

At Royal West Academy, a 'mindful moment' helps ease student stress

Royal West Academy holds a school-wide 'mindful moment' every day

By Shari Okeke, [CBC News](#) Posted: Nov 03, 2016 4:00 PM ET Last Updated: Nov 03, 2016 5:47 PM ET

Every morning at 10:42 a.m., Royal West Academy students know it's time to stop whatever they're doing and focus on their breathing for the "mindful moment," as part of a program that aims to reduce student stress levels.

Meditation music plays throughout the high school in Montreal West, as students are guided through about two minutes of mindfulness exercises.

"We're going to be doing a body scan today for our mindful moment so if you're in the hallways take advantage of this moment to stop and in the classrooms get yourself comfortable," Jan Mateus, the coordinator of Mind POP and a former school counsellor, can be heard saying over the PA system.

"POP" stands for plan, organize and prioritize.

Calming influence

While Mateus asks students to focus as they take deep breaths, some students are restless and have trouble settling down, while others embrace the opportunity to relax.

"It's something that really helps calm me, especially when I'm stressed," said Alex Rona, a grade 11 student who suffers from panic attacks when he feels overwhelmed by school work.

"I hyperventilate, my mind races into, 'I'm going to fail the year, I'm never going to get into CEGEP.'"

Royal West, a public school within the English Montreal School Board, is highly competitive.

Students compete for a spot in the school by writing an entrance exam and in many cases, they also go through an interview process.

Many of those accepted were top of their class in elementary school and then experience a shock when they find themselves surrounded by other high-achieving students.

'I end up throwing up'

"I had around a 90 average in elementary school and I came to Royal West and my first term I got in the mid-70s as an average so I think that really shook me," Rona said.

Royal West students also take several advanced level courses, which they must balance with compulsory extracurricular activities they do for credit.

Anxiety related to school work peaked for Alex Harboun last year when she was in Grade 9. It got so bad she missed a week of school.

"I get this rush of nausea and I end up throwing up and not being able to stop," said Harboun, who is now in Grade 10.

With the support of her parents, she met with a therapist last year and learned a lot about breathing and mindfulness.

Harboun says the added support of the Mind POP program at school, including the daily mindful moment, helps a lot.

"I use that in my exams at the beginning of my exams. Right before I start I take a minute to breathe [and think] 'ok I can do this'" said Harboun, adding that now she knows how to manage her stress and she feels good about this school year so far.

Getting organized

Mind POP also aims to help students organize their time.

Starting in Grade 7 students learn to use a "one binder" system to organize all their subjects, as well as a home filing system for notes they do not need at school on a daily basis.

Students can also get help tailored to their individual needs.

Rona says he is a visual learner, so Mind POP taught him to colour code when he organizes his work.

"It helped me manage my life, manage my studies, helped me organize my binders and made my head much clearer and focused where it should be," Rona said.

There is a Mind POP room in the school where students can attend study hall and make use of bean bags, various types of cushions, noise-reducing head phones and other tools to support them while they study.

Mindfulness is now part of the culture of the school and some teachers begin each of their own classes with a mindful moment as well, Mateus said.

Cristina Almeida, another Mind POP coordinator, who teaches history and Spanish, says starting her classes with a mindful moment is key.

Otherwise students can be distracted by a poor test result or disappointing grade received in a previous class.

"So they're not even really listening to what I'm teaching," Almeida said.

"When you have the mindfulness it's a moment when you can stop and say 'ok whatever happened before this moment is done, I'm gonna take a moment to breathe' and now we look forward and move on."

Royal West says it took time to introduce mindfulness into the school's culture but says now fewer students are reporting ongoing persistent stress.

High expectations

Still, the guidance department does encounter students worried about letting their parents down when it comes to grades.

Rona says he used to worry about his parents' expectations but says he's less worried now that they've realized it's ok to fail sometimes.

He says he wants other parents to know that students who are not meeting their parents' expectations may act like they do not care, but they do.

"They actually feel disappointed inside," he said.

"[Parents] do have a great influence on what they think ... I think you have to take things in perspective and understand that a student's mental health is more important than whatever mark they got on a French oral."