The Mindful Community: Creating Sanctuary and Restoring Lives through the Transformative Power of Mindfulness

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Amity Foundation
A Teaching Community

• Amity Foundation is a non-profit agency with teaching communities throughout California, Arizona, and New Mexico.

• Mission:
  • Amity Foundation is dedicated to the inclusion and habilitation of people marginalized by addiction, trauma, criminality, homelessness, incarceration, poverty, racism, sexism and violence.
  • Amity is committed to research, development, implementation and dissemination of information regarding community building.

Remembrance – Resolution – Reconciliation – Restoration - Renewal
Introduction: Creating Sanctuary-Restoring Lives

• Interest in Mindfulness has grown exponentially in recent years
• A great loneliness of spirit may serve as a catalyst to improve our relationship with ourselves and others
• This presentation will illustrate the personal and collective transformation that is possible when we live more mindfully
A World in Crisis

• Technology is advancing global connectedness at unprecedented rates

• We bear witness to natural disasters, environmental crisis, terrorism, violence, human rights atrocities, genocide, and war.

• This “connection” through technology often results in desensitization or feelings of despair and hopelessness.
Challenges Closer to Home: Community – Family - Relationships

- Life’s challenges: illness, death, family discord, financial difficulties, daily stress
- Connection through technology may result in increased isolation, loneliness, and declining interpersonal relational skills
- Humans have a fundamental need to be in relationship, to feel seen, heard, felt, valued
- Socially isolated individuals are at a higher risk for depression, anxiety disorders, addiction, and suicide
Professional Challenges

• The accumulated exposure to trauma, pain, and distress in working with others carries with it consequences including:
  • Burnout
  • Compassion fatigue
  • Vicarious trauma
  • Feelings of being underappreciated and overwhelmed

• Impact on the therapeutic relationship
  • The “energy of the healer” is critically important
  • There is a direct relationship between the therapeutic relationship and treatment outcomes
Looking Within: Personal Challenges

• Lack of balance, integration, and harmony in our personal lives impacts us physically, emotionally, and spiritually

• Feeling overwhelmed, helpless, or inadequate frequently results in unhealthy coping strategies: resistance, denial, perfectionism, self-judgment
Letting Go of Resistance:

- Our human tendency is to “side bar”, deny, or resist unpleasant experiences in order to function.
- This strategy generally backfires – increasing stress and stress related disorders.

Guided Meditation:
The Power of “Yes”

Tara Brach in: **Radical Acceptance: Embracing Your Life with the Heart of a Buddha**
“We have to face the pain we have been running from. In fact, we need to learn to rest in it and let its searing power transform us.”

~ Charlotte Joko Beck
Mindfulness Practice

• Helps participants turn toward, rather than away from physical pain, trauma, other areas of difficulty.

• Shifts relationship to painful experience providing freedom in attitude and action.

• Different from most cognitive therapy in that it encourages accepting thoughts, sensations, etc. rather than training to ignore, change, or substitute.
Mindfulness: A Definition

- Synonyms of “Mindful”: alert, astute, attentive, aware, careful, heedful, thoughtful, wary, watchful, and wise
  ~ J. I. Rodale (1978)
- Mindfulness in education: open minded and avoiding premature closure of possibilities
- Contemplative usage:
  - “A state of awareness that emerges through paying attention, on purpose, in the present moment and non-judgmentally to unfolding of experience moment by moment.”
  ~ Jon Kabat-Zinn (2005)
Mindfulness: What is it?

• The fundamental elements of mindful meditation practices include:
  • Body focused attention
  • Shifting focus
  • Mindful movement
  • Mindfulness of everyday activities

• Essential Components:
  • Self Compassion
  • Self Acceptance
  • Openness to Experience
  • Increased present moment awareness
The Challenge of Non-Doing

• We live in a driven, goal oriented society
• Value is placed on being productive; on “doing” rather than “being”
• The practice of Mindfulness is not about going anywhere or doing anything --- it simply provides a safe space to reconnect to our present reality
The Breath: 3-Minute Breathing Space Meditation

• We began today’s session with a practice known as a “breathing space”

• The breath provides an anchor to the present moment

• Allowing time to briefly pause and check-in with ourselves throughout the day provides an opportunity to respond rather than react to stressful situations
The Gift of Presence

• Every day we miss opportunities for making true connection with others

• Instead of listening empathically and responding appropriately, we respond from our own point of view and fail to make a connection to the other person’s experience.

• Mindfulness techniques improve our ability to separate our own issues, thoughts, and emotions from those of the other person.
Presence

“The most precious gift we can offer others is our presence. When mindfulness embraces those we love, they will bloom like flowers.”

~ Thich Nhat Hanh
Responding with Empathy and Compassion

• Feeling another person's presence through non-verbal cues:
  • Relaxed, Open Body Posture
  • Facial Expressions/Eye Contact
  • Respectful Movements
  • Accepting, Non-Judgmental Presence

• Empathizing with feelings
  • Empathy ~ being sensitive to the feelings, thoughts, and experience of another without the person directly communicating these feelings.

• Providing authentic evidence that we are changed in the moment because of another’s internal world
Attunement

• Attunement requires focused attention on something or someone outside of ourselves and taking that essence into our internal world

• Interpersonal attunement
  • Taking in the internal world of other people and allowing them to shape who we are in that moment

• A simple but challenging practice
  • Letting go of our internal notion of what should be and remaining open to what is

~ Daniel Siegel (2010)
Empathy and Compassion

The Loving-Kindness Meditation Practice
Creating Sanctuary

• We create sanctuary for others when we let go of the need to comment, fix, or be the one who knows everything
• Sanctuary is felt when we are present, attuned, and open
• In this way we provide the sense of safety and security necessary to build trust
• As each person attunes to the other, a deep feeling of coherence, resonance, and harmony is established
  • Feeling felt, heard, and seen
  • A genuine sense of care and interest develops
Empathetic Listening Practice

- Mindfulness Practices provide a means of tuning experiences as they unfold moment by moment
- Return to the Loving-Kindness Meditation and practice listening with an open heart
Mindfulness is not Passivity

• We recognize that often we have to intervene, sometimes rather forcefully in people’s lives----but being aware of who we are and where we are coming from will help us not to be reactive and to do this appropriately.

• Presence allows us to “meet people where they are”, both confronting and supporting.

“People need both. It is the sound of two hands clapping.”

~ Betty Dederich
Mindfulness: An Intervention for Families

• Lack of awareness and automatic patterns of behavior within dysfunctional family systems frequently lead to substance abuse, abuse, neglect, and violence.

• Mindfulness practices wake individuals and families from the trance of unhealthy, destructive systems, effectively disrupting the cycle of maladaptive behaviors and healing relationships.
The Mindful Family

- Mindfulness
  - Encourages healthy lifestyles
  - Creates safe, healthy environments
  - Builds family cohesion
    - Families that work together and work towards common goals have a greater sense of optimism and morale.
    - Feeling felt, heard, and seen
- A genuine sense of care and interest develops
- Families learn to manage difficult circumstances positively
The Mindful Child

• When children live in an environment supportive of mindful processes they learn to:
  • Approach experience with curiosity and an open mind
  • Calm down when they’re angry or upset
  • Experience happiness for the good fortune of others, generosity, diligence, and equanimity
  • Develop compassion, empathy, patience, and humility
  • Live gently and in balance with other people and their environment

~ Susan Kaiser Greenland “The Mindful Child”
Benefits of Mindfulness

• Caring for ourselves is an essential daily practice – not a luxury
• Self reflection is not selfish – without it we become limited in how we can care for others.
• Taking brief periods of time to reconnect to the present moment throughout the day helps us to “reset”, improving our ability to focus our attention.
Resiliency: A Benefit of Mindfulness

- Resilience is the ability to learn and grow through the positive and the negative experiences of life
  - Adapting to changing circumstances
  - Responding positively to difficult situations
  - Turning the most difficult or traumatic experiences into constructive ones
  - Using coping strategies and problem-solving skills effectively to work through difficulties
A Mindful Community

• Imagine for a moment what a “Mindful Community” would look like; feel like...
  • Within our family, neighborhood, workplace
• Building healthy relationships and stronger families
  • Mindfulness improves skills in areas such as parenting, communication, relationships, money management, stress management and coping skills.
Implementing Mindfulness in a Therapeutic Community

- The Therapeutic Community provides an ideal setting for practicing and teaching Mindfulness techniques
  - Whole person approach to treatment
  - An environment that fosters trust, where new values can be formed
  - Responsibility is developed by teaching people the ability to respond without impulsivity.
Implementing Mindfulness in a Therapeutic Community

• “Community as Method” ~ George De Leon (2000)

• All members of the community work to develop healthy behavioral patterns which expand both mind and spirit
  • Faculty serve dual roles as role models and counselors
    • Example: As faculty members integrate mindfulness in their personal lives, they model the benefits for others.

• Emphasis on peer accountability and mutually supportive relationships

• Community folds around the person, and changes to keep current and innovative
What we’ve done

• From April 2008 to the present, Amity Foundation has conducted twenty-four (26) mindfulness courses; and six one day “reunions” which included participants who remained in residence following the course.

• A total of 338 participants enrolled in courses in four (4) Amity communities (Arizona, California and New Mexico).

• 317 (94%) completed; 16 dropped, 5 left Amity early due to personal/family issues
What We Have Learned

• When we began integrating Mindfulness practices in our community we did not consider the personal benefits or the impact on the community as a whole.
• Encouraging healthy lifestyles
  • Promote regular exercise
  • Provide continuing education opportunities
• Building community cohesion
  • Communities that work together and work towards common goals have a greater sense of optimism and morale.
• Building safe and healthy environments
  • Communities that are safe and secure are more likely to manage difficult circumstances positively.
Mindfulness: Professional Development

• Amity Foundation provides the opportunity for all members of our faculty and staff to participate in Mindfulness-Based Courses.

• Participants report:
  • Mindfulness practices have facilitated empathic attitudes among Circle Tree Ranch Practitioners.
  • Mindfulness practices increase self-care and decrease the tendency to take on others’ negative emotions.
  • Self-care trickles down to improve the quality of other relationships, reducing “burn-out”.
Mindfulness: Professional Training

• Amity offers professional training and retreat opportunities at our Circle Tree Ranch Campus in Tucson, AZ.

• Course objectives:
  • To develop and deepen personal mindfulness-based meditation practices
  • To understand course curriculum and discuss methods for course implementation in a variety of settings
  • Explore techniques for facilitating mindfulness courses through practice and feedback sessions
Conclusion

Mindfulness - An Ancient Practice Becomes an Innovative Solution

- Mindfulness practices enhance self-efficacy, self-knowledge, self-care, and wellness.
- Changes in brain, mind, body & behavior result from the daily discipline of mindfulness meditation, influencing emotional, mental, social, and spiritual health.
- Personal and collective transformation is possible when individuals, families, and communities become more mindful.
Summary

• We encourage others in helping professions to incorporate mindfulness practices and to experience the personal and professional benefits.

  • Mindfulness practices assist in developing:
    • Presence - a gift to ourselves and others
    • Attunement – creating the sense of safety, security and trust necessary to build healthy relationships
    • Resilience - facing challenges that arise in our daily lives
  • Caring for ourselves as an essential daily practice

Thank your for your participation.
Let us know how it works for you!
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