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## Kids and anxiety: Therapists integrate yoga, meditation and other methods to alleviate stress and worries

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Therapy and medication are primary treatments for childhood and adolescent anxiety, but they are not the only way to help kids who are feeling stressed and anxious. Yoga, meditation and mindfulness are all being looked at as ways to help not only the one in four children and adolescents who will suffer an anxiety disorder in their lifetime, but also the greater population that battles stress and anxiety in daily lives.

“In helping kids who are worriers, we’re trying to teach them you had a scary feeling or a scary thought, but that doesn’t mean anything about the truth of the situation other than you had that scary feeling or thought. Meditation does the same thing,” said psychologist Lynne Siqueland of the Children’s Center for OCD and Anxiety in Plymouth Meeting, Pa.

“I’ve become more interested in doing more and more with that; I’m part of a group of therapists who are trying to integrate,” Siqueland said. “It’s a very similar approach but a different entry point than cognitive behavioral therapy. There is a lot of evidence — especially with adults, less with kids — that yoga and mindfulness really can help, too.

Such methods may solve the problem for children with mild anxiety or serve as another tool for those for whom anxiety has more severely impacted their lives.

Montvale’s Allison Morgan is an occupational therapist and founder of Zensational Kids, a company that creates programs to help “integrate the evidence-based science of yoga and mindfulness” into pediatric therapy and education.

“You have an anxiety disorder, something happens, you get all of those feelings stirring,” Morgan said. “But if we use yoga, mindfulness, meditation, you practice when you are not anxious so you can create this new pattern in your brain and within your body ... so that when that anxious event or thought enters, you can kick in this new habit, which changes this cycle.”

Recently Morgan held a workshop for educators and therapists in her Educate 2B! program to implement in their classrooms to help alleviate stress and anxiety in the students and create a better learning environment.

Throughout the daylong session, Morgan talked about brain function and neural pathways. She cited the studies and research that



AMY NEWMAN/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Educate 2B!, a one-day workshop, gathered educators and therapists in Oradell in March.

back her methods or notes where it is in the program manual.

For example, she doesn't just show how to properly do the "belly breath," she explains that deeper breaths activate the parasympathetic nervous system and create a relaxation response. When relaxed, the prefrontal cortex of the brain is activated, allowing people to create, plan, organize and better self-regulate and stay on task.

Instead of just showing the proper form for the warrior yoga pose, she cites a 2012 Harvard study that showed that doing the "power poses" like warrior can actually make people feel and believe they are brave, confident and strong. That feeling helps them actually accomplish things that might be challenging.

To prove her point about the power of yoga in academics, she mentions a 2009 study published in the International Journal of Yoga that showed the students who practiced yoga performed better in academics and that low-stress students performed better than high-stress students.

At one point of the training, she notes that the constant reminder of the research is for "the people who are paying us" – the superintendents, principals and directors of programs. The group all nodded knowingly. It's the scientific evidence that keeps some administrators, and other teachers, from rolling their eyes and dismissing the idea of yoga or meditation.

Along with yoga, meditation and mindfulness, some parents believe that changing a child's diet and cutting out certain foods including gluten and sugar can help with anxiety issues. Experts say there is no evidence to back those specific claims.

The fewer sugar highs and lows and better balanced diet, however, along with exercise and getting the right amount of sleep does help overall health and well-being, including controlling emotions, which can be a roller coaster for anxious kids.

"Good sleep, hygiene, good rest, good balanced diet, all that always helps with emotional regulation," said psychologist Donna Pincus, director of the Child and Adolescent Fear and Anxiety Treatment Program at Boston University and author of "Growing Up Brave: Expert Strategies for Helping Your Child Overcome Fear, Stress, and Anxiety." "There's kids who are just not eating; that's going to affect their mood, too."

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Allison Morgan of Montvale demonstrates a "focused eagle" yoga stance during Educate 2B!

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