

# A quiet revolution

## Congressman touts the benefits of mindfulness meditation

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U.S. Rep. Tim Ryan has a big idea for how to help make this country a better place: sit quietly, focus on breathing in and out, and repeat daily.

"If you take time each day to have some quiet time and train your mind to be in the present moment, you'll see your stress is reduced because you're not regretting the past and fretting about the future," said Ryan. "Mindfulness meditation is paying attention to the present moment on purpose, without judging."

In his book, "A Mindful Nation: How a Simple Practice can help us Reduce Stress, Improve Performance, and Recapture the American Spirit," Ryan writes, "Although it may seem like an unusual way to approach serious practical problems, I am convinced that our capacity to be mindful is the natural pathway to addressing so many of the difficulties we face."

### Article Photos



U.S. Rep. Tim Ryan teaches students about mindfulness meditation in Baltimore. Ryan has written a book about mindfulness meditation and believes that even children can benefit from the practice.

So what is mindfulness meditation exactly?

"A lot of people think it's like a religion. It's not a religion, it's just breathing; it's a mental fitness exercise," said Ryan.

"Mindfulness meditation is the practice of staying in the moment as each moment unfolds, focusing on the breath and cultivating concentration," said Kathy Garritano, a registered nurse who leads a weekly mindfulness meditation group in Youngstown.

## **Fact Box**

Mindfulness for beginners

1. Sit in a comfortable, quiet place.
2. Set a timer for 5-10 minutes.
3. Close your eyes and place your hands in your lap.
4. Listen to your breath as it goes in and out.

Note: It's normal for thoughts, feelings, emotions, and ideas to come into your mind. When you notice these thoughts, just re-focus on breathing.

- Kathy Garritano

"You can start by taking two minutes a day to sit in silence and focus on your breathing. When thoughts come into your mind, acknowledge them and return to the breath," said Garritano.

It's a simple idea with giant impacts.

"I'm in a position to help decide how we're going to curb healthcare costs in the next 30 years, and this is something that reduces stress and allows your body to heal itself," said Ryan. "Mindfulness is cheap, and there are no side effects."

According to Ryan, mindfulness isn't just good for adults.

"Why are we not teaching this to our children?" Ryan asked. "This should be the first thing that they learn because everything else seems to be very secondary if you can't concentrate, if you can't focus, if you can't pay attention. Having 12 years of Catholic school, I had many, many teachers yell at me to pay attention, and this is the opportunity to teach the kids how to pay attention."

In 2010, Ryan was instrumental in gaining a \$1 million grant to bring mindfulness mediation to Warren City schools along with a social-emotional learning curriculum that teaches kids skills like self-awareness, self-management, empathy, responsible decision-making, and positive conflict negotiation.

"Warren City schools are head-over-heels in love with this program," Ryan said. "A lot of teachers tell me it's changed the mood of their classroom and changed the mood of the school. The kids are benefitting from it; they're starting to see better reading scores, better writing scores and it just makes sense."

"We're early in the game here. We're teaching skills we didn't teach before," said Jill Merolla, Warren City Schools coordinator for Skills for Life. "From 2011 to 2012, we went up a designation on our report card. Whether it's because of this, it's too early to say for sure but we went from academic watch to continued improvement."

"We have kids not only in our community but all across the country who are living with medium to high levels of post-traumatic stress," said Ryan. "Too many kids in our community have seen someone get murdered. Violent stabbings, shootings, fights, domestic violence, if you're five years old or 10 years old, that's traumatizing."

For Ryan, teaching kids mindfulness meditation and social and emotional learning is not just a way to help them cope with trauma and toxic levels of stress.

"This is how we change the neighborhoods," Ryan said. "You're going to change the neighborhoods by changing the schools, and you're going to have these kids in the neighborhoods whose default position isn't violence, the default position is nonviolence. The default position isn't anger, the default position is tolerance and compassion and empathy.

"I think that this can help us get excited again about what the future of our country can be if we can somehow focus on the real problems that we have," Ryan said.

Ryan believes that if we all take time to focus on our breathing for a just a few minutes each day, we'll see giant impacts.

"It would only make sense that if we reduce that stress level a little bit we're not only going to be kinder to the people we care about, we're going to be kinder in general," said Ryan.

"We might be able to see each other as human beings and Americans and not be so mad and angry and stressed out that we can't even talk to each other any more and have a civil political discussion," Ryan said. "We have so much violence in our society today, so much anger, so much fear, and that's not the America that any of us want.

"We're all God's children, we're all human beings, and we're all worthy. I think when we slow down, when we try to reduce our stress level a little bit, we see that in each other."

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