

A Mindful Community

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“Some of the worst things in my life never happened.”

Attributed Mark Twain

What is mindfulness and how can it help us? Mark Twain probably never heard of mindfulness but he certainly understood the essence of it. Mindfulness gives rise to insights which ripen into wisdom, because the more deeply and clearly we are able to observe the reality of our mind, body and world, the more we will understand how and why things are as they are. This paper is intended to plant the seed about the value of mindfulness, the emerging Mindfulness Movement and the potential for creating mindful communities.

Jon Kabat-Zinn defines mindfulness as “paying attention, on purpose, in the present moment and non-judgmentally.” His Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) program has been offered to staff and patients at the University of Massachusetts Medical Center for over 30 years and is the model for the health care industry. (see Mindfulness for Beginners, reclaiming the present moment – and your life by Jon Kabat-Zinn.)

Everything we say or do begins with a thought. Usually the thought is instantaneous. Sometimes our words or actions are based on habitual patterns of thinking that are not helpful to us or those around us, even if we have good intentions. Mindfulness training helps us reduce stress, increase focus and literally rewire our brains to change those habitual patterns and respond with a more compassionate and thoughtful approach. Kaiser Permanente says, “After participating in the MBSR program, many class members report considerable improvement in multiple physical and psychological symptoms. A significant number also describe-often with surprise-their lives expanding in positive ways, such as finding freedom from old problems and engaging current challenges with creativity and courage.”

Our minds are constantly racing with thoughts and concerns about the future or what has happened in the past, which has a direct impact on our focus on the present moment. That little voice in our head is never satisfied. It likes to tell us how inadequate we are. We can learn to recognize what is just a story in our mind versus reality. The Mayo Clinic say, “Meditation can give you a sense of calm, peace and balance that benefits both your emotional well-being and your overall health. And these benefits don't end when your meditation session ends. Meditation can help carry you more calmly through your day and can even improve certain medical conditions.”

Scientific research documenting how mindfulness rewires our brains to reduce stress has been conducted at major universities and research laboratories across the country for decades. The National Institute of Health alone is funding over 250 clinical studies on different applications for mindfulness.

“Mindfulness practices are currently where yoga was thirty years ago.” (Seth Greenland) It was common to hear yoga referred to as eastern, mystical and kind of weird when it was first introduced to western culture. Today we would not think twice if we overheard two people discussing their yoga routines. It is proven to have very positive results for physical and mental

health. Conversations about diet and nutrition, exercise, smoking and substance abuse are also common. Mindfulness is a simple tool to help us have the same kind of comfortable conversations about our mental health. Some programs use the term “grounding”; others call it “mind fitness.” It will soon be commonplace to hear a coworker say he or she is taking a 15 minute break to meditate.

Meditation has been practiced for over 5000 years by civilizations around the world. It is now seeing a resurgence of use in many areas of western society. Entities using mindfulness include medical centers, businesses (i.e. Google, Yahoo, Target, Ford Motor Company, Proctor and Gamble), elementary schools, MBA programs, and even the US Marine Corp. Congressman Tim Ryan of Ohio was introduced to meditation and believes that as a nation, we can have tremendous benefits from being a mindful society. ([A Mindful Nation, How a Simple Practice Can Help Us Reduce Stress, Improve Performance, and Recapture the American Spirit](#) by Congressman Tim Ryan.)

Mindfulness is becoming a standard course in corporate wellness programs. Many introductory training programs are as short as 2 hours a week for 6-8 weeks. At Google Corporation they encourage employees to slow down and get grounded before speaking or acting. Google refers to this as the ability to “create space between stimulus and response.” Their mindfulness course is offered to increase creativity, productivity and happiness. (see [Search Inside Yourself](#) by Chade-Meng Tan)

High levels of stress are taking a large toll physically and mentally on our society. Stress has become another form of addiction. We seem to have lost the civility needed for meaningful discussions about issues facing our communities, the nation and the world. Children (and adults) are overloaded with information and new technology.

In the field of education there are some amazing programs introducing meditation to elementary school children as well as high school and college. The Hawn Foundation, created by the actress Goldie Hawn, has led the way. “Working with leading neuroscientists, educators, and researchers, The Hawn Foundation developed the evidence-based MindUP™ program, a collection of social, emotional, and attention enhancing self-regulatory skills and strategies developed for cultivating wellbeing, emotional balance, and resiliency. Among the various MindUP™ skills taught to students, focused attention and nonreactive monitoring of experience from moment to moment, without judgment, display the potential to have a long-term impact on brain function and social and emotional behavior.”

The world is moving at an ever increasing amount of speed on every level from population increase, using up our natural resources, global warming, senseless violence, and the sheer enormity of the amount of data and information input we are subject to on a daily basis. We have to ask ourselves; is this healthy for humanity and the future of our world and planet.

The Big Idea – A Mindful Community. UniverCity Connections (UCC), an all volunteer coalition between the City of Fort Collins, Colorado State University (CSU), the Community Foundation of Northern Colorado and other community organizations, has generated or significantly contributed to a host of big ideas that have become realities such as Fort Zed and Homeward 2020. The Mindfulness Movement, as some call it, is underway across America. What if the major sectors of our community: CSU, Poudre Schools, the City of Fort Collins, the

medical centers, the Chamber of Commerce, and others chose to embrace mindfulness training? What if Fort Collins became a model for reducing stress and creating a more civil, thoughtful and compassionate community?

Mindfulness training is already being offered in a variety of settings in Fort Collins (see below). Hopefully UCC will become a forum to rapidly advance the awareness of and demand for mindfulness programs.

Local Resources. Colorado State University offers a for-credit class in mindfulness for freshmen called “Introduction to Mindfulness Meditation”, (contact Mac.McGoldrick@colostate.edu). The CSU Health Network also offers mindfulness and managing stress trainings for students (contact Christina.Berg@colostate.edu or janelle.patrias@colostate.edu). An internet search for “Fort Collins, MBSR”, “Fort Collins, Meditation” or “Fort Collins, Mindfulness” will bring up a list of centers, counselors, psychologists and psychiatrists who offer individual or group training. In all probability mindfulness is already being offered in organizations across Fort Collins. We would like to hear more about where it is being used.

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