



Being Mindful on Campus

How Mindfulness Is Helping Students Cope with Anxiety

By Ahuva Reich

Long before the coronavirus changed the world as we know it, Rabbi Reuven Boshnack, the OU's Jewish Learning Initiative on Campus (OU-JLIC) educator at Brooklyn College, made an observation: quite a number of students on campus were struggling with anxiety. These students were having a hard time coping with multiple real-life pressures. "We have a significant number of Jewish immigrant students including Syrians, Russians, Persians and Kavkazi Jews who are supporting their families; . . . our Hillel is incredibly multi-cultural," says Rabbi Boshnack. "In addition, they face the challenges of finding a marriage partner while juggling school, family relationships, social life and work. Many of these young adults are also trying to figure out where they fit religiously—and to be at home with their Judaism."

College students tend to be especially vulnerable to feeling stressed and overwhelmed. "In the olden days, life on the farm was very predictable," says Rabbi Boshnack. "Contemporary life has a greater degree of uncertainty," says Boshnack.

There was already a significant mental health crisis in this country, well

before the pandemic set in, notes Rabbi Boshnack. "The opioid crisis is just one indication of the unhappiness of society," he explains. Of course, with the advent of the pandemic, many students began to feel even more anxious and stressed.

Rabbi Boshnack, a graduate of Yeshiva University with a degree in mental health counseling, and his wife, Shira, have made mental health a priority in their work as OU-JLIC educators at Brooklyn College for the past thirteen years. The couple engage in pastoral counseling, helping students on an ongoing basis and referring them for further treatment when necessary. They organized a mental health awareness evening with a panel discussion that was open to the entire community and attracted some 300 participants. On a practical level, the Boshnacks assist students in finding internships and jobs, and even *shidduchim* through JLIConnections, a dating program geared for OU-JLIC students and alumni.

Mindfulness: an Antidote to Anxiety
A central component of many kinds of psychotherapy, mindfulness has also become increasingly trendy in recent years. The meditative technique is popular among Hollywood celebrities and corporations like Aetna, Target and General Mills, which offer mindfulness training to employees (some corporations even hire "chief mindfulness officers" in the hopes

of increasing productivity).

However, while some people think of mindfulness as an Eastern meditative technique, it is actually a Jewish concept, rooted in age-old Jewish sources. "There is ample evidence that meditative practices were widespread among Jews throughout Jewish history," wrote the brilliant physicist and prolific author of Jewish works Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan in his book *Jewish Meditation* (chap. 5). "References to meditation are found in major Jewish texts in every period from the biblical to the pre-modern era." In fact, the Amidah, Rav Kaplan writes, was designed to be a meditation. And the Musar Movement, he notes, is one of the most important meditative movements in Judaism.

In a lecture on Jewish mindfulness, Rabbi Ya'akov Trump,* rabbi of the Young Israel of Lawrence-Cedarhurst in New York, discusses how many of the concepts found in mindfulness—such as meditation—*hisbodedut*—and "being in the present" are drawn from Judaism. The Gemara (*Sukkah* 53a), for example, states: *It is said about Hillel the Elder that when he would rejoice at the Simchat Beit Hashoevah, he would say: 'If I am here, everyone is here; but if I am not here, who is here? What did Hillel mean?'* Quoting Rabbi Nisson Alpert, Rabbi Trump explains Hillel's words as follows: When I am here, all of me is here. In other words, if I am engaged in an activity—whether I am playing with my



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* "Jewish Mindfulness," available at <https://www.yutorah.org/sidebar/lecture.cfm/865797/rabbi-ya-akov-trump/jewish-mindfulness-/>.

children or learning Torah—all of me is engaged and fully present in that activity.

This past fall semester, Rabbi Boshnack, who has Chassidic leanings, had an idea: why not draw upon his own interest in mindfulness to address the growing anxiety among students? Soon “Mindful Mondays,” a weekly discussion group on Jewish mindfulness, was launched.

“We started the course because we wanted to be prophylactic—and help young people achieve mental hygiene,” says Rabbi Boshnack. “If someone is worried—he needs to understand what he can do to self soothe; he needs to learn to recognize the situations that cause him to be anxious. Part of the solution is self-awareness, getting to know one’s feelings and thoughts.”

The course is based on the work of Dr. Benjamin Epstein, a Jerusalem-based psychologist and author of *Living in the Presence: A Jewish Mindfulness Guide to Everyday Life*, who in his book demonstrates the idea that one must consciously infuse the present with The Presence, the awareness of the Divinity that is imbued in every moment. Rabbi Boshnack intersperses Chassidic stories and Torah concepts with breathing methods, guided imagery and other techniques that relax the body and mind. A good part of the class is experiential. In a soothing, calming voice, he guides students to engage in relaxation techniques and then to visualize letting go of negative emotions.

“Mindfulness really teaches you to be in the moment and that it’s ok to sit with uncomfortable emotions,” says Sarah (not her real name), who has been attending the weekly sessions since they began. “I love the classes. They are the highlight of my week.”

Zooming Mindfulness

Once Covid-19 shut down the Brooklyn College campus in early March and students were forced to be homebound, a whole new host of challenges arose, such as students having to contend with difficult familial relationships; navigating Pesach at home with their non-religious families; or dealing with making a Seder alone. Not surprisingly, Rabbi Boshnack’s course, viewed as

Key Pointers for Coping with Anxiety

Remember:

- Although prolonged periods of stress can wear down your body and mind, anxiety is a normal part of our biology. It actually protects you when there is a threat to our physical or emotional safety.
- Don’t discount or downplay anxiety. “When someone is worried for example, just saying ‘cheer up’ doesn’t work. It’s the equivalent of saying to a heart patient, ‘Just snap out of it. I think you’ll be ok,’” says Rabbi Boshnack.
- Outlets, such as exercise, sports, art, music or reading, are important in managing stress. Engage in range of activities that you enjoy.
- Stay connected. You are not alone, even though it may feel that way. Keep in touch with people who can provide practical assistance or emotional support.
- If your anxiety feels unmanageable, you should seek professional help. Therapy and/or medication can be beneficial.



Rabbi Reuven Boshnack, and his wife, Shira, both of whom have been serving as OU-JLIC educators at Brooklyn College for the past thirteen years, have made mental health a priority in their work on campus.



Rabbi Boshnack with students at Brooklyn College.

We need to do a better job inculcating in our children and in our students that Hashem loves us. This is especially important during challenging times, such as the times we are living in right now.

a luxury only weeks earlier, was now seen as a necessity. Currently called “The Mindful Zoom,” the course is drawing even more participants than when it was on campus.

“Students are fearful about their health and about their families’ health; they are concerned about the economic frontier; there’s a lot going on [contributing to students’ anxiety],” says Rabbi Boshnack. “Some are grieving over losing a loved one. Others are grieving over their future—they might have lost jobs or internships that were lined up.” There are many of layers of stress, and teaching coping skills and resilience through mindfulness is Rabbi Boshnack’s specialty.

How Mindfulness Works

What are some of the fundamental ideas of Jewish mindfulness?

- **Being in the moment.** “We are used to living distractedly and running away from the present,” says Rabbi Boshnack. Paying attention to your breathing and to the sensations around you can help you achieve a state of mindfulness. Clear your mind of thoughts about the future or past by focusing on what you are doing in the present. Cooking, exercising and dancing are examples of activities that require one to be immersed in the present



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“There are many layers of stress, and teaching coping skills and resilience through mindfulness is Rabbi Boshnack’s specialty.”

moment, which is why people enjoy these hobbies.

- **Learning the skill of gratitude.** “Thankfulness is a skill,” says Rabbi Boshnack. Instead of allowing your mind to focus on the negative, practice focusing on the good. This will enable you to develop a healthy and positive outlook. Ask yourself: What did I receive? And what did I give back?
- **Directing the mind towards radical acceptance.** Accept the reality as it is. You can react to it but you can’t fight it. Accept, for example, that you have to be sheltered at home for a few weeks during a pandemic. “Acceptance of reality is an active choice,” writes noted American psychologist Marsha M. Linehan, the founder of dialectical behavior therapy (DBT), a type of psychotherapy that combines behavioral science with mindfulness.
- **Knowing that “it’s okay to not be okay.”** People think everything has to be perfect and that they are supposed to be holding up just fine, even during an unprecedented pandemic, says Rabbi Boshnack. That’s simply not the case.

Religion can be drawn upon as a resource to find meaning, comfort and peace of mind. Unfortunately, Rabbi Boshnack finds that it can have the opposite effect when one is lacking certain foundations of faith. “We need to do a better job inculcating in our children and in our students that Hashem loves us. This is especially important during challenging times, such as the times we are living in. We mention this concept every day in our *tefillot*. Rav Soloveitchik taught that it’s *kefirah* [heresy] to believe that Hashem commands us to love Him but doesn’t love us back.”

Internalizing some of the key elements of *emunah* can also result in reduced anxiety and greater *yishuv hada'at* (tranquility). “Especially in times of great uncertainty, one should work on recognizing that one is not running the show, but that God is,” says Rabbi Boshnack.

The most critical aspect in coping with anxiety of all kinds is learning skills that build the grit and resilience necessary for coping with stress. Once students master the art of Jewish mindfulness, says Rabbi Boshnack, they will be able to think healthy thoughts; to welcome their thoughts and not run away from them; to live in the moment; and to internalize that God is in control. They will be healthier and happier overall and will be better equipped to face all kinds of life challenges—even a global pandemic. ■