

Mindfulness programs help minoritized youth develop healthy coping skills, study shows

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Educational programs that promote mental and physical health can help young people—particularly in environments of chronic stress and trauma

exposure—learn healthy coping strategies, avoid risky behaviors, and succeed in school. A [new study](#) from the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign shows that a school-based mindfulness program is beneficial for Black high school students in urban communities.

"These are low cost, highly scalable, and highly sustainable programs that teach important skills and impact students' lives. Getting feedback from minoritized youth in under-resourced communities is important to ensure that interventions are appropriate and effective," said lead author Jacinda K. Dariotis, professor in the Department of Human Development and Family Studies and director of the Family Resiliency Center, both part of the College of Agricultural, Consumer and Environmental Sciences (ACES). She is also Health Innovation Professor in the Carle Illinois College of Medicine at the U. of I.

"Research shows that youth who have dysregulation of behavior and emotion are most likely to engage in risky behaviors later, sometimes including substance abuse. The mechanisms that regulate the stress physiological system are affected by trauma, adversity, poverty, and structural factors, such as racism and other forms of discrimination. We conducted this work in the city of Baltimore, which has one of the highest rates of child trauma in the country," said study co-author Diana Fishbein, director of Translational Neuro-Prevention Research in the Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill.

The researchers compared the effects of two school-based programs designed to promote [healthy development](#) and decision-making, a mindfulness program based on meditation and breathing practices and a health program focused on nutrition and healthy behaviors. Each program was delivered four times per week during the school day over approximately 8 weeks.

The paper was part of a larger study evaluating the programs' impact on stress physiology. The findings are published in the journal *Mindfulness*.

"It was important to hear the students' voices so we could learn what worked and didn't work, and what their perceived benefits were," Dariotis said. "So we conducted focus groups in each of the participating schools after program conclusion."

The focus group study included data from 45 ninth-grade students in three schools. The majority identified as Black (86.7%), which was consistent with the student population.

Four themes emerged from the focus groups; three of them were common to both programs but with different applications.

Students who participated in the [mindfulness program](#) reported enhanced [emotional intelligence](#) and increased capacity to recognize or anticipate emotions and reactions in themselves and others.

"This is about perspective-taking, empathy, compassion, and awareness of self and others. The students talked about how these meditative practices helped them be mindful of what others might be going through and thinking before reacting," Dariotis noted.

Students in both programs experienced a mindset shift toward cognitive control through greater focus, awareness, and intentionality. Meditation helped cultivate increased awareness, intentional actions, and deeper thinking, while youth in the health program described increased awareness and reflection about personal health choices.

Students in both programs also reported that they were able to transfer skills they learned in the program to other contexts, and they had shared what they learned with family members and friends.

"This is incredibly important because it means that it's becoming part of who they are and how they're engaging in different environments. Mindfulness skills can be beneficial in interacting with others and reducing stress levels not just with peers in school, but with family and in the community," Dariotis noted.

Finally, youth didn't just transfer the learnings to other contexts for themselves, they also taught their new skills to others, including peers and family members.

"Our research shows these types of programs do work when you are intentional and you're prioritizing youth. In this case, it was ninth graders, but these skills can affect behaviors and outcomes for youth at all ages," Dariotis stated. "It's important to continue this work and think about implementing these types of programs and skills in different environments."

More information: Jacinda K. Dariotis et al, Perceived Benefits of Mindfulness and Health Education Programs for Minoritized Adolescents: A Qualitative Analysis, *Mindfulness* (2023). [DOI: 10.1007/s12671-023-02147-y](https://doi.org/10.1007/s12671-023-02147-y)

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