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MINDFULNESS

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Q & A WITH MINDFUL HEALING AND CERTIFIED HEALTH AND WELLNESS COACH, JULIE ANNE LARKIN, WHO LIVES ON HILL LAKE IN AITKIN COUNTY.



Larkin explains the benefits of practicing mindfulness in today's stressed-out, tech-driven world.

The lights are dimmed and a circle of people sit, breathing deeply, with eyes closed. "Everyone has the capacity to be mindful, it just takes practice," encourages mindfulness teacher Julie Anne Larkin.

This isn't some New Age spa. It's 5 p.m. in a hospital conference room and outside the closed doors flows a steady stream of activity. Inside there's a blissfully calm and introspective vibe. Several times a year, Riverwood Healthcare Center in Aitkin offers a series of mindful meditation classes to help ease stress and improve the wellbeing of community members and employees.

Riverwood is not alone in offering mindfulness through community wellness programming. In addition, a number of Fortune 500 companies, including Target, Apple and General Mills, offer mindfulness classes for their staff. Benefits include lower stress levels, enhanced cognitive functioning, creative thinking, productivity, and even improved physical health.

Mindfulness, once the domain of the spiritual set, is now a recognized mainstream practice as more people are drawn to the concept of shutting out distractions and focusing on the moment.

So what does this mean? Larkin, a Mindful Healing and Certified Health and Wellness Coach, explains how mindfulness works.

What exactly is mindfulness?

Mindfulness is simply about paying attention to what is happening in the moment just as it is, without judgment. Mindfulness is a state of being; it requires practice, working with the mind and thoughts to see more clearly. Mindfulness practices like meditation, yoga, breathing and being in nature, allow us to slow down, center ourselves and pay attention to the present moment.

We have so many stressors in our daily lives. Not only are we inundated by technology and immediate communications like texting, emails, and instant messaging, we feel many other demands, like kids, jobs, finances, environmental concerns, social pressures or health problems. Our stress keeps building unless we learn tools to help manage our lives and thoughts in healthy ways.

The result of a mindfulness practice is that one will be able to create a space that is less reactive, and be more open to the possibility of doing things differently—in ways that are more kind and supportive to ourselves and others.

How did you first become involved in mindfulness?

I was stressed, anxious, and physically ill. I suffered from gastric reflux, looping worry, disturbed sleep and eventually panic attacks—giving me an increasingly smaller and smaller life. I learned of an eight-week Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) class that suggested I could find the peace of mind I so desperately wanted. The class gave me tools that literally transformed my life. That was in 2004, and my physical symptoms disappeared once I began to make healthy decisions and

commit to a regular mindfulness practice. Today, I'm in very good health, take no medications, feel great, and am living the life of my dreams.

Are there actual, proven health benefits associated with practicing mindfulness?

Absolutely! This is why mindfulness is increasingly coming into our culture and consciousness. It takes a while to scientifically research, which seems to be our culture's way of "proving" effectiveness. There are studies coming out every day which show the effectiveness of mindful interventions. However, practitioners like me are testament to it changing lives. The proof is in the person!

How would a person begin to practice mindfulness?

While there are many books, magazines and online resources available, I believe the best way to learn is to take a mindfulness class taught by an experienced instructor. I've been teaching a four-week course called, Mindfulness: Stabilizing the Mind, developed at the Penny George Institute for Health and Healing, now part of Allina Health. The class is available through several community partners in Aitkin and in Grand Rapids.

How often should a beginner be practicing?

Mindfulness practice is a very personal thing, and there is no set prescription. To find the balance that's right for you, I recommend taking a class because it offers a supportive and informative environment. If that is not possible, find a simple meditation or breathing practice that you like and try it regularly for a few weeks. The only way to learn is to practice. Once you have given mindfulness a serious try, evaluate where you are—what you liked and found supportive—and then expand and refine your practice.

Can you recommend any books or online resources?

Mindful.org is a great resource. *Full Catastrophe Living* and *Wherever You Go, There You Are*, both by Jon Kabat-Zinn, are classic books about mindfulness practices. *The Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction Workbook* by Stahl and Goldstein has a CD with guided meditations and hands-on writing exercises. ☺

Julie Anne Larkin teaches classes through Riverwood Healthcare Center and other community locations and offers private, customized wellness coaching packages. To learn more about upcoming classes in Lake Country or to bring a class to your community, visit her website at julieannelarkin.com.

Julie Anne Larkin works through a mindfulness meditation with a few volunteers at Riverwood Healthcare Center's Healing Garden in Aitkin.