

Mindful Matters

An initiative to bring mindfulness to schools has proven such a success – and, in the COVID-19 era, so crucial – that it has been expanded for another three years to include not only teachers and schoolchildren but parents too.

When the Jockey Club 'Peace and Awareness' Mindfulness Culture in Schools Initiative began in 2019, COVID-19 had not appeared on the scene. But the challenges the pandemic has wrought on the mental health of our community – especially youth – have made it both timely and essential.

Funded by the Hong Kong Jockey Club and organised by HKU's Faculty of Social Sciences, the project, called JC PandA for short, was begun with the aim of bringing mindfulness to the education sector and has since benefitted more than 3,000 students from more than 36 schools. It has also provided mindfulness training to teachers and to caring professionals, such as educational psychologists, social workers and counsellors, to equip them with stress-coping skills and prepare them to teach mindfulness. They are also encouraged to include mindfulness in the repertoire of their teaching and services.



Professor Shui-fong Lam (left) and Educational Psychologist Mr Denis Kwan introducing resources of JC PandA.

Project Director Professor Shui-fong Lam explained the concept. "The lineage in our programme stretches back to the secular mindfulness advocated by Jon Kabat-Zinn in the early 1980s, who said 'mindfulness is the awareness that arises by paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally.' In mindfulness practice, we focus on the present moment by paying attention to our breath and bodily sensation. By doing so, we can be spared from worrying about the future or ruminating about the past. Worrying about the future is related to anxiety and ruminating about the past is related to depression – this is why mindfulness practice can ameliorate both."

Regarding the extra element of stress that COVID-19 brought into people's lives and how they affected the project, she said: "Our team was able to face the challenge and be flexible. In early 2020, when COVID-19 arrived, we immediately turned all our training courses for teachers into Zoom teaching. We also had a journal paper reporting the effectiveness of our training in building teachers' resilience during the most difficult time in Hong Kong. The data clearly showed that mindfulness can help people cope with adversity."

To empower the general public to use mindfulness to cope with the pandemic, the team has also developed a resources package (www.jcpanda.hk/ms2020/en) in which audio instructions on mindfulness practice techniques are offered in English, Cantonese and Putonghua. The resources package was

well received and has been browsed over 150,000 times.

The decision to continue and expand JC PandA was made in late 2021 when the end of Phase I was looming large. "In reviewing what we had achieved in three years, we were gratified," said Professor Lam. "However, we could also see that there was still much unfinished business, as the demand for our services is huge."

Major expansion

There are four main areas of enhancement for Phase II, including major expansion that will increase the number of schools served from 36 to 84. "This constitutes about 9 per cent of the public schools in Hong Kong, which is a substantial percentage for the initiation of cultural change," said Professor Lam.

"Second, we shall also extend our services to parents, with mindful parenting courses to help them take care of themselves and their children with mindfulness. Third, we shall work with school teachers to integrate mindfulness into different subjects, such as language, social studies, music and physical education.

"Finally, we intend to concentrate further on our 'train the trainers' approach and provide training to school teachers and helping professionals. We hope that they can teach mindfulness courses to their students or integrate mindfulness into the repertoire of their services."

Training the trainers is a capacity-building strategy. It strengthens the systems and makes the impact sustainable. "The positive feedback from our partner schools in the past



Mindfulness training for teachers.



PROFESSOR SHUI-FONG LAM

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three years has convinced us that our efforts are not in vain," she added. "Students benefit the most when the adults around them can teach them mindfulness mindfully."

Undergraduates also play an active role in the project, being recruited as research interns who can attend the mindfulness courses and have first-hand experience in the implementation of mindfulness research and intervention. "In the next year, we shall offer mindfulness training to clinical and educational psychology trainees," said Professor Lam. "Hopefully, it will help their professional development and empower them to use mindfulness to serve their future clients."

Asked what she hopes to achieve in the next three years, Professor Lam said: "I hope to mobilise and empower the existing resources of the systems and make mindfulness culture sustainable in schools in Hong Kong."



Students of the HKTA Shun Yeung Primary School meditating.