

Preventing Violent Extremism Through Education: Five Steps to Consider for Cultivating Emotion Regulation

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This manuscript illustrates the concept of violent extremism and briefly explains one methodology, that of mindful compassion, which may be integrated into existing curriculum that fosters critical thinking, perspective taking inquiry, non-violent communication, and restorative justice practices in order to prevent violent extremism. Five basic mindful compassion practices are identified along with ways to evaluate those practices. Providing the five basic mindful compassion practices of “focused breathing,” “mindful and active listening,” “body scan,” “just like me,” and “loving kindness” as well as evaluating their effectiveness may inform just how much training is needed for each age-group and where this training should be placed in order to optimize the benefits of these practices. Understanding that adolescents and young adults (approximately 12 years of age to 25 years of age) have difficulty regulating their emotions due to the normal process of brain development, ensuring that students are given more strategies to meet their emotional reactivity will likely enable their success. In addition, considerations for integrating these practices across cultures and age-groups are introduced.

Keywords: stress, anxiety, mindfulness, compassion, self-regulation, peace, emotion-regulation, attention-regulation

Introduction

Violent extremism has become one of the biggest threats that the world is currently facing. It affects the security, well-being, and peaceful way of life of many individuals living in both developed and developing countries. Yet, the challenges, to date, have been tackled mainly from an interventionist perspective that is to counter violent extremism with military and security measures. From 2001 to 2017, the United States government alone will have spent approximately \$1.78 trillion to fight terrorism. The European Union’s spending is estimated to have increased €5.7 million in 2002 to €93.5 million in 2009. Yet, governments are painfully aware that there will not be sufficient resources to protect everyone from the terrorist attacks perpetrated by radicalized individuals (United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2016, p. 1). As such, we must seek other preventative measures and ones that could likely cultivate critical thinking, resilience (Tugade & Frederickson, 2004), and even compassion for diverse ways of being.

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In attempting to understand violent extremism, there is no one agreed upon global definition of violent extremism. For purposes of this paper, we define it as extreme behavior that intentionally causes an unacceptable level of harm to another. The challenge with this definition is determining what extreme behavior is and what an unacceptable level of harm is. What is likely obvious to identify as unacceptable behavior is radical behavior that intentionally causes another's life to end, acts of terrorism fall into this category.

Literature Review

What is often less obvious is an extreme expression or behavior that does not allow another's views to be recognized or considered. Even more, challenging is determining what constitutes mental harm to another. Growing access to social media as well as increased mobility of many cultures magnifies the presence of global diversity. As such, it is understandable for us to experience direct conflict with another. This is considered normal human behavior (Golden, 2016). One preventative practice is to avoid conflict, however, that may be perceived as avoiding interaction with anyone who is or believes differently than another.

As such, we propose cultivating awareness into the emotions that arise within the body when one is not allowing another's views to be recognized or considered even if they are in direct conflict with one's own or even personally insulting. Adding further challenge to this proposal is the reality that some people are not comfortable with body sensations, particularly those who are victims of violent extremism and have suffered emotional trauma or physical/sexual abuse. Starting with a focus on body sensations may be contraindicated. As such, we propose other practices that may lead to cultivating emotional awareness and eventually, emotional regulation. Why might this be important?

Refusing to acknowledge another's perspective and suppressing sharing one's own emotions and perspectives can increase difficult emotions that fuel disagreement. This ability to understand others and help others understand one's own views is vital to effective communication. However, when difficult emotions trigger destructive behaviors, much suffering and violence may ensue (Damasio & Carvalho, 2013; Damasio, 2012; Damasio, 2005; Golden, 2016; Kabat-Zinn, 2013; Lane & Schwartz, 1987; Lindhard, 2015; Nummenmaa, Glerean, Hari & Hietanen, 2013; Singer, 2006). This paper focuses on preventing violent extremism through education that teaches students how to become aware of and to regulate emotions. An expanded curriculum would address questions such as What are emotions? How are they generated and experienced in the mind, brain, and body? What is the function of different emotions? How can emotions be used as a source of information? What are different methods for increasing and decreasing emotions? and How can awareness of emotions be used as a method to understand others?

An important challenge is how to integrate emotional awareness curriculum into pre-kindergarten through 12th grade. In this brief manuscript, we propose specific strategies that can be integrated into existing curriculum using a multi-method approach that includes visuals (figures and art), cartoon books, songs, poetry, and short stories to train students at different developmental stages. Why?

Below, we identify push-pull factors that have been identified to influence violent extremist behavior (Cragin, Bradley, Robinson, & Steinberg, 2015; Fazli, Johnson, & Cooke, 2015; Hassan, 2012; Khalil, Zeuthen, & Neema, 2014; United States Agency for International Development [USAID], 2009), as well as undergraduate student success (Astin, 1993; Baxter-Magolda, 1999; Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges, & Hayek, 2007; Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, & Whitt, 2010; Rendon, 1994; Schlossberg, 1989). Table 1 below was extracted from the UNESCO preventing violent extremism through Education Guide for Policy-Makers Report (Sept. 13,

2016). In Table 1, it can be seen that many similar factors that contribute to a student's ability to succeed in school.

Table 1

Drivers of Violent Extremism

Push factors	Pull factors
Poverty, unemployment	Utopian world vision
Experience of exclusion and injustice	Sense of belongingness
Stigmatisation, humiliation	Black and white, good vs. evil vision
Lack of experience in/exposure to democratic processes of dialogue and debate	Charismatic recruiter
Peer pressure/influence	Sense of mission and heroism
Existential, spiritual search for identity	Promise of adventure
Boredom, adolescent crisis	Access to power and money
Lack of means to make voices heard or vent out frustration	Legitimation of violence

In essence, a student's sense of belonging, access to power and money, level of poverty, unemployment, search for identity, and life experience among many other factors may influence students' tendency toward violent extremism as well as influence their ability to complete a certificate or degree successfully. Cultivating resilience, critical thinking, global citizenship (which includes several sub-outcomes, such as the ability to understand each other, care for each other, act for the well-being of others is needed and value all humans' dignity, and cultural diversity), as well as engage incompassionate dialogue even when in conflict appear to be potential solutions, not only to cultivating educational success in students but perhaps also in preventing violent extremism.

Curriculum

How do we cultivate the ability to recognize and regulate emotions? One of the most practical methods is to begin with training in mindfulness meditations (Goldin & Gross, 2010; Goleman, 2004; Hanson, 2009; Kabat-Zinn, 2013). Mindfulness refers to a set of practices that cultivate present-moment awareness along with attitudes of curiosity, openness, and acceptance. Mindfulness training has been shown to increase positive emotions, emotion regulation, ethical decision making (Shapiro et al., 2014; Shapiro, Jazaieri, & Goldin, 2012), as well as decrease negative emotions, stress, depression, and anxiety (Baer 2003; Biegel, 2009; Bresciani, 2016; Chambers, Lo, & Allen, 2007; Grossman, Niemann, Schmidt, & Walach, 2004; Heeren, Van, & Philippot, 2009; Liehr & Dieas, 2010; Mendelson et al., 2010; Tang et al., 2007; Zeidan, Johnson, Diamond, David, & Goolkasian, 2010; Zylowska et al., 2008).

Through specific training and over time, those with healthy neural pathways are likely to access emotional awareness on demand and regulate emotions in order to be with others who are expressing thoughts and ideas that are in direct conflict with one's own, without the difficult emotions escalating into destructive emotions. In addition, mindfulness-based practices allow one to listen with intention for any potential connections in the differences; this may build a bridge to understanding, possibly even creating a pathway to discovery resolution and possibly access to restorative justice. Furthermore, through specific mindfulness-based compassion practices, we may be able to cultivate empathy, understanding, and even kindness for another who is very different from us, and do so without giving up our own sense of identity, passion, beliefs, or cultural way of being.

We currently have an understanding of the curriculum and practices that cultivate emotion regulation and compassionate dialogue (Bresciani, 2016). The challenge is that we do not understand how much curriculum is

needed or how long one needs to practice the curriculum in order for awareness of emotions and the ability to regulate them in all situations to become evident, particular to those who have witnessed or are currently experiencing violent extremist behavior. What is evident, at this point, is that while we can introduce these mindfulness-based practices and compassionate dialogue practices, it is up to the student (and the teachers) to actually practice using them in all situations until emotion regulation and compassionate dialogue become fully integrated into daily behavior. In this manner, it is our hope that participants of this curriculum can be with another, while experiencing difficult emotions with awareness and without shame.

If this curriculum intrigues us and we want to begin the practices, here are just a few of them that we can begin integrating into any classroom or out of classroom setting. The order in which we have listed these practices is intentional. As it can be considered integrating them into the existing curriculum, please consider doing so in the order they are listed. If we prefer to have guided audios for these practices or scripts to adapt and adopt for our use, please find them at: <http://www.integrativeinquiry.org>.

Focused attention on breathing (“This can be done as silent sitting meditation or as a walking meditation”) to train sustained attention on a specific object: “Body scan” to train moment-to-moment attention to sensations and impermanence; “just like me” to train empathy, care, compassion for others and develop a sense of common humanity; “mindful listening” to train offering one’s full attention for the benefit of another person; and “loving kindness” to train recognizing discontent and suffering in others and enhancing the intention to relieve others from the causes of discontent and suffering.

Following each practice, invite the participants to share what they noticed. We may choose to separate the groups by gender, if this is culturally appropriate. Then, invite reflection via inquiry.

What did we notice during the practice?

If the participant notices bodily sensations, then ask where in the body those sensations were noticed (if culturally appropriate to do so).

Next, asking whether the participant was also aware of any thoughts, feelings, or beliefs that seemed to be related to the bodily sensation.

1. How is what we noticed different from what we have experienced before?
2. What are we noticing now? Has anything shifted?
3. What are our thoughts, feelings, or beliefs that seem to be related to the bodily sensations we are sensing now?
4. How might this help us better understand how emotions are influencing our decisions?
5. How might it be helpful to know that bodily sensations, thoughts, emotions, and feelings all come and go?
6. How might directing our attention in a specific way be helpful to empowering you to regulate our emotions?
7. How might we be able to practice this exercise on our own?

Assessment and Evaluation

Performance-based assessment is the gold standard for evaluating attention and emotion regulation and there are many ways to do so (see <http://www.healthmeasures.net/explore-measurement-systems/nih-toolbox> for ideas). The challenge is that many instructors do not have the opportunity within the classroom to evaluate the effectiveness of these practices using standardize performance-based measures. And if instructors are able

to administer such assessment within the classroom, the relevance of the performance-based task within the classroom setting to students' out-of-classroom life is often under question.

As such, ways in which an instructor can evaluate the effectiveness of this curriculum include administering the following instruments as pre- and post- assessments. The citations for each instrument are listed next to them. It is suggested that we can access those articles for more details on how to use the instruments and for information on how phrasing may need to be adapted across culture, language acquisition levels, and age-groups.

Five Facet Mindfulness Questionnaire (Baer, Smith, Hopkins, Krietemeyer, & Toney, 2006) or Mindful Attention Awareness Scale (Brown & Ryan, 2003); Jazaieri 16-Item Compassion Scale (Jazaieri et al., 2014); Active Listening Attitudes Scale (Mishima, Kuboto, & Nagata, 2000); Student Journal Entries (Bresciani, 2016); and 360 Degree Observations (Bresciani, 2016).

If an entire school or university chooses to adopt these practices, then we strongly recommend designing a reflective student-learning portfolio for which evidence of application of the practices can be compiled and evaluated. Guidelines for setting up a reflective student-learning portfolio can be found here at http://interwork.sdsu.edu/main/ma_student_affairs/rlp.

Adaptations Needed

In closing, it is suggested that we can consider the following suggested adoptions for the practices as we provided.

Take into account, the age distribution of the students in our class and their level of emotional and physical well-being. Modifications in the length of the practices, the introduction and set-up of each practice, language modifications, timing of when in the day we invite students into the practices, and examples used will need to be adjusted for varying age groups and in some cases gender. In addition, consider agency. As students become more comfortable doing the practices, they may want to lead them for each other in or out of the classroom setting.

Think through the cultural relevancy of the language and the practices and modify accordingly. Be sure to consider the way we introduce the practices. For instance, teaching the "just like me" practice may mean that, as we introduce it, we acknowledge that varying cultures have distinct differences and lived experiences (and some may have experienced more pain and suffering at the hands of other humans). The intention for this practice is for us all to connect on a common ground of our shared humanity. As such, be mindful of cultural influences that would require changes in set-up, language modifications, and examples used.

Involve the community in which we are sharing these practices. If we are invited into a community to share these practices, invite one of the community members who invited us to literally sit beside us as we teach, or to show community support in the most culturally relevant manner. It is important to honour any modifications that the community would like to see completed. If we are unsure how such modifications may influence the integrity and effectiveness of the practices, please contact professor Bresciani Ludvik for assistance at: mbrescia@mail.sdsu.edu.

Regardless of where we are sharing these practices, it is important to encourage a playful curiosity. Remind participants to not become attached to their judgment of the practices or themselves as they practice. The idea is to suspend judgement of themselves and others for the time that they are practicing and for the time in which we are inviting them into inquiry of the practices.

Finally, remind them to continually be in inquiry around what they are experiencing and to notice how bodily sensations, feelings, thoughts, and emotions all change. Invite them to explore how and where they are placing their attention intertwines with what they are noticing in their bodily sensations, feelings, thoughts, and emotions.

Advanced Practices

For advanced practices, we recommend integrating these five basic mindful practices into deeper inquiry practices that already exist in daily curriculum. In this way, students are invited to examine all sides of a perspective on one topic while monitoring and regulating their emotions. Examples of successful inquiry-guided curriculum design by Mohanan can be found at: <http://www.iiserpune.ac.in/~mohanan/inquiry/justific.pdf> and <http://www.iiserpune.ac.in/~mohanan/kti/default.htm>. With this curriculum, we notice that there is an intense investigation of rationale to unveil the logic of a choice. When integrating the mindful practices into more complex reasoning and inquiry curriculum, such as Mohanan's model illustrates, students may be able to monitor their emotions as they examine all sides of a topic. This leads to greater awareness of differences while students are empowered to be with their emotions that arise when their own beliefs, ideas, and values are challenged by another's line of logical reasoning.

Furthermore, through this examination of all sides of a perspective, a student may become aware that they have wronged another. As Desmond Tutu (2016) stated, the ideal society is one in which its members enjoy their freedom to be human freely, provided they do not thereby infringe the freedoms of others unduly. When the freedoms of others are unduly harmed, whether with intention or not, the practice of restorative justice can be used to address the harm directly. Restorative justice, as illustrated by Howard Zehr (2015) focused three pillars of repairing harm: (a) harms and needs; (b) obligations; and (c) engagement. Repairing harm requires the engagement of both the offender and the victim as well as the community for, as Zehr writes, A harm to one is a harm to all (2015, p. 25). Restorative justice requires at a minimum: 1. That the harms and needs of those harmed be addressed; 2. That those causing the harm are held accountable to repair the harm—as opposed to focusing on casting blame and guilt; and 3. While involving both of these parties as well as the relevant communities in the process (Zehr, 2015, p. 35). Restorative justices are an educative process that is intended to transform those who have been harmed and those who illicit harm, as well as the communities involved. As such, its practice aligns well with the mindfulness practices introduced in this manuscript as well as the deeper inquiry curriculum introduced by Mohanan (2016).

Conclusion

This short manuscript sought to provide five simple practices and their evaluation methods, so that educators can begin integrating these practices into their pre-kindergartens—through college level courses, as well as their out of classroom learning opportunities. While we are still unclear, as to the extent, that these practices need to be repetitively embedded into curriculum or how much the students need to engage in these short practices, so that their ability to become aware of and regulate their emotions is evident in all types of settings, we are confident that these practices, repeatedly applied in multiple settings, will certainly begin the process of empowering students to regulate their emotions while cultivating compassion, and hopefully contribute to a significant decrease in violent extremist behavior as well as improving student success. Providing the five simple practices (“focused breathing,” “mindful, and active listening,” “body scan,” “just

like me,” and “loving kindness”) and evaluating their effectiveness in a multitude of venues may inform just how much training is needed for each age-group and where in order to optimize the benefits of these practices. Understanding that adolescents through young adults have difficulty regulating their emotions, ensuring that students are given more strategies to meet their emotional reactivity will likely enable their success (Blakemore & Choudhury, 2006; Wetherill & Tapert, 2013).

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