



## Pop Quiz

with Michele Chaban  
BY LAURA BICKLE

Everyone teaches their students to use their brains, but what about their minds? Michele Chaban, co-founder and director of the Applied Mindfulness Meditation program ([bit.ly/1oh2Yu2](http://bit.ly/1oh2Yu2)) at the University of Toronto's Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work, says that when you integrate mindfulness meditation into your daily practice, it strengthens the teacher-student connection and is key to helping your students learn to become more compassionate people. The self-awareness guru shares how meditation can improve your ability to learn and your overall well-being, training the body and mind to work together.

**Q** How would you describe mindfulness meditation?

Jon Kabat-Zinn, a leader in the field, defines it as the non-judgmental act of paying attention to what you experience in a single moment. If we take that a step further, mindfulness meditation can be seen as a series of methods that include exercising conscious, attention to breathing, listening, speaking, as well as non-judgmental awareness. To put it simply, with this training we learn to respond rather than react, and it reminds us to connect rather than correct.

**Q** Why is this training a helpful tool in a school setting?

These practices can strengthen our whole brain, and increase our ability to teach and learn. Sharing this with our youth promotes self-regulation, which impacts both mental health and wellness — it also reduces risk taking and anxiety and can lead to an enhanced awareness of not only the self but others. Teachers can use this practice to improve all forms of communication: written, verbal and behavioural. It's also a useful coaching strategy for parents and peers. We've even seen it reduce incidents of horizontal violence (intergroup conflict) by as much as 50 per cent.

**Q** How can mindfulness training help prevent teacher burnout?

We know that burnout is a combination of factors, largely due to being ill-informed about how our bodies and brains integrate. By learning specific brain-body exercises associated with mindfulness, we lay down the neuropathways that lead to improved health. Research shows that mindfulness is a model that creates resiliency within us and around us. A 2012 comparative employee wellness study, "Meditation or Exercise for Preventing Acute Respiratory Infection," shows that those who practise it enjoy a 76 per cent reduction in sick days.

**Q** Can you give an example of an exercise teachers can try?

Try this three-minute exercise. Take a comfortable posture and bring yourself into the present. Follow your breath — breathing in and out, gently and naturally — and let the breath be your anchor in this present moment. Acknowledge the thoughts, feelings and body sensations that you're experiencing. Take the breath to all areas of your body. Breathe into the sensations. While breathing out, allow a sense of softening, opening and dissolution. Remind yourself that "it's OK to feel whatever I'm feeling." Bring this expanded awareness into the rest of your day.