

## Ahimsa Center K-12 Teacher Institute Lesson

**Title:**

*Ahimsa as a model of Health: decreasing events of stress, anger, and violence at an individual level*

**Lesson By:**

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**Grade Level/ Subject Areas:**

*9-12<sup>th</sup>*

**Duration of Lesson:**

*(20-30min 3-4days)*

**Content Standards:**

High School Course 2:

3.3 Evaluate the psychological benefits derived from regular participation in physical activity

3.4 Explain and analyze the role of individual attitude, motivation, and determination in achieving personal satisfaction from challenging physical activities.

3.9 Encourage others to be supportive and inclusive of individuals of all ability levels

**Lesson Abstract:**

This lesson uses the “Gandhian” concept of *Ahimsa* to promote a healthy lifestyle by investigating main inhibitors of health such as stress, anger, and violence and how they conversely relate to *Ahimsa*. Health as a multidimensional aspect of wellness provides students with an opportunity to look at their own responses to anger and stress. In order to further develop the concept of *Ahimsa* as a model of health, students outline the paralleling relationship between common methods of anger and stress reduction to that of the *Ahimsa* practice.

**Guiding Questions:**

*How does Ahimsa fit into a practical model of a healthy lifestyle?*

*In what ways does anger and violence affect health?*

*How can practicing Ahimsa create a healthier individual mentally, physically, and emotionally?*

**Content Essay:**

**Gandhi’s Ahimsa**

The word *Ahimsa* is an ethical concept meaning nonviolence in thought and action using positivity, love, compassion, a peaceful nature, and forgiveness to live a full, interconnected life with mindfulness toward all beings (Sethia pg. 65, 66). A cardinal virtue, in many eastern rooted religions, *Ahimsa* is commonly associated with Mahatma K. Gandhi the father of nonviolent social resistance due to his many campaigns for nonviolent social resistance in India during the

1920's and 30's. *Ahimsa* has now become the global term for nonviolence among academics and scientists alike.

Discussion of *Ahimsa* can be synonymously linked to strong mental and emotional health through the verbal description. However, to go deeper into the powerful concept of *Ahimsa*, discussion must take place around *Ahimsa* as a practice of health. By applying the concept of nonviolence to scientific research, surrounding individual wellness, a connection can be made between the practice of *Ahimsa* and stress and anxiety reduction strategies.

According to Gandhi, one can practice *Ahimsa* through self-transformation by practicing love and mindfulness, by not injuring any creature by thought, word or deed. True *Ahimsa*, according to Gandhi, should mean a complete freedom from ill-will, anger and hate, and an overflowing love for all. *Ahimsa* is the attribute of the soul and therefore to be practiced by everybody in all the affairs of life (Gandhianpeace.com 2013).

### **How can we be mindful of others' thoughts, traditions, and needs in our daily lives?**

#### **Ahimsa and Stress**

Investigating *Ahimsa* as a practical model for health requires a comparison of Gandhi's *Ahimsa* to the concept of health in recent medical research. The World Health Organization describes health as "a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity" (2002). A major inhibitor of health for many people is stress. High levels of stress are a common problem in today's society creating an unsteady platform for personal wellness. In order to learn how the practice of *Ahimsa* can help to counteract stress we must first learn about the different kinds of stress and how they relate to our overall wellbeing.

There are two kinds of stress. The first is called eustress; eustress is a "healthy response to a stressor that produces positive results". An example of eustress would be training really hard for a race that you feel good about once you have completed it. The second type of stress is called distress. Distress is a "harmful response to a stressor that produces negative results" (Meeks et al. p. 188). This type of stress leads to thoughts or behavior of anger. These two opposing kinds of stress can tell us a lot about how our lifestyles, habits, and responses affect our health and happiness.

Counteracting high levels of stress is a topic well discussed throughout the health industry. Implementing *Ahimsa*, as a practical model to reduce stress, could be revolutionary as a recent medical research that indicated the key ways to reduce stress are meditation, mindfulness, extending love or compassion to others, and positive thinking. (WebMD 2013). These aspects of personal health parallel that of the practice of *Ahimsa* and therefore represent a possible positive correlation between the practice of *Ahimsa* and healthier lifestyles, overall wellbeing, and happiness.

#### **Ahimsa, Anger, and Violence**

The Concept of *Ahimsa* embodies nonviolence in thought and action and since we now know that *Ahimsa* can be a practice of health to help decrease stress, an important connection can be made by looking at the ways anger and violence effect health. By comparing and contrasting the

opposing concept of *Ahimsa* to anger in an individual we can gain a greater understanding of *Ahimsa* as a practical method of health and wellness routines.

Anger is a universal reaction to an outside stimulus that has a variety of triggers depending on the person. Being angry is okay. Sometimes we need to go through an emotional experience to understand new concepts and ideas and ultimately ourselves. Unfortunately, anger can many times be difficult for people to handle and this event or issue becomes an unresolved long-term problem. According to recent research, “long term and intense anger has been linked with mental health problems including depression, anxiety and self-harm”. Conversely, *Ahimsa* aims to claim compassion and love through mindfulness of others and nonviolence as a way of life ultimately creating a gap between personal wellness and mental, emotional, and physical health problems.

### **Why do you think anger and violence, over time, can have such negative effects on people’s health?**

Beyond emotional instability, long-term anger and violence can also cause people to become physically sick, contracting issues such as “high blood pressure, colds and flu, coronary heart disease, stroke, cancer, and gastro-intestinal problems” (mentalhealth.org 2013) all because of how angry and violent they are. A perpetual state of anger, in any individual, and violent habits make the body to feel as if there is an emergency at all times. This constant state of fight or flight provides little rest for the body and consequently adversely affects the immune system, allowing the body to become extremely susceptible to injury and disease (Meeks et al. p. 187). The body’s reaction to anger and violence is to try and rebalance in order to find homeostasis. Therefore, an argument could be made around the idea that anger causes the body to feel as if it is unbalanced.

### **Can you ever remember a time when you did something wrong and you felt sick to your stomach?**

Thinking about our bodies reaction to anger and violence should remind us of the effect stress has on our body’s as well. Using our prior knowledge we can easily see that anger, stress, and violence can many times be interrelated. Remembering that the goal of Gandhi’s concept of *Ahimsa* means to love the meanest of creations as ones self and reject nonviolence to see for the world love, and compassion (Sethia p. 65). Each of us, when working toward better overall health and wellness, should remember that the practice of *Ahimsa* inadvertently works to counteract the negative imbalances that stress, anger, and violence impose on our lives. If we can implement Gandhi’s concept of *Ahimsa* into our daily lives we have the opportunity to become calmer, healthier, and happier individuals.

### **What are some ways that we can implement the practice of *Ahimsa* into our daily lives?**

Using knowledge based on the concept of *Ahimsa* we can now see that anger and stress have the possibility of being decreased throughout an individual’s life by consciously practicing *Ahimsa* as a model of health. This might mean a serious commitment like morning meditations or simply remembering to count to ten when angry to avoid causing the body any unneeded stress or perpetuated anger. It is important that we try to approach life in the positive sense using compassion and love as our guide to life.

## **Bibliography:**

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“Blissing Out”. [www.webmd.com](http://www.webmd.com). Blissing Out: 10 Relaxation Tips to Reduce Stress on the Spot. Web. August 8, 2013.

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Meeks, Linda; Heit, Philip; Page, Randy. *Comprehensive School Health Education: Totally Awesome Strategies for Teaching Health* 4<sup>th</sup> ed. New York: McGraw-Hill Companies., 2005. Print

Sethia, Tara. *Gandhi: Pioneer of Nonviolent Social Change*. New Jersey: Pearson Education., 2012. Print.

## **Teaching Activities**

The activities in this section are designed to be implemented throughout the lesson(s) to create a foundational understanding of *Ahimsa* as a practical method of personal health. Activities should be completed in their chronological order to increase students understanding of lesson content.

### **Activity #1**

Upon completion of “Gandhi’s *Ahimsa*” section of the lesson have students work in groups of 3-4 in order to create posters advertising the clubs around campus that embody Gandhi’s concept of *Ahimsa*. The students may have to do some research. Their final poster board product should include:

- The name of the club
- The mission of the club
- When and where they meet

### **Activity #2**

After discussing “Ahimsa and Stress” have students use their journals to make a list of major daily activities as well as a recent or upcoming events or issues that are prominent to their life at this point in time. Some examples are; a big test coming up, waking up for school late, getting in an argument with your parents, planning an adventure with friends etc. Once students have compiled their lists, using the definition of distress and eustress, have them label each activity/event on their list as either distress or eustress. Then ask students to pair and share with another classmate answering the following questions:

- Do you notice a trend in your distress to eustress activities?
- What can you do to decrease the amount of distress in your life?
- How do these stresses affect your health?
- How can practicing *Ahimsa* lower our stress levels?

### **Activity #3**

Once discussion in the “*Ahimsa*, anger, and violence” section of the lesson has taken place ask students try an experiment with you. Students should use their journals to write for approximately 5min about an issue or personal situation that makes them very angry or upset. This is a free write and no one will see it but them. Once students have finished writing ask them to re-read what they wrote. Ask them how re-reading the story made them feel. Write prominent or resonating answers on the board. Then students force themselves to hold a smile while re-reading their writing again. Now how do they feel? Was it harder to think of the same things with a smile on their face even though it was forced? Ask students:

- Did you feel a difference between these two experiences?
- Why or why not?

### **Activity #4**

Upon completion of the lesson students will work in groups of 3-4 in order to brainstorm a strategy for practicing *Ahimsa* to live a healthier lifestyle. Students use poster board to illustrate their idea and share it with the rest of the class. Criteria for this activity should include:

- The name of your strategy
- What your strategy is
- How you will implement it
- How it fits into Gandhi’s concept of *Ahimsa*

### Materials Needed

- Markers
- Newspapers
- Magazines
- Poster board
- Laptops or internet access
- Journals
- Pens/pencils