Epping School District
Mental Health and Wellness Newsletter
Understanding Mindfulness and our Brains

May 27, 2020

Dear Epping School Community,

We hope this letter finds you rested and refreshed after a nice long weekend. While the warm sunny weather has been a blessing, I imagine that many of you are thinking about the quickly-approaching summer and wondering or even worrying about what it will look like with many of our typical summer activities not available. Thankfully the stress of managing remote learning will be alleviated with the end of the school year; however, many of you may experience a different set of stressors in trying to figure out how to keep your children occupied over the summer vacation. Practicing mindfulness yourself and with your children may help you all cope with any difficulties, including boredom, that may arise. As promised, here is another newsletter in our series on Mindfulness.

In this edition we focus on understanding the impact of mindfulness on our brains. When I began learning about mindfulness, one of the things that I found most compelling about it was that there is a growing body of research showing how effective it is and specifically, that there is brain science behind it. Below you will find an introduction to the basics of the science behind mindfulness, as well as resources for teaching your children about mindfulness and their brains. As always, please reach out with any questions or concerns.

Sincerely,
Sarah Wagner and the Epping Counseling Department

UNDERSTANDING MINDFULNESS AND OUR BRAINS

First things first. Let's review some basic brain science.

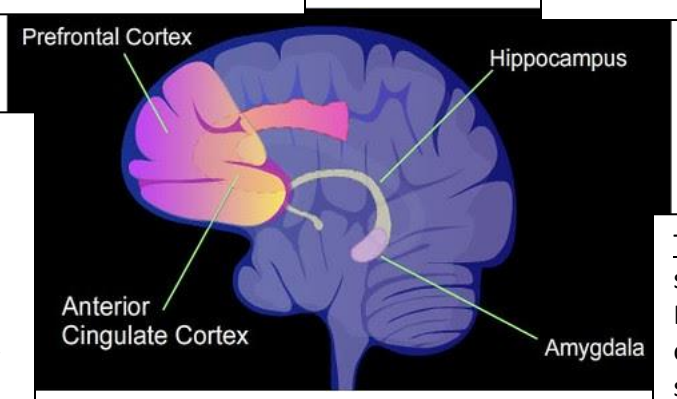
Our brains change and grow throughout our lives based on our experiences

- Our brains are composed of specialized "communication" cells called neurons. There are 80-100 billion neurons in the human brain!
- Each neuron forms thousands of connections with other neurons, creating pathways for information to flow from one part of our brain to another
- The more we use a particular pathway in the brain, the faster and more efficient it is, and the easier it is to trigger its use again

Now let's take a look at a few key regions of the brain and the role they play:

The Prefrontal Cortex - our thinking brain. It is involved in helping us plan and problem-solve

The Hippocampus -plays a key role in memory and learning



The Anterior Cingulate Cortex – part of the thinking brain that helps us regulate our attention and emotions. It is also involved with empathy and impulse-control

The Amygdala – the seat of our emotions. It plays a key role in our response to stress, fear, anxiety.

Next, we look at how these regions interact:

- When something triggers strong emotions, the amygdala takes over.
  - It often misperceives these triggers as a threat and will activate our primal flight, fight, or freeze response
- When activated, the amygdala "hijacks" the thinking and memory parts of our brain, which means:
  - We are not able to make rational decisions
  - We are unable to control our impulses or regulate our behavior
  - We cannot call up memories (such as how we solved these kinds of problems in the past) or learn anything new

So, how does mindfulness help?

1. In the moment, practicing mindfulness can help calm the amygdala and bring the thinking and memory regions of the brain back "online."
2. Practicing mindfulness over time has been shown to:
   a. Increase the size and the activation of the prefrontal cortex, the anterior cingulate cortex, and the hippocampus – in other words it can improve our rational thinking, problem-solving, self-regulation, ability to sustain attention and can enhance our ability to access our memories and learn new things.
   b. Decrease the size and activation of the amygdala – meaning that we may not be as emotionally reactive or as prone to react to strong emotions with a fight, flight or freeze response

How can I explain this in ways that children can understand?

For elementary and middle school children: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=so8QN9an3t8
For older children/teens: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aNCB1MZDgQA

RESOURCES FOR SUPPORT

Families First is offering opportunities for parents to connect with other parents online to help decrease the feeling of social isolation we are all facing. These groups are informal with no agenda except for sharing stories and ideas, venting frustrations and reminding ourselves that we are not alone as we get through this challenging time together.

Tuesday Evening Parent Recharge
weekly at 6:30 p.m.
Join Zoom Meeting
https://zoom.us/j/540259112
Meeting ID: 540 259 112

Thursday Morning Parent Recharge
weekly at 9:30 a.m.
https://zoom.us/j/334557303
Meeting ID: 334 557 303

Heads Up: Coping through Covid-19 is a mental health webinar series from Dartmouth-Hitchcock with several webinars focused on parenting: https://www.dartmouth-hitchcock.org/patient-education/mental-health-webinar-series.html

Counselor/Psychologist email and office hours:

EES

Julie Kratimenos: Julie.kratimenos@eppingsd.org, 9:00am-12:00pm

Marianne McDonough: mmcdonough@eppingsd.org, 8:30am-10:00am, 2:00pm-3:30pm

Kathy Stanley-Berting: KStanley-berting@eppingsd.org, 8:00am-10:00am, 1:00pm-2:00pm

EMS

Sarah Wagner: swagner@eppingsd.org, 8:30am-10:00am, 1:00pm-2:30pm

Nick Degruttola: ndegruttola@eppingsd.org, 9:00am-12:00pm

EHS

Sarah Wagner: swagner@eppingsd.org, 8:30am-10:00am, 1:00pm-2:30pm

Julie Morin: jmorin@eppingsd.org, 9:00am-10:30am, 1:00pm-2:30pm

Melorah Bisallion: mbisaillon@eppingsd.org 10:30am-1:30pm

Community Resources:

Dial 211 for statewide resources

Waypoint confidential support and advice for families: 1-800-640-6486

Seacoast Mental Health Center: 431-6703 and 772-2710

Unemployment assistance: www.nhes.nh.gov

Suicide Prevention Hotline: 1-800-237-TALK (8255)

Crisis Text Line: Text 741741

Community Partners: 516-9300

HAVEN: 994-SAFE (7233)