.

Mindfulness and Learning

As we continue to practice mindfulness, our brains become able to direct our attention with greater awareness and skill. For pupils, this could mean that they can develop a greater capacity to concentrate on their learning and become less distracted by everything else that is going on in the classroom. If they are able to concentrate more consistently this should improve their understanding and retention of information.

Metacognition and Learning

As your pupils become more familiar with the metacognitive techniques that we discussed in part 3 of this series, they will become better able to self-assess their thinking processes and their progress. This higher awareness of how they learn best, will give them a personal toolkit of things that they know will help them to learn more successfully. It will also help them to be able to handle unexpected or high-stress situations, like SATs tests, more calmly and systematically.

Memory and Mindfulness

In September 2018, Berkeley, University of California released the findings of their [research](#) into mindfulness and memory.

Participants were randomly assigned to either a four-week online mindfulness course or a creative writing course. The mindfulness group spent two weeks learning to focus on their breath or body sensations and two weeks learning "open monitoring," being aware of what was happening around them and gently redirecting their attention when their minds wandered.

Before and after the training, participants completed a memory test: They first saw a set of letters appear on a screen and, after a few seconds' break, they saw a single letter and had to determine if it had been part of that set or not. As the task is repeated multiple times, seeing a letter in an earlier set can interfere with the ability to recall whether the letter appeared more recently, giving researchers a way to measure proactive interference. In addition, some participants were scanned via MRI before and after the training to look for changes in the volume of their hippocampus - an area of the brain associated with memory.

Results of the analyses found that the mindfulness group had significantly less proactive interference during the memory test compared to the writing group, indicating an improvement in short-term memory.

In the mindfulness group, the better people performed on the memory task, the more their hippocampus volume increased, too. While prior research has found that mindfulness meditation improves short-term memory and that meditators have bigger hippocampi, this was the first study to link the two findings

together. In other words, the improvements in interference weren't transitory, but led to actual structural differences in the brain.

Memory and Learning

So, there is evidence to suggest that doing repeated mindfulness practice can physically change the brain and improve memory. Alongside the improvements in concentration and learning, this suggests that mindfulness in the classroom can be a worthwhile exercise, with proven benefits.