

Emotional Intelligence

Simply put, emotional intelligence is learning to understand, recognize, and manage emotional states. Unlike math or language arts education, most schools do not provide an orientation to the basic and universal process of feeling and managing emotions. This is somewhat surprising in that emotional control and emotional intelligence are associated with lower rates of depression (Erbas, Ceulemans, Lee Pe, Koval, & Kuppens, 2014), higher rates of well-being (Kashdan, Barrett, & McKnight, 2015) lower rates of aggression (Pond et al., 2012) and higher academic success (Brackett, Rivers, Shiffman, Lerner, & Salovey, 2006). To some extent, the conspicuous absence of emotion education in schools may be due to the prejudice that feelings “are not academic” or the notion that people naturally improve at controlling their own emotions. Indeed, most of us adults do not throw a tantrum when they are denied something. Even so, building a robust emotional vocabulary, improving in the ability to identify and differentiate emotional states, gaining the ability to accurately read emotional expressions in others, and improving one’s understanding of how emotions can be used effectively are all crucial to life success.

Web Site: This is a link to the educational unit on *Emotional Intelligence* at the Noba Project, an open educational resource for psychology. The unit is authored by Marc Brackett and his colleagues from Yale University. <http://nobaproject.com/modules/emotional-intelligence>

Book: Goleman, D. (1995). *Emotional Intelligence*. New York, NY: Bantam

Education: Marc Brackett’s “RULER” program teaches emotional intelligence skills to students. <http://ei.yale.edu/ruler/>

Meditation

Many people think of meditation as a religious practice associated with monks and Eastern traditions. Although this is historically accurate, meditation can also be practiced in a secular way that is no different than taking a yoga class or enjoying an inspiring view. At the heart of mindfulness is the idea that people can broadly benefit from paying attention to their own

thinking. All people interpret daily events through the lens of their own values, culture, and experience. Mindfulness practices help people notice their interpretations and understand when these interpretations may exaggerate negative emotional experiences. For example, it is common for people to mentally continue arguments long after the argument has finished, and the parties involved are no longer arguing. We often engage in this style of thinking because our mental arguments allow us to craft responses that are clever, vengeful, or suggest that we are the hero of our stories. Unfortunately, these fantasies often serve to maintain anger or irritation. Mindfulness practice can shift attention away from the argument and to the present moment—talking to our neighbor or grocery shopping, for example—where the argument does not exist.

Mindfulness

Simply put, mindfulness is a mental state of focused attention and conscious awareness. Mindfulness originally emerged from the Hindu/Buddhist religious traditions, but it has become widely employed as a secular psychological technique. The practice of mindfulness typically involves sitting still and making observations while, at the same time, trying to be aware of the many evaluative and judgmental thoughts that are associated with such observations. For instance, a person might observe sensations in her body, her own breathing, or her visual field. When she experiences intrusive thoughts such as “that is a cute bird” or “My legs ache; I probably should not have exercised so hard” she simply accepts that these thoughts have occurred and attempts to focus her attention back to a neutral observation.

Ultimately, the resulting awareness of our mental evaluations can provide the basis for well-being. This is because some portion of a person’s distress comes from the mental stories they tell about their circumstances. For example, when a romantic couple gets into an argument it is common for both to become emotionally aroused (e.g., irritated and angry). Frequently, these distressing emotions continue long after the fight has ended. In large part, this is because the person is continuing to think about the fight, replaying it or revising it mentally, even though it is in the past. In a similar fashion, people often

inadvertently enflame their own distress by mentally clinging to past problems, exaggerating current difficulties, or inflating potential future woes.

Web site: Mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) programs are available in many cities. This approach to managing daily distress has received research scrutiny and is widely believed to be helpful in non-clinical stress as well as some forms of clinical problems. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mindfulness-based_stress_reduction

Books: For decades, Dr. John Kabat-Zin, a professor at University of Massachusetts Medical School, has been a leading champion of secular approaches to mindfulness. <https://www.mindfulnesscds.com/>

Other: A first person account of a mindfulness program written for the Guardian newspaper. <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2014/jan/11/julie-myerson-mindfulness-based-cognitive-therapy>

Social Skills

Like emotional intelligence, the ability to navigate social relationships is crucial to success. These are the skills that parents typically try to instill in their children: expressing appreciation to others, being polite, being helpful, and listening well. Interestingly, well-being is cultivated, in part, by investing in others. This includes expressing gratitude, of course, but it also includes charitable work, donating money, and extending kindness.

Research: A Creative Commons licensed, open chapter from the Noba Scholar web site is written by Helliwell and his colleagues (Social Capital and Prosocial Behavior as Sources of Well-being). It reviews the research suggesting that helping others pays back happiness dividends. <https://www.nobascholar.com/>

Research by Otake et al. (2006) describes the benefits of a simple intervention in which students in Japan kept track of small acts of kindness toward others. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1820947/>

Example volunteer programs:

United Kingdom—National Citizenship Service (ages 15-17) <https://www.ncsyes.co.uk/>

United States of America—AmeriCorps, the corporation for national and community service <https://www.nationalservice.gov/programs/ameriCorps>

International—Habitat for Humanity <https://www.habitat.org/volunteer/long-term-opportunities/international>

