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Heartfulness Initiative helps students cope amid pandemic

BY MIRANDA JETTER

Students have missed out this year. Proms and SAT tests, college campus tours and walks across stage at graduation—all were canceled in the face of the novel coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19). Amidst these disruptions the Heartfulness Initiative has stepped up to provide youth with tools to help them combat stress and anxiety during this crisis.

The initiative is run by the global non-profit Heartfulness Institute. They use mindfulness and meditation practices to create "fulfillment and wellbeing," according to their website. The workshops they offer in high schools are free and they claim a long list of benefits for those who participate. Some of these include a more nurturing classroom environment, teachers and students who are better equipped to deal with stressors in the classroom, and

improvement in student decision making over time.

Beena Shah, a lead volunteer and meditation trainer with the initiative said that she was first drawn to the practice 12 years ago. She felt distraught after moving to America: "I was totally empty inside." So she sought out something that would bring her inner fulfillment and peace. She found Heartfulness and "there was no turning back." Now she helps bring that practice to highschoolers around the South Bay.

Last year the initiative came to Irvington High School to teach a Heartfulness series after the principal, Amanda Melsby, reached out to them. She heard about the project through the Parent/Teacher/Student Association (PTSA) and was interested because one of the school's goals is to "promote mindfulness and resiliency."

Melsby said that some of the freshmen who've taken part in the course say the methods are unexpected and hard to do at first but others have found it "extremely beneficial" and overall students seemed to enjoy it. Highlighting mindfulness in the classroom setting is crucial, she said, because it's harder for students to engage with it for the first time on their own. It's impossible to take away every stressor a student may experience, she said, but by giving them these tools they can respond well, becoming stronger and more resilient.

Mental health issues have become a growing concern for adolescents. Anxiety has become the most common reason college students seek counseling according to an article published in 2017 in The

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New York Times Magazine, and from 2007 to 2017 the rate of suicide among 10-24 year olds increased by 56% making it the second leading cause of death among that demographic. The pandemic has only intensified these issues. According to a New York Times article, two-thirds of those who texted the National Text Crisis Line in recent months have reported more intense feelings of anxiety and depression – nearly double the intensity before COVID-19.

Mindfulness may be a powerful tool to address this anxiety. In a study done on a program similar to the Heartfulness Initiative, teens reported a significant decrease in "anxiety, perceived stress, and depression" at the three month follow up after the program's end, according to a paper published in Cognitive, Affective, and Behavioral Neuroscience.

The Heartfulness Initiative's most recent series keeps the effects of COVID-19 and its resultant anxieties at the forefront. At last month's virtual series, open to any Fremont highschooler, Shah and other volunteers walked nearly 80 students through techniques like left

nostril breathing and positive self-affirmations over Zoom video chat. She said one of the favorites among students was the total body relaxation exercise where they talk participants through methodically releasing and relaxing every body part.

One of the biggest challenges of last month's course was trying to keep students engaged with the material. The lack of in-person contact made it easy for students to drop out of sessions if they grew bored so Shah and other volunteers used Zoom breakout rooms, interactive polls, and word clouds to keep them engaged.

Sneha Vallumchella was one of the students in Shah's course last month, yet she came to Heartfulness differently than many of her peers. The 16-year-old James Logan High School student got involved through her parents who have been taking her to the Heartfulness Institute's Fremont center since she was little. In her day-to-day experience she said Heartfulness strategies have taught her to be less reactive in stressful situations and "to pause and just introspect."

One technique for coping with COVID-19 that instructors offered was to bring attention to each day, she said. They suggested that every day should be special and that they should do things to take note of and remember this time. Vallumchella took this advice to heart: daily diary entries and practicing her French horn is how she reminds herself that despite everything each day is still unique.

To learn more about upcoming Heartfulness workshops visit: www.heartfulnessinstitute.org