7

Although there is much interest in teaching mindfulness to college students and other emerging adults, traditional methods of teaching mindfulness and meditation are not always effective for reaching this age group. Koru is a program, developed at Duke University, that has been specifically designed with the developmental characteristics of emerging adults in mind.

Koru: Teaching Mindfulness to Emerging Adults

Holly B. Rogers

On many campuses of higher education around the country there is a desire to help the students of today engage in contemplative practices. Many committed and creative teachers are looking to bring the important skills of mindfulness and meditation to their students. However, teaching these skills to college students is no small feat. College students, who are typically in the developmental period known as emerging adulthood, are by nature curious, open, and interested unless they are skeptical, critical, and bored. Anyone who has worked with this population has seen both sides of this developmental period. The benefits of learning mindfulness at this stage of life are tremendous, but it can be difficult to convey these to students in a meaningful way. In my experience, traditional methods of teaching mindfulness and meditation are not particularly effective for individuals in this stage of development. However, if understood and attended to, the characteristics of this developmental stage can be used as guides to crafting a mindfulness program that will resonate with college students. Koru, a course in mindfulness and meditation that is taught through the student counseling center at Duke University, is an example of a program that was designed specifically to meet the needs of the emerging adult population.

This chapter explores the interface between emerging adulthood and mindfulness practice. First, the definition and developmental features of emerging adulthood are reviewed. Next, the ways in which mindfulness can serve as a developmental aid for this group are discussed. Finally, the

New Directions for Teaching and Learning, no. 134, Summer 2013 © Wiley Periodicals, Inc.
Published online in Wiley Online Library (wileyonlinelibrary.com) • DOI: 10.1002/tl.20056

specific strategies that have proved fundamental to the success of Koru are reviewed.

Emerging Adults

Emerging adults (EAs) are individuals between the ages of 18 and 29. In this country many, but certainly not all, emerging adults are involved in higher education as they prepare for their future. Jeffrey Arnett (2000, 2004) coined the term "emerging adult" and identified the characteristics of the age group, arguing that emerging adulthood constitutes a unique developmental stage. Arnett observed that in modern, Western cultures the developmental imperatives of adulthood, such as choosing a life partner, having children, and beginning a career, are being pushed later in life. Young people in their twenties no longer live within the constraints of adolescence, living at home and following the rules of parents or other caregivers. At the same time, they are not yet taking on all the responsibilities of adulthood. What has emerged is an extended period of development that is largely taken up with personal growth and identity development. This pattern of adult development seems to cross racial and ethnic lines but may be somewhat limited by socioeconomic factors, with the poorest EAs often not having the same experience of delaying adult responsibilities.

Arnett (2000, 2004) articulated several characteristics of EAs including an emphasis on identity exploration, instability and frequent changes in many spheres of life, focus on the self with major choices based on personal desires because there are few commitments to others, feeling in between adolescence and adulthood, and feeling that anything is possible. This time of growth and identity development is a period of excitement and change. Unfortunately, for many EAs this is also a time of great strain and stress.

This developmental phase is all about not knowing what is next in any sphere of life. There are frequent transitions and EAs recognize that the choices they make will determine their future success and happiness. They can often feel pressured and lost as they struggle with each decision, second-guessing themselves every step of the way. Questions about what career path to follow and whom to choose as a life partner are major concerns of this age. Underneath these questions are struggles about values and meaning. They may find it hard to identify their authentic feelings and beliefs as they are pushed by peers and pulled by cultural pressures in many different directions. Often EAs do not have the necessary skills for managing these struggles, which can lead to maladaptive coping and distress. Felix is an example of a student who is facing the typical developmental pressures of this stage.

Felix is a 21-year-old junior. He came to college, planning to go to medical school, a strong preference of his parents. He was a very strong student in high school but has found it hard to keep up in college, largely

because he enjoyed hanging out with friends and sleeping late during his first two years at school. Now as he starts his junior year, he recognizes that his grades are probably not good enough to get into medical school unless he can pull a 4.0 for the next four semesters, an impossible feat for him. To make matters worse, he realizes that he is not that interested in medical school but has no idea what other career he could pursue. He has reached the point where he worries so much about his grades and his future that he can't focus when he tries to study. At bedtime, he can't fall asleep. Often he ends up drinking with his buddies as a way of avoiding his worries. He is vaguely aware that this behavior is only making matters worse for him, but he doesn't have any other ideas about what might work.

Felix's struggles are fairly typical. He entered college with a game plan that was largely determined by his parents. Until recently, he had not considered whether he personally had an interest in a career in medicine. The social pulls of college called him away from his academic pursuits and allowed him to delay any serious consideration of his values, wishes, and plans. Finally, fairly late in the game, he has to confront his general aimlessness and it scares him, which leads him to vacillate between intense anxiety and even more avoidance. Felix is in need of a strategy that will allow him to manage his anxiety while he begins to develop a better understanding of what actually interests him and motivates him. Mindfulness can provide both the anxiety management as well as the self-understanding that he needs to navigate this difficult time.

Mindfulness

Mindfulness is the practice of allowing the sensations, thoughts, and feelings of the present moment to displace plans, worries, and judgments about the past and future. Mindfulness involves cultivating the ability to notice with curiosity, acceptance, and compassion the fullness of each moment. Perhaps somewhat surprisingly, this simple (though not easy) practice has proved useful for reducing a multitude of difficulties in both the body and the mind. It is beyond the scope of this chapter to detail the science that supports the value of the practice of mindfulness, but it is clear that effects such as decreasing anxiety and increasing self-understanding are common benefits. These benefits dovetail nicely with the specific needs of emerging adults as they navigate the path to mature adulthood.

There are a variety of ways in which mindfulness supports the maturation process of EAs. Mindfulness teaches EAs to pay attention to their inner world at least as much as they pay attention to their outer experience. By doing this, they begin to develop a sense of their core values, which can lead them to make choices that are consistent with their authentic self, choices in which they feel greater confidence. Mindfulness cultivates wisdom, tolerance, and compassion—all qualities that lead to greater patience, understanding, and maturity. Calm focus on the present moment disrupts

emerging adults' preoccupation with the future and helps them develop a relaxed acceptance of their current life situation, which opens the way for increased experiences of contentment.

The practice of mindfulness helps college students decrease their stress, thereby improving their ability to focus on their work. This improved focus on academic tasks is often the short-term goal that most interests students. Generally, the short-term goals of stress management, improved academic performance, or anxiety control are what inspire students to seek mindfulness training. Wonderfully, the longer term benefits of greater wisdom, patience, and compassion will develop over time, no matter the initial motivation for getting started.

Although mindfulness practice has the potential to be particularly useful for EAs, traditional methods of teaching mindfulness and meditation are not always effective for this age group. Margaret Maytan, the codeveloper of Koru, and I have observed that there are a number of variables to be considered when designing an effective program for EAs. We have incorporated these strategies into our program for teaching mindfulness. Koru is a four-week course on mindfulness for college students. The course specifics are detailed in *Mindfulness for the Next Generation* (Rogers and Maytan 2012). In the next section, some of the elements that have been incorporated into Koru and have proved critical for teaching EAs mindfulness and meditation are discussed.

Critical Teaching Elements

These elements can be organized into three groups: organizational factors, teaching factors, and student factors.

Organizational Factors. There are several factors that are related to the way the course is structured and taught. We call these "organizational factors." Relevant organizational factors are related to the size, makeup, and structure of the class.

Koru consists of four 75-minute classes. At Duke we experimented with longer and shorter class periods as well as greater or fewer numbers of classes. It became clear that the group achieved optimal participation and focus with four 75-minute classes. With more classes, the attrition rate started to increase, and with longer classes, the students began to get restless or bored.

EAs learn best in small groups. They are sensitive to peer influences and thus engage eagerly when working together with their peers. Students in the group learn from each other's questions and will often use humor to enhance their experience. Small groups of eight to twelve students function best. It is harder to create the group cohesion that makes the group thrive with more than twelve participants.

Having a diverse group of students in the group enhances the experience of the participants. Ethnic, cultural, economic, sexual orientation, and

religious diversity increase richness in the group discussions. Further, the presence of students from a variety of backgrounds allows the students to experience the judgments that arise when they face others who differ from them in some way. Acceptance of self and others often evolves from this awareness of judgment. When recruiting for a group of students, intentionally seeking a diverse group of students should be a priority.

A perhaps less intuitive organizational factor is the need for a structure with clearly defined protocols and procedures for the class requirements. Although mindfulness is not usually taught in this way, college students are accustomed to being externally motivated and adapt easily to a structured learning environment. Mindfulness is a skill that is somewhat difficult to learn and can be fully grasped only with a significant amount of practice. Students do best if they are "required" to attend class and practice. After just a few weeks of required practice, the benefits of mindfulness provide students with the motivation they need to continue. Therefore, Koru has mandatory attendance and required homework every day. The students are given a log where they record their daily meditation and their daily experiences of gratitude; they are required to bring the completed log back to each class. In the development of Koru, formalizing the requirements in this manner was the factor that most enhanced the students' attendance and enjoyment of the class.

Teaching Factors. The need for a very active teaching style is one of the teaching factors to keep in mind. Traditionally, mindfulness concepts and insights unfold over time, as the learner opens to the richness of the present moment. College students may not have the patience to persist with the practice without more support than is usually provided by mindfulness and meditation teachers. Without clear support of their progress and active assistance with hindrances, students may lose interest. We have found that a very active teaching style helps maintain the students' motivation, helping them overcome obstacles and supporting their progress.

For example, it is common to hear students say that they had a "bad" week and they aren't "good" at meditating because they can't focus their mind. A college student can quickly become discouraged if these judgments aren't actively addressed. First, it can be useful to help the students identify the judgment, coaching them to recognize and release judging thoughts, returning their awareness to the sensation of the breath. After instruction on how to work with judging thoughts, it can also be helpful to challenge the students a bit. Ask the students if they've ever done anything hard before. If they discover a task does not come easily to them, do they just quit? Does it mean they "can't" do it, or that it is not worth doing? Students respond well to being reminded that they can do hard things and have often done hard things. In fact, most things worth doing, including developing the skill of mindfulness, take a bit of practice.

The need to keep the students engaged in learning a practice that is a little esoteric requires the teacher to keep the teaching interesting and

relevant. When working with EAs, it is helpful to use stories or metaphors that will be meaningful to them. For example, taking examples from their typical daily experiences is helpful. Use metaphors for developing mindfulness that relate to their frequent interest in building physical skills or fitness. Weave the academic challenges they face into stories that illuminate concepts like nonjudgment, acceptance, and self-compassion. Use stories from your own life that reflect challenges with which students will be able to identify, like managing an overly busy schedule or having trouble staying focused. EAs are often put off by too much lecturing; they respond better when their comments and questions are used to stimulate teaching, drawing from stories and examples that resonate with their lives to illustrate the principles and practice of mindfulness.

Last, but in no way least, on this list of teaching factors is the importance of very quickly providing some relief for the students' stress and anxiety. Most students come to our class at Duke specifically because they are feeling overwhelmed and stressed, often to the point they are not sleeping or no longer able to cope. They are in need of relief from their suffering. For this reason, the teacher should be prepared to teach mindfulness-based skills specifically aimed at lowering stress and anxiety. For example, the first session of Koru includes instruction and practice with two breathing skills: diaphragmatic breathing and dynamic breathing. These are very different skills but both are specifically taught for the purpose of calming anxious minds and bodies. The students generally report feeling calmer and less stressed after practicing these skills, which increases their motivation to persist with their mindfulness and meditation training. Paying attention to and addressing the level of stress in the group are important parts of creating an effective class.

Student Factors. Finally, there are characteristics of the students themselves that affect their willingness to learn mindfulness and meditation. For one, the students are often a bit skeptical about anything that seems too "new-agey," "touchy-feely" or "out there." They can be easily put off by anything that smacks of mysticism. They want to know that what they are learning is practical and has proven benefits. If you intend to attract and maintain a wide variety of students, it is helpful to use conventional language and be prepared to ground the teaching in scientific research. For example, it may help the students to know about some of the data showing the benefits of mindfulness on the physical and psychological health of college students (see Roberts and Danoff-Burg 2010). Students may want to know whether mindfulness can improve their sense of well-being (see Davidson et al. 2003) or help them concentrate better (see Tang et al. 2007). Having some familiarity with the science behind mindfulness can help work with students' skepticism when it emerges.

College students may be particularly suspicious of some of the concepts that are central to mindfulness practice. For example, the idea of "acceptance," a core teaching of mindfulness, makes them very

uncomfortable. They easily confuse acceptance with passive resignation and they react strongly against this idea. Students will reject this concept unless the teacher is well armed with explanations and examples of acceptance that resonate with the students. For instance, using an example of a student who has not prepared adequately for an exam and is feeling very anxious can be helpful in demonstrating acceptance. Highlighting how the student might behave if he were practicing acceptance (perhaps recognizing that getting some rest and food will help him do his best or considering contacting the professor to see if he has options for delaying the exam) versus not practicing acceptance (trying to cram until the last minute past the point of exhaustion and then going to the exam feeling frantic) can demonstrate the difference between acceptance and passive resignation. Acceptance is a very active state of seeing clearly the reality of each moment, then from this place of clear understanding, acting wisely. It is not about giving up or refusing to act. The students need to be very clear on this distinction, or they may reject the concept entirely.

Despite their skepticism, EAs are also quite flexible; when approached in the right way they are willing to experiment and see what happens. They have tremendous capacity for change. With a relatively limited amount of practice, they will begin to notice subtle shifts in their experience that can be very meaningful for them. It is common for us to hear a student report after just one week of practicing that she is already feeling less stressed or feeling more engaged in her work. Hopefulness and motivation follow these early successes and the groundwork is then laid for continued study and practice.

A frequent complaint of students is that they feel burdened by time pressure and all the demands on them. They will commonly say that they do not have the time to spare even ten minutes a day to do their mindfulness homework. You can take a two-pronged approach to this particular concern. First, practical problem solving about time management can help students "find time." Second, helping the students think differently about their available time can help shift their sense of time pressure.

Helping the students brainstorm ways to open up small amounts of time for meditation practice is a good place to start. Often the students will "discover" flexibility in their day if they are questioned carefully about how they commute to class, spend the time between classes, use technology, and study. With this type of discussion, they may discover that there are actually pockets of time in their day that would be well used by meditation practice.

Engaging the students in a more philosophical discussion about how they use and value their time is a powerful way of helping them shift their sense of chronic time pressure. It is useful for them to see that it is as much the way they think about time as it is the way they spend their time that creates stress for them. There are different ways to approach this. You can ask students how they feel or what they generally think when they are

"waiting" for something, like waiting for class to start or waiting in line at the store. Ask them to consider what the difference is between "waiting" and standing mindfully in a line. Ask them to consider what they might think, feel, or do differently if they are "waiting" versus practicing mindfulness. Usually students will grasp that "waiting" involves some expectation of what should be or will be happening in the near future, and an impatience to see that happen. Invite them to be curious about the moments spent like this during their day, all the waiting moments. Ask them to be curious about how their sense of time changes, if they start to notice these spaces in their day. Students often find that bringing their attention mindfully to the present moment during these "in between" times allows them to feel less time pressure.

Koru and Transformation

Koru is taught through the student counseling center at Duke University where I have been a psychiatrist since 1996. Koru was developed after many years of trying, often unsuccessfully, to engage students in learning mindfulness and meditation. My experience was that students would readily sign up for meditation training, but the attrition was high, with only a few students actually attending the classes regularly and developing a mindfulness practice. Additionally, it seemed that the class was appealing only to a fairly narrow cross-section of our diverse student community.

In an attempt to address both these issues, my coteacher, Margaret Maytan, and I worked systematically to develop a class that would have broader appeal and more effectively engage the students. After trying multiple formats and curricula, we found what seemed to be the optimal program, which we now call Koru. Koru is the New Zealand Maori word for the unfurling fern frond. It represents new growth that comes from a constant center. It is the natural representation of the harmony that exists when change occurs in the context of stability, the type of change we wish to promote in our students. When students register for Koru, they commit to attendance at all four classes and ten minutes a day of mindfulness practice. In each class, the students are taught a mindfulness-based self-calming skill and a mindfulness meditation. Although this may seem a relatively small "dose" of mindfulness training, we have seen that this is an optimal first exposure for college students, not too little and not too much.

To our surprise and delight, Koru has met with great enthusiasm and success. The course runs two or three times each semester and still produces long waiting lists. The attendance stays consistently high, with most students attending all four classes and many requesting additional mindfulness training at the end. The factors discussed here seem to be the most salient determinants of the students' success.

In the development of Koru, we have used detailed student evaluations as well as rates of enrollment and attendance to measure the success of the

course and to guide us in its evolution. The evaluations show a remarkable degree of transformation and enthusiasm for continued practice. Students report that they are happier, less stressed, sleeping better, and managing their studies better. Some describe profound changes in their relationships. They report a general improvement in their life satisfaction, and most express gratitude for having learned mindfulness. More than once, a student has reported that Koru was the "best thing I have done at Duke," high praise for a short course on mindfulness.

In my experience, teaching mindfulness to college students is a most worthwhile and rewarding endeavor. When approached properly and provided with a clear structure, they quite readily take up the practice and begin to integrate the principles of mindfulness within their everyday lives. Taking the time to develop a course that fits with the developmental needs of emerging adults will allow a broader range of students to experience the benefits of mindfulness. These young people will take what they have learned with them as they make the journey into full adulthood, bringing wisdom and compassion into their lives and thus into all of ours.

References

Arnett, J. J. 2000. "Emerging Adulthood: A Theory of Development from the Late Teens through the Twenties." *American Psychologist* 55: 469–480.

Arnett, J. J. 2004. *Emerging Adulthood: The Winding Road from the Late Teens through the Twenties*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Davidson, R. J., J. Kabat-Zinn, J. Schumacher, M. Rosenkranz, D. Muller, S. F. Santorelli, F. Urbanowski, A. Harrington, K. Bonus, and J. F. Sheridan. 2003. "Alterations in Brain and Immune Function Produced by Mindfulness Meditation." *Psychosomatic Medicine* 65: 564–570.

Roberts, K. C., and S. Danoff-Burg. 2010. "Mindfulness and Health Behaviors: Is Paying Attention Good for You?" *Journal of American College Health* 59(3):165–173.

Rogers, H., and M. Maytan. 2012. *Mindfulness for the Next Generation: Helping Emerging Adults Manage Stress and Lead Healthier Lives*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Tang, Y-Y., Y. Ma, J. Wang, Y. Fan, S. Feng, Q. Lu, Q. Yu, et al. 2007. "Short-Term Meditation Training Improves Attention and Self-Regulation." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 104: 17152–17156.

HOLLY B. ROGERS is a staff psychiatrist for Counseling and Psychological Services at Duke University and a clinical associate at Duke University Medical Center.