

Providence Hospital - Mindfulness Meditation

The following is a compilation of stories and comments of people who have participated in the Mindfulness Meditation course.

For additional information, please contact Dr. Howard Schubiner, phone: 248-865-4133

The moment one gives close attention to anything, even a blade of grass, it becomes a mysterious, awesome, indescribably magnificent world in itself. --Henry Miller

A trip to the dentist

I had a cavity filled and a crown replaced this morning and there were so many feelings, sounds and thoughts that arose. I found that I had a natural tension that seemed to arise in my jaw and neck. The muscles were tightening as my jaw was held open and my mouth filled with appliances, sponges, and hands. It was interesting to pay attention to the sounds. In the background was soft classical music, some pieces slow and beautiful, while others were quick and bouncy. These sounds were counter posed to the sound of the drill and the suction machine. It was very interesting to just let the sounds come and to mindfully pay attention to the usually soothing and the often terrifying sounds together at the same time. This seemed to help the tightening sensations in the jaw. As time passed, I noticed I was getting anxious to be finished. After an hour of various injections, drilling, filling, casting, trimming, and measuring, I began wishing I was somewhere else. As I watched these thoughts, I also noticed that I wasn't being patient, one of the first concepts fundamental to the practice of mindfulness. This led to me pay attention to patience, my lack thereof and then gradually allowing myself to become more patient. After all, I certainly wasn't going anywhere until my dentist removed all the hardware, etc. from my mouth. After patience, I just naturally paid attention to the other concepts one should practice while being mindful: trust, the beginner's mind, non-striving, non-judging, accepting and letting go (or letting be). I found myself content to surrender to the moment, to the capable hands of the dentist, to being there, to the music of the radio and the dental machines.

Meditation against all odds

I attended my first meditation class on Wednesday. It was all I hoped it would be and more. When I got home from work Thursday, I couldn't wait to put in the disc and start my first meditation. My 13 year old daughter, Ashley, was walking over to a friend's house and then the two of them were walking back here. My 10 year old, Amber, was staying home and she agreed to try the meditation with me. I thought, okay I've got at least 15 minutes before Ashley returns. Amber and I pulled our chairs up to the computer, I slid in the CD and we began. Well, it wasn't more than 6 minutes into the meditation that Ashley came bolting through the door with her friend. She took one look at me with my head bowed meditating and yelps "WHAT THE HECK IS GOING ON." Amber softly answers, "she meditating". Ashley next response is "MOM, DOES THE WORD CRAZY MEAN ANYTHING TO YOU. I MEAN REALLY!" I remained meditating as Ashley and her friend go to her room, but not for long. Within moments Ashley is back and spewing "MOM, DO YOU PURPOSELY TRY TO EMBARRASS ME WHEN MY FRIENDS ARE HERE!" Believe it or not, I did not let Ashley interrupt me at that moment and I did my best to stay with the meditation. I'm sure she found this even more annoying. What Ashley didn't know was that I was eagerly embarking on a journey of awareness that I just knew would become the beginning of renewal not to mention, help me cope, cherish and enjoy the always unpredictable and sometimes over zealous 13 year old in my life.

Finding a time and a place

I have found it to be a great challenge to incorporate the mindfulness exercises into my evening routine. I find that I have a very hectic existence from the moment that I walk in the door each evening, until I lay down each night. When I began to make attempts to practice the Mindfulness breathing CD, it immediately attracted both my nine year old daughter and our cat. Both would make their way into the room, and find a spot on the bed, or wherever I would be, and try to be a part of the event. I would just laugh, and attempt to continue the exercise, unless they would be too chaotic, in which case, I would ask them both to leave. The Mindfulness training has already helped me to focus on areas of stress in my life, of which there are many, but that I hope to address successfully with the information, and practice that I have learned. I am already experiencing some benefit and look forward to great gain.

The Umbrella Connection

Recently I was diagnosed with Adult Attention Deficit Disorder which (in my case) affects my ability to organize thoughts, keep focused on the moment at hand, remembering where I put things, missing appointments and commitments, etc. These situations often cause me embarrassment and distress.

After attending four sessions of Mindful Meditation and practicing the meditation exercises, I had an unusual experience while shopping at my local Meijers Store. It had been raining and so I brought my umbrella with me. Upon leaving the store, I realized I didn't have my umbrella. Usually when this kind of event happens, I become so anxious I do not process thoughts clearly. This time I just stopped in my tracks and said to myself, "Now keep calm, slowly breathe in and out. Concentrate on this moment and which isles you walked through. Let's see, I looked at picture frames, moved on to shoes, and then spotted some pretty throws for my new living room sofa. I may have laid my umbrella down while examining one of the throws. Please let it be there."

As I retraced my steps, I kept repeating, "Keep calm, keep breathing, and stay in this moment". I wasn't sure exactly where I saw the throws, so just kept walking toward the back of the store. Miracle of miracles!!! I walked directly to the throw display. Walla! My umbrella was lying right where I left it--just waiting for me. I cannot explain what a sense of relief and 'unadulterated glee' I felt. . A positive outcome like this rarely happens to me.

I know my success was the result of keeping calm, focusing on my breathing and staying 'in the moment' during my search. Instead of feelings of self-incrimination, I experienced a delightful feeling of self-accomplishment!

Through continued practice of Mindful Meditation, I hope to experience many more "umbrella connections".

Dealing with work stress

I was in the ER, in the physician's conference room located in the center of the treatment area(an unfamiliar area for me), listening to their issues on the slowness of the computer system while checking out the settings on the PCs. Present at the meeting were the chairman of the dept., 5 other physicians, and the president of the computer system (many of the key players in this issue). This was my first meeting with many of these physicians and I had several goals in mind: wanting to demonstrate my true concern for their problem by listening totally (not interrupted); as well as document physical settings on the PCs (data I would need to communicate to Tech

Support and Network Services to get resolution). I also value the time users donate in order to solve their computing needs and I strive to concentrate on the issues at hand.

That day I was also the Helpdesk's application support person (if Helpdesk personnel are unable to resolve a user's issue they refer it to the support person). I was paged 5 times in a period of 20 minutes by the Helpdesk for problems they could not handle. Three of the pages related to non-printing of documents the users needed in order to conduct business that day (priorities). Hating to make a negative impression on the physicians or leave before all the pertinent data was obtained, but knowing that the president of the computer system would be able to continue in my absence, I excused myself to attend to the printing issues.

This decision was very stressful. I was obsessing about it all the way to the parking lot; wondering why me; why today; why now; have I wrecked my credibility with this group of docs; how am I going to solve these printing issues when I know little about them. Getting in my car, I purposely decided to try Mindful Meditation breathing. I concentrated on breathing; looked at my reaction in the ER when the pages kept coming in; looked at the decision to leave the meeting; and let it go. By the time I arrived at my office (about 6 minute drive) I felt the tension was gone. True the problem was still there but I felt in control, able to deal with it, without the added anxiety generated by the stress.

Life lessons

I came to the mindful meditation class hoping to find a better way to deal with stress and anxiety in my life. But now that I have completed five of the six weeks in the course, I can see that the life skills I'm learning are of even greater value. What I see now is that the highs and lows in life are only rare blips, and while it's critical to know how to deal with these times, most of my days are quite routine. It's being able now to be mindful of the ordinary that I am most grateful for. I feel that the calmness I gain from this new way of being and seeing will help me deal with whatever life brings.

Daily challenges

I stopped at the light on my way to work. The advertisement on the large bus in front of me showed a picture of a robust Marine scaling a wall. The caption read, "A day without challenge is a wasted day." My first thought was, "This has nothing to do with me." But as I sat at the light, I considered my challenges. There are a multitude of challenges each day: getting everyone up and out of the house on time without screaming or misunderstanding, dealing with delays or rude drivers, holding my tongue as my daughter makes her own decisions, taking time to listen to someone who just needs to talk. These are my challenges today and everyday. A day without challenges means I'm ignoring them and therefore ignoring the teaching of the day and therefore wasting the opportunity to grow. Thoreau wrote: "I went to the woods to live deliberately....and not to find at the end of my life that I had not truly lived."

Seeing trees

A couple of years ago, I arrived a few minutes early to give a talk to a class in Ann Arbor. Having had a busy day, I took some time to practice walking meditation along a nearby riverbed. It was January and about dusk. As I walked, I noticed the shapes of the trees. I was amazed by the variation in shape, size, contour. Each tree was so different from the next. They stood there, bare in the cold, yet beautiful. I never paid much attention to trees in the winter, waiting for the spring to be struck by the delicate pale greens as the leaves emerge and loving the fall for the blazing colors.

During the next few weeks, I paid attention to the underlying structure of trees. In many ways, I found that trees are more beautiful without their leaves. You can see each one in detail, naked, exposed and unique. Much more unique than when covered up in the summer. This process led me to the awareness that we are all usually covered up. But when we take the risk to expose ourselves, to be vulnerable, to allow others to see our underlying structure, we see the beauty we have as unique individuals.

Conquering fear

Being mindful helped me conquer fear. For at least the past twenty years, I have been terribly afraid while crossing certain overpasses and bridges. As I approach them I feel the panic rising, my breathing and heart rate increase, my knuckles are white on the steering wheel, and I repeat prayers over and over as I drive. Last week, when we were discussing using mindfulness in our daily lives, our teacher suggested that we might look at fear as an ocean. We don't have to plunge in. We can dip a toe in and withdraw, and then dip in again. On the way home after class, I came to one of the dreaded overpasses. I felt myself gearing up to fight the panic. And then I remembered I could look at my fear—just a little. I tried being mindful of my fear, and just as sometimes happened when I try to be mindful of my thoughts without judgment, there was space. What a miraculous relief! This week, I've had to cross that same overpass a few times again. As I approached, I waited for the panic to start, but it did not. There was still space—nothing. I am so grateful.

Relationship issues

My husband was married before and has two children. We interact with his ex-wife who has done many things that make it hard on us and especially on the children. Recently, another episode occurred which made me really angry. This anger threatened to flow out of me onto her. I was concerned that this might also affect my relationship with my husband. When I sat and paid attention to this problem, I found that gradually my anger dissipated. When I noticed the issues and perspectives on this situation, I found that I really wasn't so mad at her anymore. What had replaced the anger was kindness. I now began to feel some compassion for her. She is only doing what she is able to do right now. This has helped me tremendously; to be able to let go of the anger and focus on what I/we have in our family.

Creative thinking

One thing I have noticed is some improvement in problem solving when I run into a roadblock. I would usually come up with one "solution," but if it didn't work, I got frustrated and then procrastinated doing anything about the issue until the situation was desperate. Since experiencing meditating about a problem, more solutions than just the first one come to mind and I can get past the setback better. I feel that I am being more honest with myself - even when I don't particularly like what comes to mind, and also gentler, though there is a long way to go!

A new approach

Two weeks ago I had a meeting with my boss. I have started preparing for my meetings with him. He is often very critical, demanding and loud. I have seen from the mindfulness class that I can develop a calm and quiet manner. My boss started right out yelling how he did not want me to write down a list of all the safety violations at the site. He was out of control and very reactionary. I just sat back and looked at him and said very calmly, "This was a report for discussion and I gave it to you for your opinion. You do not have to be so loud, demanding, and out of control. When you want to discuss this professionally we can do that. The report is

necessary to remind us of what needs to be addressed. It is not an attack on you. This is an audit report.” He sat down and calmed down. Meanwhile, I was not in the least bit upset. At that moment, I could look at him in a different light...as if I stepped out of my body and was watching the whole situation. I didn't want to overreact to his reaction so I just took deep breaths and let him vent and calmly spoke professionally and respectfully to him. It felt so good to not have my heart race or allow anger to overtake me. Although my work can be exhausting, I love the work I do and mindfulness allows me to control some of the negative aspects of it.

Skills for taking tests

I woke up on the morning of my final exam with a very tense feeling and a queasy stomach. I didn't think I would be this nervous for this exam since the previous two were challenging but not overwhelming. This last few weeks of class had been much more work than I had expected. I spent many more hours on my programming homework and though I completed each assignment I still felt like I barely knew the material. This final exam was scheduled to be 3 hours long and I could not contain my dread as I drove to class. I was so nervous that my breakfast didn't stay down long. "This is ridiculous!" I said to myself. I am a 39 year old woman who has completed a degree and taken many classes before. I was tired of being so anxious before each test for each class. My preparedness for any test never seemed to alleviate my anxiety. On the way to class I decided to practice some mindfulness techniques that I had recently learned. The first technique was to walk to class with a beginner's mind. I looked at the campus and realized again how nicely landscaped it was. The sun was shining through a slight fog that made everything seem fresh and new. I even started to notice the other students that were walking to class. They were of all different ages and that made me grateful not to be the oldest student. That gratefulness never occurred to me before. This technique helped me to focus on something other than my panic. I next decided to use the "What else is true?" technique. I kept asking myself what was true and first came to the conclusion that I was not as prepared for the test as I would have liked to be. I then felt the panic of the possibility of failing the test. I went through a series of "What else is true?" questions and finally ended up (after many negative thoughts) with some positive thoughts. For instance, I realized that I had a very good relationship with the teacher as I have taken classes with her before. She knows that I am a diligent student and sought out her help and completed all the extra credit I could. I also realized that in a worst case scenario, if I failed the test, she would most likely spend some extra time with me and probably let me get an extension on the class or retake the exam. These thoughts relieved me greatly and would not have occurred to me had I not used these techniques. I went into the testing center feeling much better. I was still a little nervous but not as much as earlier which would have crippled my thought processes. In the end, I passed the test and passed the class. I plan to use these techniques every time I am ready to take a test in the future.

Controlling thoughts

This week a serious problem came up in our information technology department. Some errors in programming occurred and the data went out to our clients. As soon as I realized there was a problem, I feverishly began to work on it. I was at work until midnight trying to fix the problems. I called everyone and explained what had happened. As I worked, I got more and more upset. My hands were literally shaking as I continued to imagine the terrible outcomes that could occur. This is how I usually respond to difficult situations. I can't turn off my mind and spend a lot of time worrying about the worst possible things that can happen. However, this time, I used mindfulness to help me control my thoughts. I was able to recognize that I was thinking these "worst case scenario" thoughts and then I was able to breathe and to gradually let them go. As I breathed and let the thoughts go, I was able to regulate my panic. My hands stopped shaking and I was able to begin to focus on the "real" aspects of the situation. I hadn't finished by midnight but had a good start on the solutions. I decided to go home and sleep. In the past, I would have slept about 3-4 hours and been back in the early morning to finish. This time, however, I realized that

no additional problems would occur as I had contained the damage. So, I slept 8 hours. In the morning, I finished. I had completed the job accurately and quickly. I didn't spend much time worrying about the worst, but spent the time working productively. And I had taken care of myself: controlled the panic and got a good night's sleep, in spite of a major snafu. I was so happy.

Paradise?

It was a busy Wednesday morning and I noticed stress. I was out of town on Monday and Tuesday, working but in a relaxed environment. Today was different and by 7 am, despite meditating just a few minutes earlier, we were late, several things in the house needed attention, and several people in the house needed attention. The difference between yesterday and today couldn't have been larger. Suddenly, the melody and lyrics of a song popped up. As I listened, I heard, "Oh, think twice, just another day for you and me, for you and me in paradise." Initially, it seemed so ironic. Paradise? I don't think so.

But as the day unfolded, the song stayed in my head. Later, I looked up the lyrics and found that Phil Collins was singing about a chance meeting with a homeless person. Think twice, he says. Last week, my son showed me some parables from Buddhism he was given in his religion class at school. Included was the famous fable of the Buddha walking into a butcher shop.

Supposedly, he asks the butcher for the "best" cut of meat. The butcher replies, "They are all the best." And the Buddha is instantly enlightened.

My son commented, "They are also the worst pieces of meat."

"Yes, of course. In fact, the only ones."

As the day continued, the concept kept rolling around in my mind. And I began seeing everything around me as my corner of paradise. The song kept reminding me to let go of comparisons to any other paradise, any other place, and any other time that might be "better."

Towards the end of this day in "paradise," a memory of the movie "Field of Dreams" arose.

There's a wonderful scene where one of the ghost baseball players asks Kevin Costner's character if this (a corn farm in rural Iowa) is "heaven." Costner looks around and sees (in a new way) his farm, his home, his wife and daughter, his life. "No," he says, "it's Iowa." But it is clearly his heaven on earth, his paradise.

And I guess I have to conclude that this one is mine.

Compassion

My mother has dementia and her ability to taking care of things has been diminishing. We want her to live the life she wants and she absolutely wants to stay at home. An intensely private woman, she wants very limited help from non-family members and resists suggestions for more services fiercely. (The closest child lives 45 minutes away, the rest of us are hours away.) For several years now we've struggled to arrange things so that she has the independence she wants but is reasonably safe.

Lately that balance has seemed precarious. My husband, daughter and I went over for a visit one weekend and she seemed noticeably less able, physically and mentally. She'd had a small fire while preparing food for our arrival. She'd handled it herself but was shaken by it. She was frustrated with her caregiver, but refused to consider supplementing with someone else. I've been frustrated because she would rather limit what she does rather than allow more help. I get even more frustrated because I see that as an extension of the way she has always lived—dealing with problems by denial or by throwing money at them—and I think about how much that has cost her and our family. Then I start spiraling down with my own anger at how hard I've had to work to learn to deal with problems because she never taught me useful skills in that area.

By the end of the weekend, the future seemed hopeless and grim. It seemed as though the balance had tipped so that she was too unsafe but she didn't accept that. It seemed to me that we had only two choices: to get all five siblings to agree that it was time to add more care

(which would be no small job) and then force her to accept it against her wishes, or learn to come to peace with the idea of a catastrophe occurring. I was utterly depressed.

I meditated for a bit, which calmed me down, and then thought about it. I thought about how I can't know the future and that therefore there are probably more than two choices, including something more incremental and palatable. Just realizing that made me less anxious and reduced my sense of panic as I was gearing up emotionally to choose a path.

I thought about myself and thought that maybe I'm not the best problem-solver in the world but I'm good enough and that's OK. Thinking about that reduced the anger and resentment I was feeling on my behalf, which was keeping me from listening to her and helping her to make the choices she wants, which are the ones she will go along with.

I thought about taking it slowly, tackling single problems as they appear and/or as she wants to deal with them. The situation will be different as a result of those changes, and then see how it is then.

Then I tried to increase my sense of compassion for her, which is generally great but is challenged when she makes choices I disagree with. I hope when I am her age I will accept whatever it takes to stay mobile and socially active, but those aren't her goals. My ability to be compassionate is equally challenged when her choices affect my well-being, i.e., I worry more. So maintaining my sense of compassion is an on-going process.

Being compassionate is made easier, though, when I keep in mind two things, in particular: that I can't predict the future and that therefore there are probably more possibilities than I sometimes think there are. (It just occurs to me that that would mean there are more possibilities for catastrophe, too, but in life catastrophe occurs much less frequently than ordinariness, so I suppose the same proportions would hold true for this unknown future.)

And second, that if I accept myself with love, then I don't need to be angry about what she did or didn't do for me and then those emotions won't complicate decision-making or my ability to hear her.

Expectations

I had a real moment of clarity in the last week of the class. Our homework assignment was to live one day without expectations. I wound up not doing the exercise but in NOT doing it, I walked away with a very valuable lesson. The week leading up to the last class, I had the closing for the purchase of my first home and I also found out that there would be an audit of my work. These were two very anxiety-producing events.

When reflecting on it, what I found is how I add to my anxiety by my expectations of what should be happening and then what could happen in the future. I had such an excess of unnecessary anxiety, tension and worry. I realized, after the fact, by not having expectations and by trying to live moment to moment, there still would have been a level of anxiety, but it would have been so much more manageable. I add to my level of anxiety unbelievably by having so many expectations on how things should be and then have all the unrealistic expectations of what could possibly happen. I truly realized that the source of a great deal of my anxiety comes from having all these pre-conceived notions on "how it should be" instead of just living moment to moment, day to day. It will take practice, but I am going to try and think less about how I want thing to be and try to just enjoy/live/cope with the moment. I truly believe in doing so I will be able to experience a much more joyful life.

Walking meditation

As part of our mindfulness meditation class, we were asked to do a walking meditation. My job requires me to do lots of walking, but I was somehow unable to focus during these times. There were either cars or people which created distractions and I was unable to concentrate on anything other than getting myself from point "a" to point "b." Then one day I needed to get something from my car before walking across our campus. On this particular day I had parked on

the roof of our parking structure. As I gathered the things I needed from the car, I realized it was a nice sunny day, it was warm and pleasant; so I decided to walk across the top of the parking deck.

As I walked, I realized that the area surrounding our campus is really quite striking, especially from the height of a four story parking deck. There was a cool breeze and a fair amount of solitude. I slowed my pace and just took in the surroundings. It was quite a relaxing moment. As I reflected back on the walk across the top of the deck, I realized this was a great place for me to practice walking meditation. So each day I try to walk across the top of the parking deck at least a couple of times. It is a time I treasure to enjoy the beauty of this world and to slow down for a few moments and appreciate life and all that it brings.

A clean car

My daughter is a junior at college. She lives in an apartment near campus and because the parking lot for her building is frequently full, she has to park her car on the street. One evening someone vomited on her car. It was on the roof, down the rear window and down the passenger side of the car. It was pretty disgusting!

My daughter discovered it the next day after the mess had baked in while sitting under the morning and afternoon sun. She took the car to a self-clean car wash and tried to spray the mess off, but with limited success. Much of the goo remained and she left it like this until she came home the next weekend. When I saw her car, I told her that the longer she left this mess on, the harder it would be to remove it. She casually replied that she planned to clean the rest off soon.

“Soon” turned into two months. She was home one weekend and I couldn’t stand to look at the mess any longer. I had some time on Saturday morning and I decided to clean the car myself. Normally, I would have fumed while doing the job knowing that she should be doing it. Or I would have made some sarcastic comments regarding her lack of concern about the appearance of her car or her “laziness.” Because I had been using mindfulness meditation to notice my personal relationships, I decided to take a different approach. Interestingly, I didn’t seem to mind cleaning the car too much, even though it took several hours of hard work to scrub the mess off. When she woke up (around noon), I was done. I simply told her that I had cleaned her car and left it at that. The response I received from my daughter was one I had tried repeatedly to get, but had never succeeded in getting. She was very appreciative and apologetic and she had been especially thoughtful since that time.

I know that this response and the change in our relationship will wear off if not nurtured and I plan to continue to work in this. I was surprised at how oblivious I had been. I had used certain techniques (sarcasm and criticism) to try to get a particular response from my daughter. It had not worked but I continued to do the same thing over and over again with the same results. Mindfulness offered me a different way to look at the situation and the result was a whole lot better.

Mindful eating

I practiced eating a mindful meal last week. It went Ok, but was kind of difficult. I had trouble focusing on just eating for a whole meal. Today, on the way to class, I was rushed and in a hurry. I hadn’t had time to eat, but I was hungry and wanted to grab something quick before leaving. I wasn’t sure how long it would take me to get to class since it was all the way across town. I didn’t want to be late and I could feel myself getting tense and anxious. Anyway, I grabbed some leftovers from the refrigerator. I was going to gulp it down and jump into the car. However, something happened as I began to eat. As I put the food into my mouth, it reminded me of “mindful eating.” I immediately stopped and paid attention. The taste of the food brought me

back into the moment. I finished eating (mindfully) and got into the car. The whole drive here was wonderful because I stayed in the moment and was able to let go of the tension and worry.

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For additional information, please contact Dr. Howard Schubiner, phone: 248-865-4133