Takoma Park election guide

Folk Fest photos

Remembering Dan Parr

Eco-friendly funerals
Mindfulness and health
Learning to embrace our lives

One of my favorite mindfulness and health studies – because of the simplicity of the intervention – took place just over ten years ago. Jon Kabat-Zinn, a University of Massachusetts biomedical researcher, divided patients with psoriasis into two groups. One group received standard phototherapy treatment. The other group received the standard treatment and also listened to guided meditations. They focused on becoming more aware of their breath, bodily sensations, feelings, and thoughts while receiving light therapy. The lesions of the second group cleared significantly sooner.

Another remarkable study took place about five years ago at the University of Wisconsin. Richard Davidson, the director of the Laboratory for Affective Neuroscience, put an experienced Buddhist monk into a magnetic resonance imaging machine that videotapes the functions of the brain. Davidson had been studying positive emotion and had developed a way to measure happiness based on electrical activity in the prefrontal lobes. The scores of the thousands of people Davidson had previously studied had aligned into a neat bell-shaped curve; however, the monk’s score was literally off the chart: 50 percent greater than the previously recorded highest score.

What the patients with psoriasis were learning, and what the monk had spent years developing, was mindfulness practice: a set of skills that helped them concentrate their minds and focus on present moment experiences. The word “mindfulness” can be misleading, however, because in English we think of mindfulness primarily as a cognitive process. In the mindfulness practice tradition, however, the “mind” is the center not just of cognitive processes, but also of affect and of functions such as will, volition, and desire. The “mindfulness” of mindfulness practice also means full presence, heartfulness, and whole-heartedness.

All of us are already mindful. When we bite into an apple and notice the flavor of the apple, we are being mindful. When we look to a loved one and feel a warmth in the heart, we are being mindful. When we become aware of our breathing for a few moments, we are being mindful. However, for most this is a fleeting encounter. Of Conscious Breathing. Periodically throughout the day, we close our eyes and become aware of our breathing for two or three or more breaths. We direct our attention to the physical sensation of breathing: the breath entering the body, the body expanding, the body being full, the body expelling the air, the body being quiet for a brief moment, and a new breath entering the body.

We can also practice by opening our awareness a little wider, so that we become conscious not only of the breath, but also of the sensations of well-being and ill-ease in our bodies and in our minds.

Because it is so easy for us to get lost in the rush of everyday life, many people set up cues to remind them to pause for a few moments. This reminder or cue could be a bell, the ring of a telephone, entering a new room, seeing the next patient, starting to write a fresh paragraph.

Developing as a mindfulness practitioner is similar to becoming more proficient with a sport such as swimming: it is all about incremental refinements. We need only put the practice to mind notices and moves on. Instead of being present, we obsess over what happened in the past, worrying about the future, or distract ourselves from what we are currently experiencing and doing.

With mindfulness practice we train ourselves to come back to the present moment, to what is occurring inside of us and around us: feelings of calmness or of angst, the twinkle in a friend’s eye, the sound of the wind.

Many people begin cultivating their mindfulness with the simple practice of Conscious Breathing. Periodically throughout the day, we close our eyes and become aware of our breathing for two or three or more breaths. We direct our attention to the physical sensation of breathing: the breath entering the body, the body expanding, the body being full, the body expelling the air, the body being quiet for a brief moment, and a new breath entering the body.

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Wisdom in foolishness
The effects of laughter on human health

by Leslie Sapp

In 1979, Saturday Evening Post editor Norman Cousins published a now famous book, *Anatomy of an Illness*, chronicling how he cured his severe chronic pain with a self-invented regimen of laughter and vitamin C. Ten years later, the healing power of laughter was finally acknowledged in the Journal of the American Medical Association. Over the next 20 years, researchers have identified and documented some very profound health benefits of laughter.

Through a series of studies at California’s Loma Linda University Medical Center in the early 90s, psychoneuroimmunologist Lee Berk, DrPH, MPH and endocrinologist Stanley Tan, MD showed that “mirthful laughter” caused a marked and measurable increase in the beneficial anti-stress hormones, including endorphins and neurotransmitters, as well as a decrease in the stress hormones cortisol and adrenaline. Everyone knows that “stress is bad,” but how exactly do these hormonal changes impact on human health?

As Dr. Tan puts it, the neuro-hormones responsible for a healthy immune system work “together like an orchestra, each instrument [making] a particular note.

Laughter makes the entire orchestra more melodious or balanced,” allowing the immune system to work more effectively. 1 As a result, the cells that produce anti-bodies increase in number, the T-cells (which combat viruses) are activated, and the natural killer cells increase in number and activity. All this—and much more—occurs as a direct result of laughter!

Dr. Berk, a self-described “hardcore medical clinician and scientist,” firmly believes that “lifestyle choices have a significant impact on health and disease,” and that “the best clinicians understand that there is an intrinsic physiological intervention brought about by...mirthful laughter, optimism and hope.”2

In 1998, in response to the early findings of Dr. Berk and Dr. Tan, the Loma Linda University Cancer Institute created a special library of humor materials for their cancer patients to use. Since then, laughter-based medical programs have gradually begun to spring up around the world. In a number of clinics, laughter has is used as adjunct to—or sometimes even a replacement for—pain killers, for both chronic and acute conditions. It’s also being used in place of certain anti-depressant drugs. Laughter therapy may even become standard fare in the treatment of diabetes and cancer risk reduction, improved cardiac function, less intense migraines, fewer periods of anxiety, and a host of other beneficial health outcomes.

Everyone knows that “laughter is the best medicine,” but what if you have nothing to laugh about? What if you simply have a lousy sense of humor? Or what if things are so bad for you that nothing seems funny anymore? No problem—fake it ‘till you make it! Studies have shown that the beneficial physiological changes that result from laughing occur even when we just pretend to laugh. In fact, most human bodily systems don’t recognize the difference between simulated laughter and the real thing. Just a few moments of either variety will activate the immune system, calm the nerves, awaken the senses, and sharpen the intellect.

Now that’s something to laugh about!

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Mindfulness, continued

to practice, it is important to have a good coach, and we sustain our effort and motivation by being around people who practice.

Medical research on mindfulness has ballooned in the past decade. It is no longer the province of a few mavericks. Recent studies have related regular mindfulness practice to better immune system response, cancer risk reduction, improved cardiac function, less intense migraines, fewer periods of anxiety, and a host of other beneficial health outcomes.

The ancient practitioners emphasized something much simpler: through mindfulness practice we develop a calm mind and a joyful heart. We feel more alive, more in touch with life, more connected to others. We are better able to respond to life’s challenges with composure, courage, and compassion.

Mitchell Ratner is the Senior Teacher at the Still Water Mindfulness Practice Center, which offers programs in Silver Spring, Takoma Park, and Columbia, Maryland, and Chevy Chase, DC. For information, visit www.StillWaterMPC.org.

God
and I
have become
like two giant, jolly people,
living in a tiny boat.

We keep
bumping into each other
and LAUGHING

You have stumbled enough
in the earth’s sweet dance.

You have paid all your dues
many times.

Now let’s get down
to the real reason
why we sit together
and breathe.

Let’s begin the laughing,
the divine laughing,
like great heroic women
and magnificent strong men!

—Hafiz
(Sufi mystic poet)