While the concept of mindfulness is not new, its use and applicability in the Western world is relatively recent. Mindfulness in modern psychology might embrace Dr. Jon Kabat-Zinn’s (1990) definition of mindfulness as “moment-to-moment awareness” (p.2). The Dalai Lama (2006) refers to mindfulness simply as insight, about which he has said, “To succeed at developing insight you first need to identify ignorance” (p. 29). We are also encouraged to define mindfulness for ourselves by simply answering the question, “What is it like to be here in this moment?”

In the advising arena, mindfulness can be defined as the ability to focus, block out distractions, and have heightened levels of the five senses. Advisors’ moment-to-moment awareness of what is happening in an advising session can have a positive impact on the experience for our students and for ourselves. Thus it is helpful when advisors understand the benefits of mindfulness practice in academic advising and the ways in which we can formally practice mindfulness in our daily routines.

**Improving the Quality of the Advisor-Advisee Relationship.** For some time the advising relationship has been lauded as one of the key ingredients to student success. Light (2001) noted that, “good advising
may be the single most underestimated characteristic of a successful college experience” (p.81). Habley (as cited by the Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education, 2005) took it a step further saying that “advising bears the distinction of being the only structured activity on campus in which all students have the opportunity for ongoing, one-to-one interaction with a concerned representative of the institution, and this fact is a source of its tremendous potential today” (p. 2).

So, we are left wondering how to get the most out of what is sometimes a 10 minute interaction. Famed clinical psychologist Carl Rogers, in his memoir A Way of Being, came to the conclusion that one of the most simple and healing services he provided his clients was simply “hearing” them (1980). Active listening – responding to both verbal and non-verbal behavior, paraphrasing, and clarifying – is a basic interpersonal skill that can be helpful in forming an instant connection. The art of active listening is not new to anyone in academic advising, but it can be challenging to maintain in EVERY student interaction. We propose that when we calm our minds and focus on our breathing – a basic mindfulness skill – advisors can strengthen the relationship between ourselves and our students. When we do this we heighten the verbal and non-verbal exchange of advising.

Try this: Pick an object frequently in your line of vision when you are with students. Every time you look at this object, take a deep breath; feel the air enter your nostrils and then your lungs. Feel the air rush out as you exhale. Do it again. For just a few moments make your breath your total focus.

Being intentional with our “advice” in advising. NACADA Past President Nancy King (2009) has said that the words we use matter. When we are in a hurry and say things like, “get your general education courses out of the way” to an advisee, we are communicating that we do not think those courses are important. We know better, of course, but to not be mindful of how that sounds to an advisee can harm the student’s view of the college experience. Kabat-Zinn (1990) lists non-striving (p.37) as a pillar to mindfulness practice. He suggests that many times we introduce the idea that we are not where we should be, and along with it comes the notion that we are not okay right now. Mindfulness is non-doing. It is simply paying attention to what is happening, thereby allowing us to be more intentional. We propose that by practicing non-doing and staying in the moment we can remind ourselves that we are okay and take the time to be very intentional with our wording.

Try this: After focusing on your breathing for a few seconds, feel what it is like to be in your office, sitting on your chair, feel your body sitting at your desk. Enjoy the sensation of just being; let the student take the lead. Resist the urge to “go over everything,” focus on the students’ questions and the sensations at hand.

Loving our jobs every day. Addressing mindfulness is also a matter of professional development and decreasing the risk of burnout. “...(The) increased time demands [in academic advising] place a higher relevance on self-care” (Davis, 2008, p. 453). Symptoms of burnout can include negative feelings toward students, self-doubt, anger, guilt, inability to concentrate and feeling overwhelmed (Davis, 2008). During busy advising times it can be hard to take a few moments and focus our awareness on how we feel: Tired? Hungry? Stressed? It also can be difficult to address those needs. Another pillar of mindfulness practice is the idea of the Beginner’s Mind – or cultivating a mind that is willing to see everything as if for the first time (Kabat-Zinn, 1990, p 53). When we cultivate a Beginner’s Mind we set aside our preconceptions about the student/situation and approach each student with a fresh attitude and renewed focus.
Try this: While you breathe, focus your thoughts on why you went into this field in the first place. Most of us gravitated to advising because we like people and like helping them. When you bring yourself back to remembering the simple reasons you chose this profession, you can find feelings of contentedness.

Challenges to mindfulness. Why is the practice of mindfulness so difficult for some? The hustle and bustle of our work and personal lives, paired with our culture’s emphasis of *doing over being*, are a few of the challenges we face as we attempt to operate in the moment. Others may be concerned that suggestions to breathe deeply and focus on an object may be misconstrued. Technology can be another barrier to true mindfulness – it can be difficult to pick up on subtle cues when corresponding via email or when a student in the advising chair is texting constantly. The bottom line is that each of us must find the level of mindfulness that works and feels comfortable given our individual personalities and work circumstances – the very effort of trying to meet someone else’s standard of mindfulness takes the focus off our own progress.

Try this: Think about a time when being mindful in an advising session resulted in positive outcomes for you and the student – what were you aware of? How might you repeat that success in other interactions? Conversely, think about a time when you were not mindful in a session – what happened? At what point did you “drop the ball,” and what have you learned about yourself as a result?

There is an old saying -- “happiness is not a destination, but a mode of transportation.” Mindfulness is similar – it is a means to an end, not the end in itself.

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