

It's all in your mind

'Mindfulness' is a potent technique that is helping students keep their anxieties at bay, writes **Denise Ryan**.



JESSICA Fairley kept tossing and turning at night. Like most year 12 students, she was familiar with the latest VCE study techniques, but wasn't quite sure how to stop her mind racing.

After taking part in a recent pilot program at Methodist Ladies' College, Jessica was surprised to find that practising mindfulness — a technique that trains people to focus — has not only improved her sleep and school performance, but also her sense of well-being.

MLC's year 12 students attended an introductory session on the technique by Craig Hassed, a GP and senior lecturer at Monash University's department of general practice, who has been teaching mindfulness techniques to Monash's trainee doctors and at the Royal Australian College of General Practitioners since 1991. Research related to his work shows it reduces stress levels and improves work performance.

Demand from MLC students

for a more intensive, six-session course was so high that places had to be balloted. Other schools, such as St Michael's Grammar School, have asked Dr Hassed to speak to staff as part of new programs being developed to help students still their minds so that they can study effectively.

Put simply, mindfulness involves sitting down, closing your eyes, and focusing the mind on breathing and on different parts of the body — for example the weight of your clothes or the pressure of your shoes. This can be for as little as a minute — which Dr Hassed describes as a "comma" to punctuate your life — or for five minutes or longer (a "full stop"). Thoughts that come and go are observed and acknowledged, but are not reacted to or judged. "You watch the train (of thought) go by but you don't get on the train," he explains.

Jessica says practising this technique proved calming, and helped to clear her mind so that she could focus on something specific.

"I am having a really busy year and have had trouble getting to sleep because I am worrying about everything. I'm more conscious about the way that I do things now and understand better why I struggle with some things if I am distracted, tired or in a bad mood," she says.

Mindfulness has gained momentum in the last four years following studies by Oxford University researcher John Teasdale and others, which showed its use halved the relapse rate in people with recurrent depression. It is also used to treat anxiety and eating disorders.

The concept is not new. Mindfulness has been used by psychologists since the turn of last century. William James, regarded as the father of psychology, spoke of the importance of "bringing back a wandering attention", and such principles can be found in most traditional cultures.

"The Western world has to a significant extent lost touch with its contemplative roots. These are very ancient practices, and we are just rediscovering them," Dr Hassed says.

Mindfulness is one of several branches of psychology being offered in some schools to improve performance and mental health. Geelong Grammar last year introduced courses in positive psychology for students, while Genazzano College offers senior students courses in performance psychology.

Dr Hassed says these psychological strategies are helpful and it is up to the individual therapist — or, in this case, school — to work out what best meets a client's needs. Dr Faye Lambert, the deputy head of St Michael's,

says her school may end up using a mix of approaches.

Positive psychology, developed by US psychologist Martin Seligman, seeks to challenge and change the contents of a person's thoughts, but also emphasises full engagement as central to happiness. Performance psychology teaches techniques such as visualisation and affirmation to help students manage stress and achieve better results.

MINDFULNESS is different again. "People think mindfulness is about distracting ourselves from our worries, but our worries are distracting us from our lives. We cannot live our lives fully unless we learn to engage our attention willfully in life as it unfolds moment by moment," says Dr Hassed.

Most people need to learn to recognise which thoughts are worth giving attention to. "If we react to a negative thought or feeling, it amplifies the experience. A mindful perspective would note, 'That's an interesting observation'. If the person cultivates a different non-judgemental attitude to a negative thought, it starts to recede by itself," he says.

MLC's head of senior school, Anne Wallington, heard Dr Hassed speak about his broader Essence of Health program at a conference in England two years ago. "It struck me as a complete approach to well-being," she said.

In his book, *The Essence of Health: The Seven Pillars Of Well-being*, Dr Hassed outlines a holistic approach to health-care — "essence" standing for Education, Stress Management, Spirituality, Exercise, Nutrition, Connectedness and Environ-

ment. He argues that each of us can do more to prevent illness, and that while there is a place for prescribed medications, faith that drugs can solve just about any health concern is misplaced.

One way to preserve health is to learn to manage stress. Too often, he says, the "fight or flight" stress response is activated when it is not necessary. "We activate it over something which is not really there, or activate it far in excess of what the situation demands. Much of this has to do with stress related to an anticipation of future events and replaying of past events."

If we imagine being chased by a tiger, and if we regard it as being real, then the body activates stress responses (such as elevated heart rate and blood pressure), as if the tiger was really there. "Fortunately about 99 per cent of the tigers we find ourselves running from are only in our imagination. This is where approaches such as mindfulness can be so invaluable."

Replaying an event in the mind can reproduce the stress response even though the event has past. Extended activation of the stress response can lead to high "allostatic load", which means wear and tear on the body.

Dr Hassed cites research showing this reduces a person's immunity, and ultimately their health. Mindfulness can be applied to most situations, he says, but is very useful for high school students to help deal with anxiety about study and about exams, to help focus and then switch off and get a good night's sleep, and also to help deal with emotional issues.

Mindfulness and emotional intelligence overlap, he says, because by becoming more

aware of your own thoughts and emotions, you inevitably understand others better.

Year 12 MLC student Emily Flood says practising mindfulness has improved her relationships with friends and family. "I'm now capable of understanding the reactions of people around me. I stand back and realise that they are also stressed and that there are things going on in their lives. I feel I am a happier person. It has helped me become more empathetic."

Jessica Fairley has also found that mindfulness has helped to manage her personal life. "Before, if I had an argument with someone, I would keep replaying it again and

out the conversation with their parents about being a failure. All of a sudden the mind has them walking the streets without a job. Meanwhile, they can't engage their attention on their study.

"Mindfulness is engaging attention on what is in front of one, learning to recognise this mental imagery that is the imagination, and that it can generate an enormous amount of stress or can be a distraction."

Mindfulness helps to develop acceptance. "What is happening is happening, and if we rail against it we make it worse."

But he says acceptance is not an excuse for apathy. "If

rible traumatic experience when in reality there may be very little happening. Our attitude to it will determine whether we amplify the impact of it, or whether we notice it, or, better still, are able to get on with our lives."

Dr Anthony Hadj, a senior cardiology resident at the Austin Hospital, first learnt about mindfulness when he was a medical student at Monash in 2000. Dr Hassed's course, which included meditation and stress management techniques, proved helpful in his early days as a young doctor and he decided it had great application for his patients.

Dr Hadj ran a recent trial on 18 patients awaiting heart surgery at The Alfred hospital, which involved giving them a diet, vitamin supplement, exercise and a mindfulness meditation program. A cardiac surgeon, a psychologist and a physiotherapist worked with him to show patients in eight sessions how to manage their stress and become more active while awaiting surgery. The results found that patients had not only reduced physical symptoms such as high blood pressure but also reported feeling happier and better able to cope with the fact that they had heart disease.

Dr Hadj is now conducting another trial, teaching the same techniques to about 50 breast cancer patients and their families at the Maroondah Hospital.

As for students, Dr Hassed concludes: "Many students assume that stress is the only thing they can use to motivate themselves, whereas more attention to work improves performance. They must gently unhook attention from the tendency to ruminate and worry."

6 The Western world has to a significant extent lost touch with its contemplative roots. 7

DR CRAIG HASSED

PICTURE: BRIGGIDG.COM/AMMS



again, wondering how I had offended them."

Now she takes a different approach. "In most situations, it is in your head and you shouldn't worry about it. It will sort itself out. I have learned to focus on more productive things."

Dr Hassed says the mind's capacity to imagine is a two-edged sword, with too many people constantly engaging in unhelpful visualisations.

"The student sitting at their desk trying to study imagines that they will fail, then plays



MLC teacher Ann Wallington with year 12 students (from left) Emily, Georgina and Jessica are doing a course on mindfulness. PICTURE: EDDIE/AM