A Guide for Working with Resistance

Encountering ‘resistance’ and dealing with behavior issues is one of the most common challenges for educators. Regardless of the subject matter we are teaching, our mindfulness practice can be a great asset in learning how to handle these situations with skill, grace and integrity. This guide offers an overview of key things to consider when working with resistance. The specifics of how to implement these will vary based on the context within which you work and the age of the youth you are serving.

I. Learn to See ‘Resistance’ as Information

One of the greatest challenges to effectively working with resistance is our very interpretation of behavior as ‘resistance!’ In psychology, the concept of resistance describes a client’s direct or indirect opposition to changing behaviors, discussing experiences, or assenting to a clinician’s intervention. However, our view of a student’s actions as ‘resistance’ can inhibit our ability to connect with them, block access to positive intentions, and exacerbate our own internal distress or reactivity.

Instead, we can learn to understand such behaviors as valuable information about a child’s needs. We can see it as an attempt to communicate their inner experience, to self-regulate, and/or to exercise autonomy. This is especially true with adolescents, where differentiation and identity formation are key phases of their psychological development. This shift in our own thinking help us stay connected to intentions of curiosity and care, creating new possibilities for engaging.

II. Handle your Internal State
As educators, we care deeply about our work and want to support children and youth to do their best. It can be incredibly frustrating when one or more students seem to do everything they can to undermine our intentions or inhibit learning in the classroom. Our ability to respond effectively to such behavior issues is directly proportional to our capacity to manage our internal reactivity. Here are a few tips for handling reactivity:

- **Monitor Reactivity:** Mindfully track your inner experience and find balance in the moment. Take time outside of class as needed to investigate emotions: frustration, anger, disappointment, sadness, helplessness, insecurity. Imagine the worst case scenario to face your fears. What’s the worst that can happen? Once we acknowledge that, it has less power. The more you work through your feelings outside of class, the easier it will be to stay clear, grounded, and calm in class.

- **Check Your Assumptions:** Watch out for thoughts that assume we know what is happening for the child or that attribute malicious intentions to their behavior. We really can’t know what’s going on for them. Give them the benefit of the doubt. They may actually be taking in our care whether they show it or not.

- **Don’t Take It Personally:** The more we take a situation personally, feeling threatened, judging ourselves, or seeking approval, the less likely we are to respond in an appropriate, creative, or skillful way. Remember that there are many factors in a student’s life that have nothing to do with you.

- **Redefine Success:** Watch out for the belief that you have to save, rescue, or fix anyone, which tends to narrow your attention onto one or two students. Do your best to let go of your expectations about how mindfulness “should” go and focus on responding authentically to whatever comes up as you teach. Shift your definition of success from a particular outcome to the integrity of your intention and the quality of relationship you build with the kids.

### III. Engage the Resistance

To “engage the resistance” means to work directly with the children or youth who are acting out. We try to find a way to redirect their energy, to meet the needs they are trying to meet by acting out, and/or to win them over. The level of conversation and
strategy will vary depending on the age of the youth. Here are a few best practices:

- **Prioritize Connection:** Strengthen your ability to connect empathically and prioritize the quality of relationship. Ultimately, we can’t get anyone to do anything, but *how* we engage often communicates more than *what* we say. Make space to offer empathy for their feelings to deescalate any tension.

- **Seek to Understand their Needs:** Stretch to imagine the student(s)’ concerns. Ask questions and really listen to what they say. Inquire, directly or indirectly, what matters for them. “What do you need right now?” can be a powerful question.

- **Problem Solve Together:** As you identify what’s going on, have a conversation and brainstorm ways they can meet their needs that also honor you and the other students in the room. Communicate clearly your need to balance your care for them with your duty to protect everyone’s right to learn.

- **Set Clear Limits and Boundaries:** Creating a simple structure or agreement for behavior etiquette helps students to know what we expect of them and why. Following through on the limits you set sends a clear message that you will respect everyone’s right to learn. Be sure to make your requests clear, specific, and doable, and to share the reasons behind what you are asking them to do. This inherently acknowledges their autonomy and helps create buy-in. If and when you need to use your power to enforce limits (e.g., asking a student to leave), be sure to frame it in terms of your needs (e.g., wanting everyone to learn) rather than ‘right’ and ‘wrong,’ which can undercut a student’s sense of self-worth.

- **Find Other Creative Strategies:** Each student and each situation is different. Use your intuition and creativity to find other strategies.
  - Walk or sit near the student. Depending on the context, physical contact can be settling, provide comfort or attention in an unobtrusive way.
  - Give the student a special role to help them feel like they belong are seen.
  - Name what’s happening in the room and include it in the lesson.
• **Attend to Timing:** Choose which interventions to use in class, and when to find a neutral time to talk privately with the student(s) in question. (E.g., the middle of class not be the best time to have a full-on discussion with the student...)

**IV. Refine the Container**
Ideally, you’ve created a meaningful and supportive learning environment and set a clear and strong container from the beginning. If not, it can be difficult to go back and redefine the ground rules. However, with some care, skill and planning, it can be done. If appropriate, consider doing a “reset” with your class: discuss everyone’s needs; create group agreements and norms; and work to reestablish a culture of respect.

With older youth, consider how much you’ve been able to create a sense of relevance. Find out what matters to them in their life, where they’re struggling, or where you think mindfulness can help. When they can see the potential benefits of mindfulness, they will take it more seriously. Until we do this, teaching mindfulness can be an uphill battle. Use a “hook” to draw them in and make mindfulness relevant to their lives. Revisit the question of relevance every lesson, varying and building on the hook, reinforcing it until there is a palpable and lasting shift in the tone of the room.

**V. Get Support**
While you may be the only person standing up in front of the classroom, you’re not alone. Turn to friends and colleagues for support. Seek consultation from peers or mentors. If there are other adults present or available (an aid, a student teacher), ask for their help in implementing the strategies you choose. Try obtaining one on one support for the student, which can be very effective in addressing behavior issues.

You can also be creative and enlist the support of other students. Use the behavior issue as a teachable moment and involve the whole class in an honest conversation about learning and collaboration. What do the other students need to be able to learn? Do they have ideas about how to work together to address the situation? Privately, speak with one or two students who are leaders in the class and invite their input. Encourage them to speak up or help set behavior norms.
VI. Further Resources

Need more support with student behavior? Here are a few places to check out:

- Read “10 Key Principles for Communication and Teaching Mindfulness”
- Read “Managing Reactivity: How Mindfulness Can Mitigate Countertransference”
- Read “Working with Adolescents”
- Read “Using Metaphors to Teach Mindfulness”
- Post a question on the Mindful Educator Facebook page
- Review Week 4 of Mindful Educator Essentials