

Stress—It's a 21st-century fact of life in multitasking, plugged-in, mile-a-idea. Set aside your regrets. Stop agonizing about the future. Reconnect



minute New Jersey. But wait! The mindfulness movement has a better with the present. On these pages, the experts will show you how to join...

the mindfulness revolution

By Leslie Garisto Pfaff

I am in a room at Ramapo College, discovering—along with seven fellow neophytes in the practice of mindfulness—that remaining in the present moment isn't nearly as simple as it sounds.

James Morley, the director of Ramapo's Krame Center for Contemplative Studies and Mindful Living, has asked us to close our eyes and focus only on our breathing, but my thoughts keep veering off course. Should I have taken my shoes off? I'm pretty sure the woman to my left is barefoot. What if I have to cough? Am I allowed to cough? And, oh yes, I forgot to pay my Visa bill.

I am clearly suffering from what in Buddhism is known as monkey mind, my brain leaping from one thought branch to another like a macaque zig-zagging through a rainforest canopy. In fact, modern life has caused many of our brains to react like overstimulated primates incapable of noticing the world around us as we lurch and text and Instagram our way through our daily lives.

This state of affairs helps to explain the current fascination with

mindfulness, a practice that aims to reconnect us with the present, thereby allowing us to live more meaningful, joyful lives. In the process, mindfulness can alleviate the corrosive stress that is an inescapable fact of the 21st century.

Throughout New Jersey, you can find classes and clinics that aim to teach how mindfulness can improve your business acumen, lower your risk of cardiovascular disease, keep you sober and help you enjoy your wedding. Those so inclined can take workshops, such as Mindful Aromatherapy, Mindfulness for Busy People, Dancing Mindfulness, and my personal favorite, Am I Hungry?—mindfulness for weight loss.

Mindfulness has been practiced by professional teams like the Seattle Seahawks and the Boston Red Sox and corporations like Aetna and Google, all hoping to boost performance. Longtime practitioners worry that mindfulness has become a commodity, diluting its life-changing potential. "Many people have been co-opting the mindfulness

approach, claiming that it's a method for achieving bliss or better health or higher productivity," says mindfulness advocate William Krame, a real estate developer who, with his wife, Catherine, co-founded the center at Ramapo that bears his name. While none of those ends is the goal of mindfulness, Krame notes, they may well be byproducts of the practice.

In fact, published studies of Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR), a program developed in the 1970s at the University of Massachusetts Medical Center by molecular biologist Jon Kabat-Zinn, show a 35 percent reduction in practitioners' medical symptoms and a 40 percent reduction in psychological symptoms. Research into the kind of gentle meditation that lies at the heart of MBSR has revealed its efficacy in managing physical and emotional disorders ranging from anxiety, depression and PTSD to cardiovascular disease, asthma and chronic pain. (In fact, MBSR was first employed to treat patients with intractable pain.)

How could something so



ILLUSTRATIONS BY HANNA BARCZYK

simple have such wide-ranging results? Supporters claim that mindfulness, by reminding us to experience the present moment while tuning out our worries about the future and regrets about the past, offers us a chance to see the world around us with greater clarity. Practitioners describe experiencing a kind of stepping back from potentially negative reactions.

On the day of my visit to the Krame Center, Morley had been excited at the prospect of riding his motorcycle to work. It was a gorgeous autumn morning. But his bike's battery was dead, and he couldn't find the jumper cables he thought he had left in the garage. "I started feeling angry because they were lost or misplaced, when I realized that I wasn't doing myself any good by feeling angry, and that even if I couldn't ride my bike, it was still a beautiful day," he says. That realization, spurred by his longtime practice of mindfulness, allowed Morley to choose not to react to his anger and opened up the possibility for joy in the face of disappointment. Imagine that moment multiplied by thousands, and you glimpse the potential of mindfulness.

Diane Handlin, PhD., a licensed psychologist and founder/executive director of the Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction Center of New Jersey in Metuchen, points out that the practice is hardly new; it has its roots in the principles of Buddhism going back 2,500 years. Handlin defines mindfulness as "the practice of paying attention on purpose, moment by moment, without judgment and with affection"—that is, without applying labels like "shameful" or "inappropriate." Human nature being what it is, few of us can be mindful 24/7. But the more we practice being mindful, Handlin says, the better we become at it.

Handlin teaches a program in MBSR, which she calls "the gold standard." Courses in MBSR follow a strict protocol consisting of eight weekly sessions plus a retreat where students acquire a variety of tools, including sitting meditation, gentle mindful yoga, walking meditation, and lying-down meditation, in which practitioners take a "body scan," focusing on each part of the body in succession.

MBSR may be the most strictly formu-



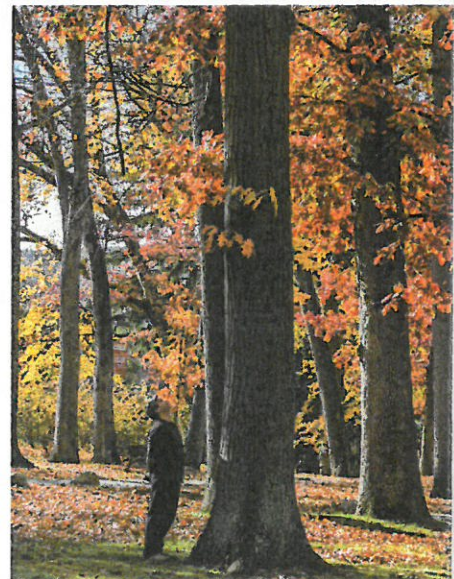
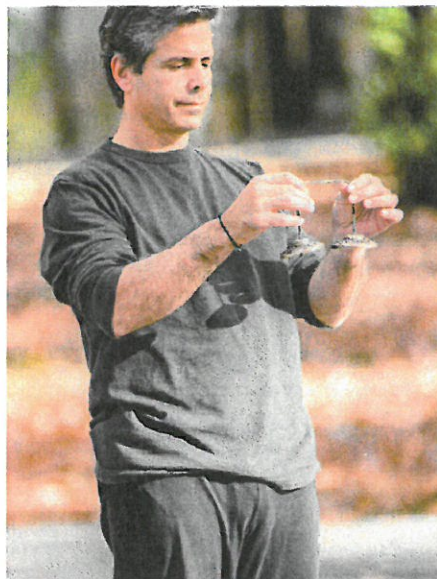
THE ROAD TO MINDFULNESS

At the Krame Center for Contemplative Studies and Mindful Living at Ramapo College, instructor and associate director Carol Bowman, top right, teaches students like Linda Cretella, above, to focus on their breath. Right: Members of Bowman's class include, front row, from left, Cretella, Adam Steck, Zin Me Ko, Jennifer Hyland.



HERE & NOW

Ken A. Varni, below, director of the New Jersey Center for Mindful Awareness, signals his class with bells during a retreat on the Ramapo campus. Center: Varni takes in his surroundings "with fresh eyes." He teaches students, like the one at right, to "pay attention to themselves at the crossroads of here and now."



lated approach to mindfulness, but it's not the only way to achieve the state. Patti Verbanas, a writer and social media administrator at Rutgers University, found it hard to focus on her breath while meditating. A mindful-

ness instructor at the university taught her to concentrate instead on a word (she chose joy), a so-called anchor to the moment. It worked. Last year, Verbanas bought a house in a short sale, a process fraught with anxiety. She credits mind-



Don't sweat the small stuff. —Richard Carlson, 1996



Feeling stressed? Adult coloring books have soared in popularity as a breezy way to relax. Psychologists say focusing on a specific activity, like coloring, diverts attention from our worries. Test this theory by downloading a line drawing of this month's Exit Ramp illustration at njmonthly.com/runnershigh.

think, *Yeah, this is an upsetting situation—I have every right to be upset. All right, let's just experience the upset. Okay, now we don't need to be upset anymore.* You kind of work through it rather than engaging in the emotion."

Mindfulness, say its advocates, isn't just for the small stuff. One woman—an Essex County resident who requested anonymity—credits the practice with getting her through an ordeal that could unhinge the most stalwart among us: Her 11-year-old daughter is being treated for depression and has threatened suicide on more than one occasion. "My mom also attempted suicide a couple of times when I was very little," the woman says, "so it's a major button-pusher for me. Something happens, and I spin off into thinking about the worst possible scenario. But I've learned to bring myself back to the present moment, then do a reality check

without jumping into the future or the past; it's like my Xanax."

Carol Bowman, a Krame Center teacher and associate director, says, "People come to mindfulness because they're suffering." To underscore the point, she refers to the title of mindfulness advocate Jon Kabat-Zinn's first book, *Full Catastrophe Living* (Delacorte Press, 1990): "It's the catastrophes of our daily lives," she says, "that motivate people to learn more successful ways to deal with the challenges they're facing."

Peter Mercer, president of Ramapo College, echoes that sentiment when he explains why the college agreed to host the Krame Center in 2013: "The pace of life is not decreasing, it's accelerating, and with it, all the sorts of maladies that come with high levels of stress and equally high levels of uncertainty. So a discipline that causes you to take a half step back from the maelstrom of every-

Continued on page 57

meditation: 4 steps for starters

Lao Tzu, Confucius, St. Teresa of Avila, Paul McCartney, Al Gore, David Lynch, Oprah Winfrey, Cory Booker and 19 million of today's Americans have all found some manner of inner peace through meditation, a practice dating back at least 3,500 years. Meditation is essentially a way of resting the mind to attain a state of altered consciousness. It's been shown to mitigate anxiety and depression, reduce blood pressure, slow the aging process and improve attention.

There are many forms of meditation, but three of the most popular are concentrative (like transcendental meditation), in which practitioners focus on a single point of attention like an object, a mantra or their own breath; open awareness (like the Zen practice of *zazen*), which involves opening the mind to whatever is happening, internally and externally; and mindfulness meditation, essentially a combination of the two.

If you're intrigued by the idea of meditation but haven't yet gotten your om on, consider these tips from Lanie Kessler-David, a social worker and mindfulness educator at Atlantic Behavioral Health's Chambers Center for Well Being in Morristown:

1. BREATHE

Take 30 seconds or so a few times a day to slow down and do nothing but breathe, paying attention to your breath as it goes in and out. If you enjoy the experience, which is central to many forms of meditation, you may well feel the same way about meditation itself.

2. LOOK IT UP

One benefit of the rising popularity of meditation is the abundance of books, videos and apps on the subject. Some good places to start: Jack Kornfield's classic volume *Meditation for Beginners* (Sounds True, 2008); the similarly named short video *Meditation for Beginners*, nar-

ated by ABC News anchor (and enthusiastic meditator) Dan Harris (mindful.org/meditation-for-beginners-video/); and the popular Headspace app, aimed at those new to meditation.

3. DIP A TOE IN

The absolute best way to find out what meditation involves—and how it feels—is to sit in with an established group or attend an introductory session—some of which are free. An internet search of "New Jersey meditation" brings up dozens of groups across the state.

4. EXPECT TO BE LOUSY

Don't be surprised if your first stab at meditation has you thinking about your grocery list, your annoying co-worker and your itchy nose—all at the same time. Our minds are wired to wander, and like any skill, meditation takes time and effort. "That's why we call it a practice," says Kessler-David.

—Leslie Garisto Pfaff



fulness with getting her through it with sanity intact.

"It's not like I'm constantly thinking about mindfulness," says Verbanas, "but it becomes the subtext for everything I do. I might

The mind is everything. What you think, you become. —Buddha, 567 BC-484 BC



THE MINDFUL REVOLUTION*Continued from page 31*

day life and to focus on the present has a kind of purgative effect.”

Mindfulness tends to attract type-A personalities—Handlin notes that many of her students are lawyers and Wall Street types, and that enrollment in her MBSR classes grew exponentially after the financial meltdown of 2008. It’s been used to great effect with hard-to-handle kids, especially those with ADHD. And it’s being applied successfully in prisons.

Stephen Michael Tumolo teaches mindfulness to inmates in two New Jersey prisons under the auspices of the organization Heart-to-Heart. He cites the example of Curtis, a former inmate convicted of manslaughter at the age of 18 who entered the prison system filled with anger. Over time, and with the help of mindfulness, he developed the ability

to reflect on his situation and discovered his calling, working as a case manager with the Urban League of Essex County in Newark after his release. To explain Curtis’s transformation, Tumolo quotes the author and Holocaust survivor Victor Frankl: “Between stimulus and response, there is a space. In the space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom.”

If that strikes you as too rarefied, consider Montvale resident Patricia Hanratty, a retired school administrator who adopted mindfulness in the 1980s. Mindfulness helped get Hanratty through tough times, she says, but it’s also really useful when she’s folding laundry. “Mindfulness,” she says, not without humor, “has helped me appreciate the joy of having nicely folded clothes. Being mindful allows me to do one thing at a time and enjoy it.”

Whatever the objective, mindfulness requires practice through meditation—daily, if possible, though Krame Center’s Morley says, “whatever you can manage is better than not practicing at all.”

Sometimes mindfulness is just about “being present,” as practitioners say. “When I’m brushing my teeth, that’s all I’m doing,” a very mindful friend tells me. On the other hand, when I brush my teeth I’m usually doing something else, like wiping the sink or listening to the news. Can I silence the chattering of my inner monkey long enough to stop multitasking and just be present? I don’t know. But if mindfulness means I can find peace while making an overdue Visa payment, it’s definitely worth a try. ♣

Leslie Garisto Pfaff is a longtime contributor to *New Jersey Monthly*. She lives somewhere east of the present moment.

**A Zen Wind Blows in South Jersey**

When walking into a Zen Center for the first time, you might feel defensive, like everyone you’re about to encounter has attained enlightenment while you, fresh out of your SUV, are a mess of spiritual ineptitude.

But this is not what happens at Pine Wind Zen Community, in the Burlington County township of Shamong. Here is why: Seijaku Roshi, the founder, has an iPhone. And instead of giving you his undivided attention as he answers your questions about how he became New Jersey’s sole proprietor of a Zen monastery, he checks the phone when it pings.

Roshi, which means “venerable old man” in Japanese—he earned the name through Zen study—is not being rude. He is just practicing one of Pine Wind’s precepts.

“In Zen, we don’t make a distinction between living your life in the world and being a monk,” he says in a windchime- and incense-heavy sitting room just outside Pine Wind’s Zendo, a darkly lit meditation room outfitted with statues of eastern deities. “My head monk happens to work for a nonprofit company on Pinelands preservation. And the woman who is my most senior monk is a grandmother of six, and her family owns a roofing materials company.”

Roshi himself is the divorced father of a 7-year-old daughter who lives with him part-time on the woodsy six-acre tract where Pine Wind set up shop in 2000. A former Catholic—he won’t divulge his birth name—Roshi moved with his family to New Jersey from Philadelphia at age nine. He first entered a Buddhist monastery in the early 1970s, in Thailand, and the monks he met there sent him on his path to Zen enlightenment.

Pine Wind grew out of the Zen Society, a loose collective of friends Roshi organized in

Cinnaminson in 1975; he incorporated as a nonprofit in 1985. It was there he started teaching meditation.

“Most of the people I started with were Catholic or Jewish, because at that time the church was very strict about divorce, and there were a lot of single mothers who couldn’t find their place,” Roshi says. “The Zen Society became a refuge for them, a place they could maintain their connection with God.”

Now, Pine Wind attracts about 100 people a month for twice-weekly meditation sessions, Zen workshops and private Zen life coaching. Five monks have been ordained there, a process that takes four to six years, though Zen is not a conventional religion.

“It’s something you experience,” Roshi says. “There is no reliance on beliefs, concepts or ideas.”

Lately, Roshi has been noticing a lot of new faces among those who come to sit silently on Tatami mats in the Zendo. This reminds him of when he started the Zen Society.

“I think people are feeling some of the same things now that people back then were feeling,” he says. “They don’t have a place of refuge—somewhere they can go to cultivate a sense of compassion and respect, where all they’re hearing is the flicker of a candle.”

Those people include New Jersey truck drivers, homemakers and “everyday people,” Roshi says. With his tranquil Zendo and his inscrutable Zen pronouncements—“do not believe anything I tell you,” he says, along the lines of the better-known Zen coinage, “wherever you go, there you are”—he is doing his best to provide such a refuge.

If listening for the sound of his flickering candle starts to feel a little too Zen and you want to restore a sense of reality, no worries: there’s probably a pinging iPhone somewhere on the premises.—*Tammy La Gorce*

