

Inward Wellness

Enhancing mental and emotional health by practicing mindfulness

BY NIKOLETA MORALES

Stress is a significant factor when it comes to overall health and well-being. Regular exercise, a healthy diet and effective coping skills are among the best ways to handle and eliminate stress, and Inward Office is taking its methods to the employees of FLASHP member school districts.

Inward Office, which offers “corporate yoga” and specializes in taking classes to your workplace, was a featured vendor at Wellness Days in Sodus, Wayne and Wayne Finger Lakes BOCES in October. The mobile yoga studio also offers mindfulness programs, meditation, self-massages and fitness classes, all with the emphasis on coping with stress.

Marla Pelletier, a yoga instructor and owner of Inward Office, demonstrated mindfulness techniques for participants during the wellness days. The key, she says, is to practice mindfulness by starting with yourself first before you can assist others.

Pelletier, who has 13 years as a yoga instructor, defines mindfulness as “paying attention on purpose in the present moment, while suspending judgment.” As she puts it, it is a conscious choice to be aware, awake and pay attention. The term “mindfulness” originated in Buddhism but has been applied secularly in schools, workplaces, and organizations.

Through her studies of meditation and yoga, Pelletier learned how mindfulness practices can re-train the nervous system to better handle daily stresses, such as anchoring the attention in the senses to change a state of high nervous system arousal, or our fight/flight mode.

“Scanning through different parts of your body, paying attention to what’s going on inside of yourself, can naturally





A seminar on mindfulness and stress management by Inward Office held at Wayne Central School District, Wayne Finger Lakes BOCES and Sodus Central School District

relax you," she says. "These are techniques we teach – how do you change from a reactive mindset to one that is responsive? The answer is a practice of stillness and spaciousness."

Sodus Athletic, Health and Physical Education Director Mike Magin was part of the team that organized the district's wellness day. More than 300 staff members participated in an hour of wellness that included relaxation techniques, racket games, biking, acupuncture, yoga, painting and other methods of reducing stress.

"It was a good reset for the staff to take your mind off the classroom and everyday work and focus on yourself," Magin says. "I recommend it for others as well."

Paula Mencucci, a physical therapist and also one of the regional coordinators for "Wellness is Now" at Newark Education Center (a component of WFL-BOCES), says NEC had a professional development opportunity day that included a seminar on mindfulness. They held a conference day, which offered staff professional development to learn strategies for stress management. It included a presentation and wellness practice that featured breathing techniques and bringing awareness to yourself and the environment. There were 46 staff in attendance.

"This was a unique opportunity for us – first one of its kind," Mencucci says. "Taking time for your own mental health, taking time for yourself to center yourself, can help you handle the day better."

Staff discussed strategies for helping students.

"I think it was a unique perspective for staff to take a look at and incorporate into their own lives," Mencucci adds.

Monica Bays, health and wellness coordinator at Wayne, says the district's wellness day was for support staff including teacher aides. Teachers and teacher assistants had other topics that they were covering. The day was focused on understanding that adults need effective strategies and techniques so they can work effectively with students.

"The support staff are the ones working more one on one with students and being able to see the things that are happening with the kids," Bays says. "There is a lot more stress in school, socially and at home and it is a hot topic in education, so we want to give them the tools to be more successful in the classroom."

Pelletier says she received positive feedback from a lot of the teachers.

"I had a nice conversation with a teacher who uses relaxation techniques with speech students to help them focus and retain new learning", she adds. "It can be mental or physical tension that creates resistance, and this can hinder learning outcomes. He had better results when he played relaxing music and did deep breathing."