

Minding your stress

'Mindfulness' helps people relax, reduce pain and increase well-being, advocates say

by Jocelyn Dong

Stressed out? Anxious? Instead of engaging in a little road rage or scarfing down a gallon of your favorite ice cream, heed the advice of local health-care organizations: They're encouraging people to adopt "mindfulness" as tool for coping with the demands of life. A number of classes on the technique start this month.

Mindfulness methods teach people to "be present" with their stress, noticing what's going on around and within themselves. Through deep breathing, awareness of one's thoughts, and gentle body movements, people learn to get a handle on stress before stress wreaks havoc on them, instructors say. In its 20-plus year history, the mindfulness movement has been credited by researchers and practitioners alike with helping people manage their anger, control anxiety and lessen the effects of illnesses.

Julie Forbes, a mindfulness instructor with a Ph.D. in psychology, sums it up this way: "A lot of it is helping people learn to respond to stress, anger and anxiety with awareness and choice, rather than react out of habitual patterns that no longer serve them best."

She explained that when people are confronted with stressful situations, they go into a "fight or flight" mode. "It's what we've been designed to do. When it happens, usually without our awareness, our ancient brain -- which doesn't do a lot of thinking -- takes over. We fall into those (fight or flight) patterns."

But, Forbes said, fighting and fleeing wear us down emotionally and physically. Learning to stay in the moment, paradoxically, can actually reduce stress, countering those primitive and intense reactions.

How many times have we heard the advice to "take a deep breath"? While breathing may seem like a no-brainer, remembering to do it during a moment of anxiety can be anything but automatic. "Often it's the last thing that people notice -- that they're holding their breath," Forbes said.

But breathing from one's diaphragm increases the amount of oxygen in the bloodstream and to the brain, helping people to think more clearly. "It can change the whole stress reaction," Forbes said. Besides lowering blood pressure, "it physically changes the body chemistry so it shifts us from sympathetic nervous system to the parasympathetic, which helps us get back into balance."

Another reason people get stressed out is because they worry about the future, anticipating things that may

never happen, or ruminate on an unpleasant past. Mindfulness teaches people to recognize their thoughts -- the first step in getting a handle on what's going on. Black-and-white thinking, in which the person doesn't believe that a middle ground exists, and generalizing (expecting a bad thing to happen again because it happened in the past) are two examples of thought patterns that Forbes calls "distorted."

People can break those patterns by choosing to think another way, she said. The black-and-white thinker may consciously try to find more reasonable explanations for what is happening, for example. More than 250 medical centers nationwide offer mindfulness-based stress-reduction programs, including Stanford, Palo Alto Medical Foundation and El Camino Hospital in Mountain View. The approach has its roots in the work of Jon Kabat-Zinn, Ph.D., who founded the University of Massachusetts Medical School Stress Reduction Clinic in 1979 and authored "Full Catastrophe Living" and "Wherever You Go, There You Are." Locally, the first mindfulness-based stress reduction programs were established in medical and educational settings by Bob Stahl through his organization, Awareness and Relaxation Training, based in Ben Lomond. At Stanford University School of Medicine, the mindfulness-meditation program was founded by Mark Abramson, a dentist who specializes in pain management.

Studies over the past two decades have documented health benefits among people who practice mindfulness. Patients have been able to manage heart palpitations and panic attacks, heal faster from injuries, handle pain better and ease depression. Physicians and therapists have started referring their patients to mindfulness classes, to supplement their care.

Renee Burgard, a licensed clinical social worker, is teaching mindfulness at the Palo Alto Medical Foundation. Her specialty is working with people who need disability rehabilitation.

"The results are very encouraging and satisfying," Burgard said. She recalled two clients, one who learned to relax his shoulder to such an extent that he no longer needed previously planned surgery and the other who had an intestinal illness that had kept her house-bound for more than a year. That client learned to reduce the symptoms of her illness so that she could venture outside again.

Often, mindfulness techniques do not reduce people's physical pain, but rather, their experience of that pain, Burgard said.

"Sensations occur in body and mind," she explained. When people experience stress, they think about it, getting upset, breathing more shallowly and tensing up their muscles. People may even argue with themselves and experience intense feelings, which leads to a build-up of anxiety. With mindfulness, on the other hand, people "sit with awareness of their problems," Burgard said. Aided by breathing techniques, muscle relaxation and meditation, people learn to identify their pain, emotions and thoughts. "It allows you to separate them out, name them, accept them, and modify them," Burgard said.

So what about time-tested stress reducers like taking a bubble bath or a trip to the coast? Does "getting away

from it all" run counter to the mindfulness philosophy? Not necessarily, said Forbes. Mindfulness is about becoming aware of what is affecting you and how you can act -- instead of simply react -- to maintain your well-being. Indulging in a sudsy soak or engaging in exercise may be how one person chooses to respond, once they've sized up what's going on around them.

And then, will a stress-free life be in store? "I don't know if a stress-free life is possible," said Forbes, who has been practicing meditation for years. "I'm in the soup with everyone else. But I definitely am learning to respond out of my own choices. I'm making different choices. It's an ongoing process."

Practice may not make perfect, but mindfulness instructors would say that it makes life better. Other drivers -- and your waistline -- might agree.

Email Jocelyn Dong @ jdong@pawebkly.com

Learning about mindfulness

Several classes on mindfulness are beginning this month. They meet once a week for 6-8 weeks. Most cost about \$300, except for the class at Avenidas, which costs \$60.

Palo Alto Medical Foundation

795 El Camino Real
(650) 853-2960
Free orientation Monday,
Jan. 14, 6:30-9 p.m.
(class starts Jan. 23)

El Camino Hospital,

2500 Grant Road, Mountain View
(800) 216-5556
Free orientation Thursday,
Jan. 17, 3-5 p.m. or 7-9 p.m.
(classes start Jan. 26)

Avenidas

450 Bryant St.
(650) 326-5362
Starts Tuesday, Jan. 22,
10-11:30 a.m.

Stanford Health Improvement Program

1000 Welch Rd. #4
(650) 723-9649
Starts Tuesday, Jan. 22,
6:30-9 p.m.

Stanford Center for Integrative Medicine

1101 Welch Road, Building A6
(650) 498-5566
Starts Wednesday, Jan. 23,
6:30-9 p.m.