MESSAGE FROM THE PACT TEAM

Welcome to the first PACT Newsletter of the 2015-2016 school year. For those of you who are new to the SAR High School community, PACT stands for “Parents Ask Call Talk.” PACT represents our initiative to build a culture of communication and collaboration among parents, children and the school.

We have exciting PACT programming for the upcoming year that includes student discussions, parent evenings and a brand new parent forum that will begin in the spring, to discuss current literature relating to PACT issues. Some of the topics that we will be covering this year include sexuality, drug and alcohol abuse, teen safety, and mental health as well as other relevant topics to today’s adolescents. For details on this year’s parent evenings, please refer to the grid on page 8.

The theme for our first newsletter of the year is mindfulness. We hope that the information contained in this newsletter helps you to prepare for the new year with a mindful perspective on parenting teens and improving the lines of communication between parents, students and school.

As always, we would love your feedback. Feel free to email us at pact@sarhighschool.org with any comments, questions or suggestions.

Shana tova! – The PACT Team

WHAT IS MINDFULNESS?

By: Dr. Russell Hoffman, School Psychologist

A lot of attention has been focused in recent years on the potential benefits of “mindfulness.” There have been numerous research articles published exploring the role of mindfulness in a variety of areas such as managing stress, coping with trauma, enhancing communication and relationships, and optimizing classroom performance, to name just a few. Indeed, mindfulness is emerging as both a promising area of study and a source of easily integrated exercises for counselors and educators to use with students. So - what exactly is mindfulness? Jon Kabat-Zinn, the founder of the Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction system and a renowned practitioner and spokesperson for mindfulness, describes it as purposeful and sustained

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The origins of mindfulness techniques can be traced to Buddhist meditation practices of approximately 2500 years ago. It was used to reach a state of inner peace, to strengthen concentration, and as a way of tapping human potential. Over the centuries, mindfulness has been employed by Hindus, Muslims, Christians and Jews as well. Within Buddhism, it has been taught that mindfulness requires intense practice and devotion and one may only teach it after many years of practice under the watchful eyes of a Buddhist instructor. Research has shown that mindfulness can successfully reduce both psychological symptoms as well as improve physical health.

RESOURCES WITH TIPS FOR PRACTICING MINDFULNESS:

• CLICK HERE to take the 21 day mindfulness challenge! Join others around the globe for a 21-Day Mindfulness Challenge beginning on September 2nd. Through this challenge, you’ll receive a daily email with inspiration and ideas on how to cultivate your own daily mindfulness practice. way. (http://www.kindspring.org/challenge/join/672/)

• Mindful Parenting: Simple and powerful solutions for raising creative, engaged, happy kids in today’s hectic world by Kristen Race

• For a great exercise to begin mindfulness both for yourself and family, watch the following “Three Good Things Mindfulness Exercise.” (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ikjT3829sZ0)

FAST PACE LIVES AND GROWING ANXIETY

By: Ms. Cari Cohen, Assistant Director of College Counseling

Facebook used to be the social media of choice for teens. Now, Facebook is passé, too slow to compete with Snapchat, Twitter, and YikYak. I find myself reminding students to check their email because that, too, has become too slow. Speed may contribute to students’ anxiety and stress, and one antidote may be to help students live in the moment and slow down. Many students feel overwhelmed by their constant stream of thoughts and never-ending to-do list. As we all know, the enormous changes brought on by technological innovations have changed our lives in both positive and negative ways. Mindfulness techniques can help students develop tools to manage their stress. By taking the time to focus on what’s truly important, students can slow down their thoughts so that they can stop multi-tasking and focus on the present moment. By practicing mindfulness, and learning breathing and relaxation techniques, one can learn to stay fully present. Anxiety is worrying about the past or the future; mindfulness deals with the present moment, so by definition it cannot include worry. When a worrying thought arises, it can be noted and then let go, with the focus redirected to the present. By practicing mindfulness exercises, students can learn the tools to manage anxious feelings. Once that happens, gaining a new management technique helps to empower the student to manage future stressful moments. Being mindful, in essence, means to accept whatever may come, and to build the confidence and ability to successfully manage life’s inevitable challenges.
HOW PARENTS CAN MODEL MINDFULNESS

By: Rabbi Aaron Frank, Associate Principal

“What’s the secret to parenting?...Be the person you want your kids to become.”

- Dr. Kristen Race,

As parents, we have many goals for our individual children and for our broader family unit. We aim to act as positive role models, reflecting the many priorities and values we hold dear. When it comes to parenting towards mindfulness, one of the central elements is the importance of modelling in the hopes that our children imitate and emulate our practice of a contemplative approach to the challenges of life.

Spending time reflecting upon practices of mindfulness and implementing them as parents will not only lead to an increased quality of life for us parents, but it will set a positive tone for our families as it will model practices that our children can imitate.

In Chapter 9 of her book, Dr. Race, shares a framework for creating a “Mindful Family.” With a grounding in brain science and step by step recommendations for each of the following points, she challenges us, as parents to:

1- “Create space for mindfulness” by noticing how we physically breathe and by allowing us to act reflectively with “forethought instead of first thought.” (p. 171) We can achieve this by taking mindful breaths before we embark on tasks that may cause stress such as answering a potentially stressful phone call or sitting in traffic. She also suggests to simply try to slow down when we approach tasks that we often do quickly such as driving or typing.

2- Live more in the present by increasing awareness of the moment. We can achieve this by simply talking to our teens about things we notice that are new or unusual around us, either when we are driving or walking. Also, she suggests being more mindful of our speech. Even tracking together how often we use “filler” words such as the words like or literally will allow us to be more mindful.

3- Cultivate empathy and compassion by decreasing negativity in discourse and increasing positive interaction with one another. We can achieve this by taking moments during structured family time such as before kiddush on Shabbat evening to express something positive about each family member. Subscribe to daily good news emails such as www.dailygood.com and talk about them with the family. Also, remember that your teen is never too old to be reminded to say please and thank you. We can model that behavior as well.

4- Develop patience and persistence in the face of adversity by recognizing mistakes and developing our muscle of patience. We can achieve this not only through mindful breathing previously outlined, but by articulating the mistakes we make with our teens. A once per week go-around at the table that asks, “what mistake did you learn from today?” can show a commitment to this value. Also, do not hesitate to model to your children by apologizing to them when you make a mistake.

5- Do not overschedule your child- In our Modern Orthodox yeshiva culture, just our children’s school hours are filled from sunup to sundown. Additionally, we want our children to take part in extracurriculars and sports in order to have varied experiences and, let’s be honest, to improve their college profile. Race recommends that in order to live mindful, healthy lives, we cannot overprogram our children. She writes, “Teenagers can handle extracurricular activities three to five days a week.” Before starting the school year, discuss this recommendation with your child. Remember, the decision of the weight of your schedule and your child’s is up

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EMPOWERING YOUR CHILD’S ACADEMIC SUCCESS:
Mindful Techniques in the Parent-Child Dialogue

By: Dr. Gail Gumora, Coordinator SLC Resource Program

Achieving and maintaining academic success in high school is less about intellectual ability and more about mastering perseverance. Without developing a “stick with it approach,” even the brightest student falls prey to a series of incomplete or missed assignments, lower test grades, and overall loss of motivation. While natural, a parent’s worried response to this scenario can fuel tensions that undermine the parent’s desire to help.

What is a parent to do?

Parenting an adolescent is no easy job. By design teenagers are in a tug of war with dependence versus independence. As such, they are likely to avoid seeking parental advice, especially around school-related issues. Asking the perennial question, “How was school today?” may now be seen as an invasion of privacy. The response to which would be intended to keep a parent in the dark.

Feeling helpless, the parent may compensate by nagging or making threats to limit activities the child truly enjoys. Frustration and anger tend to become emotional byproducts for both parent and child. A more effective approach for dealing with this sensitive issue could involve using principles of mindfulness.

Mindfulness is the cultivation of being present and paying attention to daily acts of living that brings about heightened awareness. This awareness allows for a more honest and thoughtful level of understanding and communication. Having an open mind and heart rather than holding on to assumptions, worries, and judgments drive the interaction. The parent who applies mindfulness techniques when speaking with a son or daughter about improving academic performance can cultivate cooperation over resistance. In such an atmosphere both parent and child join forces to come up with solutions for recharging motivation. When appropriate, the parent can act as a study partner.

Below are suggestions for engaging in a mindfulness dialogue with your child.

Preparing for the conversation:

• Reflect on the fears you have about your child’s academic progress. Are you worried he/she will not get into the right college? Are you worried about his/her self-esteem? Are you worried he/she may have a learning disability?
• Accept the fear. Once you can do that, the fear loses its power and allows you to deal with the present issue – helping your child find ways to get his/her work done.

Introducing the need for a conversation:

• Be honest, not angry.
• Invite your son or daughter into the conversation. Set a time that is convenient for both of you and stick to it. “I’ve noticed you haven’t been spending much time on school work lately. When would be a good time to talk about this?”

During the conversation:

• Listen without interrupting to make your point. The conversation should not be a competition.
• Show compassion. Try to see school through your son/daughter’s eyes and acknowledge his/her perspective. Acknowledgement does not mean you must agree. Rather it honors your child’s personhood. Respecting your child for who he/she is increases opportunities for cooperation. It will become easier to strategize about setting priorities and time-management.
• Ask how else you can be helpful and be available both physically and mentally. Be attentive and have a positive attitude.

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EMPOWERING YOUR CHILD’S ACADEMIC SUCCESS (continued from pg 4)

The parent as a study partner:

Some students have a difficult time studying alone. They need to bounce ideas off of a willing listener. Offer to be a listener. Have your child recite information he/she has been studying. Reciting information helps students reinforce and clarify what they know. You do not need to be the expert, just listen for connections between the main idea and the details. If you think details are missing, you can say: “Can you tell me more, I’m not sure I understand.” Be careful not to criticize.

Finally, do not underestimate your child. He/she may find it difficult to share feelings about missing assignments and lower test grades to avoid disappointing you. But the feelings are present and more than likely coincide with what you are feeling. He/she is also worried and wants to succeed.

When my daughter was in tenth grade she lost some academic momentum. I walked into her room one evening and snapped at her about not doing homework. She looked at me and said, “Mom don’t you think I am as worried as you. What I need is a hug instead of your criticism.”

WHAT IS MINDFULNESS? (continued from pg 1)

attention to cultivate one’s undistorted, non-judgmental awareness of the moment.

Mindfulness is the practice of focusing one’s conscious awareness on the moment. It involves actively and purposefully focusing the mind on the task at hand, whether it is a thinking task, such as deciding on a thesis for an essay or thinking about an interaction with another person and deciding how you feel about it, or an activity, such as eating, reading or engaging in conversation. Mindfulness is the opposite of mindlessness - it is the opposite of doing something while operating on “automatic pilot.” In a sense, it is the act of devoting one’s awareness and engagement meaningfully and completely to one thing at a time. In today’s world of multi-tasking and juggling multiple agendas/expectations, mindfulness might seem like a daunting endeavor or a threat to productivity. However, much of the research shows that practicing mindfulness can have substantial benefits for productivity as well as one’s psychological and physical well-being. And, perhaps even more importantly, mindfulness exercises are not difficult to learn or use.

One way that we have found to help explain and teach mindfulness to students is by focusing attention on just one sensory experience for a short period of time. For example, we might have students sit quietly, with eyes closed, and focus their attention on their tactile sensory input: the feel of the cool air from the air conditioner vent blowing across their skin, the feel of the desk under their hands, the weight of their shirt fabric pressing down on their shoulders, etc. Alternatively, we might ask students to focus their visual attention on a flickering candle flame or a tree outside the window, noticing and appreciating the range of visual details that they usually overlook, while also tuning out the background “noise” of their other senses. Each of these mindfulness exercises lasts about 3 minutes. Using these brief exercises, we give students an experiential lesson in what it feels like to be more fully present and aware in the moment, so that they have a reference point for using these techniques on their own. With practice, this can allow students to develop more control over their attention regulation and other cognitive processes, which is certainly a useful asset for learning.

HOW PARENTS CAN MODEL MINDFULNESS (continued from pg 3)

to you and them. How will you all create a schedule that is, at once, challenging and stimulating and also one that has enough breathing space to create a healthy balance in your teen’s life and the life of your family?

While each of these directives may seem intuitively simple, they are easier said than done. Only by conscious, deliberate and thoughtful planning can we succeed in internalizing these behaviors. Through practicing these techniques we will be able to be models of mindfulness for our teens, who, even though some may deny it or may not want to admit it, look to us as one of the central, if not the central, role models in their lives.
MINDFULNESS and PRAYER in an AGE of DISTRACTION

In his book, Focus, Daniel Goleman, the psychologist and journalist calls the times in which we live, “The Age of Distraction”. All around us, forces are competing for our attention. The prevalence of technology and media have raised this to an unprecedented level in our society. He writes, “The real message is: because attention is under siege more than it has ever been in human history, we have more distractions than ever before, we have to be more focused on cultivating the skills of attention.” Focus and mindfulness are crucial ingredients, not only for personal achievement, but for inner peace, rootedness, a sense of transcendence and an appreciation for what we have.

Achieving this level of mindfulness takes practice; in our media-saturated environment, even more so. Jewish life contains within it a powerful mechanism through which to cultivate mindfulness and a deep inner spirit: it is the power of daily prayer.

Professor Michael Fishbane explicates the way that tefilla and brachot expressly serve the purpose of cultivating a spiritual mindfulness, focused attention and an appreciation of the basic experiences of everyday life. His book is aptly titled Sacred Attunement, reflecting the idea that developing such mindfulness and spiritual awareness requires practice. It requires developing a disposition and cultivating an attunement to the beauty and sacredness of everyday being-in-the-world.

“Daily life is filled with events that largely escape routine attention. It is halakha that tries to focus the mind so that one may acknowledge the many occasions of life as they happen. At the nexus of world-being and personhood, the language of blessings is a powerful agent of transformation. The early morning recitations and blessings for food or unexpected occurrences (of sight and sound) are exemplary (p. 121)”. The brachot that we recite each morning are remarkable in the intensity of their focus. Although we commonly recite these berachot in shul, they were designed to be recited as we experience each moment of the morning routine. Consider its power: a blessing when we open our eyes and see; when we cover ourselves with clothing; when we are able to stretch out and move our body; when we place our feet on the ground; when we stand up.

Our prayer charges us to slow down and take notice of every moment of the morning routine, to take nothing for granted, to focus deeply on the everyday.

Professor Fishbane continues: Nothing is taken for granted; everything is received as a gift...The subjective self directs mindfulness to this influx of God’s creative force into one’s daily life, which is now not a mindless routine of mere naturalness, but seen with a focused spiritual attention. Daily sustenance is experienced as a divine gift and normal habitude is ruptured (p. 122).”

Daily prayer provides us with a powerful opportunity to begin our day by cultivating a sense of spirit and inner peace; to take a break from the intense flow of classes and activities to slow down, reflect and appreciate; and to end our day in a mindful and spiritually attuned way. In the “Age of Distraction”, prayer is a gift in which we should invest our energies. The sacred attunement and mindfulness that are the fruits of prayer can enrich our lives in the most meaningful way.
LONG TERM BENEFITS OF MINDFULNESS

By: Dr. Michelle Humi, School Psychologist

Recently, there has been a lot of concern about the pressure and stress that high school and college students face and the ramifications of that pressure and stress on their mental health. Frank Bruni, a recent SAR speaker, in his July 29, 2015 article in the New York Times entitled “Today’s Exhausted Superkids” highlights some of the effects of stress on students and how to alleviate some of that stress. Aside from Bruni’s suggestion of possibly redefining what it means to achieve, Jeffrey Kluger wrote an article in Time, entitled “In Praise of the Ordinary Child” (July 23, 2015) which stated that “somewhere between the self-esteem building of going for the gold and the self-esteem crushing of the Ivy-or-die ethos, there has to be a place where kids can breathe.”

Mindfulness is a process designed to reduce irrelevant thoughts in order to internalize attention. Research has shown that mindfulness practices can decrease stress, improve relaxation, enhance emotional stability, increase concentration, and improve physical health. Furthermore, mindfulness has been shown to have significant positive impact on mental health disorders including anxiety, depression, affective disorders, and attention deficits.

Mindfulness may also have long-lasting neurological effects. Richie Davidson, a psychologist at The Center for Investigating Healthy Minds at the University of Wisconsin-Madison explains, (Mindful, Aug 2014) “We can intentionally shape the direction of plasticity changes in our brain. By focusing on wholesome thoughts... we can potentially influence the plasticity of our brains and shape them in ways that can be beneficial.”

More specifically, the amygdala, our brain’s ‘fight or flight’ center and the seat of fearful and anxious emotions, has been shown to decrease in cell volume after mindfulness practice. Not only has it been shown that the amygdala shrinks post mindfulness practice, but the connections between the amygdala and prefrontal cortex (area responsible for executive functioning such as planning problem solving, and emotion regulation) are weakened. This allows for less reactivity and may cause for more connections between higher order brain function such as attention and concentration. The long-term effect of mindfulness on our brain comes from practice and routine. It comes from teaching students to slow down, take a step back and become more aware of the situation; gauging their stress level; and becoming more accepting, less judgmental, and less reactive.

While students’ stress levels and lack of sleep are multifaceted issues, mindfulness is one tool that we as educators and parents can help model and implement with our students and children. Doing so may not only combat high school stress but also long-term stress they may face in college and beyond.
GRADE BY GRADE RESOURCES

In addition to the support of our school psychologists, our Grade Level Coordinators monitor and help shape the grade’s culture. GLCs oversee the grade’s advisory program and serve as the point-people for monitoring the academic and social progress of individual students.

Along with Grade Level Coordinators and our PACT team, programs are created to further the PACT goal of increasing education and strengthening communication.

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<th>GRADE</th>
<th>GRADE LEVEL COORDINATOR</th>
<th>PARENT PACT PROGRAMS FOR THE COMING YEAR</th>
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| 9     | Ms. Shoshana Chanales  | 9th Grade Parent PACT Night - November 4, 2015  
|       | schanales@sarhighschool.org | PACT staff facilitate discussion using real life HS scenarios to open lines of communication between parents, their children and the school about parenting and decision making. |
| 10    | Ms. Gloria Schneider   | 10th Grade Parent PACT Night - January 20, 2016  
|       | gschneider@sarhighschool.org | Interactive evening with parents sharing what students are learning about in their health and beit midrash classes regarding sexuality, wellness and good decision making. |
| 11    | Ms. Lisa Birnbaum  
|       | Ms. Michelle Hoch    | 11th Grade Parent PACT Night - FOR PARENTS AND STUDENTS January 25, 2016  
|       | lbirnbaum@sarhighschool.org mhoch@sarhighschool.org | Evening for students and parents, hearing real life stories from Riverdale community members about adolescent substance abuse experiences. |
| 12    | Ms. Alicia Germano  
|       | Ms. Shuli Taubes     | 12th Grade Parent PACT Night -December 14, 2015  
|       | agermano@sarhighschool.org staubes@sarhighschool.org | “Parenting When Your Child Has One Foot out the Door"  
|       | | The program features a panel by parents of SAR alum. It focuses on the challenges and issues regarding parental responsibilities in a year where we need to foster independence and encourage wise decision making. |