INSIDE:

HOW PRACTICING GRATITUDE CAN HELP YOU HEAL

CENTER OFFERS NEW WORKSHOP ON MANAGING ANXIETY AND DIFFICULT EMOTIONS

NEW PARKINSON'S DISEASE WEBSITE LAUNCH
MANDALA

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Mandala is the Sanskrit word for “circle” and is a sacred symbol that mirrors a state of consciousness through a concrete pattern. Native Americans use mandalas as healing and transformational art in the sand; art therapists to facilitate healing; and Tibetans as visual representation of Buddhist beliefs. As a universal symbol of healing, the respective circles of the mandala capture the many diverse aspects of the Center’s work: reflection, transformation, spirituality, creation, and lastly, the ongoing journey that continues to shape what we are to become.

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Adjusting Expectations

In conversations that I have been having personally and professionally, I sense a growing understanding that many of the changes we made during the Covid-19 pandemic are here to stay. While the state of the pandemic is certainly better than it was a year ago, we continue to live with uncertainty related to the Covid variants, endurance of immunity post-vaccination, what future school and work options will look like, and how to heal the nation. In a recent article in the *Harvard Business Review*, Aneel Chima and Ron Gutman note that while we may think of 2020 as an anomaly, it may not be. They suggest that conditions for accelerating change have been building for years. While we may yearn for stability, the reality is that in the world today, change is:

- **Perpetual** – occurring all the time in an ongoing way.
- **Pervasive** – unfolding in multiple areas of life at once.
- **Exponential** – accelerating at an increasingly rapid rate.

As I think about a world in which change is so all encompassing, I am reminded of a quote by E.B. White. In a *New York Times* interview with Israel Shenker, White is quoted as saying – “Every morning I awake torn between a desire to save the world and an inclination to savor it. This makes it hard to plan the day.” Often the second part of the quote is left out – “But if we forget to savor the world, what possible reason do we have for saving it?” His point – savoring must come first.

The pandemic has certainly forced us to re-think our values, priorities, and in many ways, our purpose. That is also true for us at the Bakken Center. Since the onset of the pandemic, a major focus for us has been to find ways to stay connected to each other and to help others stay connected. More and more research is emerging on the importance of social connection. Be sure to check out the story by Kevin Coss on the power of social connection and ways that our Integrative Health and Wellbeing Research Program are coaching patients and healthcare providers on the importance of social wellbeing and self-care.

Another deep learning for us at the Bakken Center is that by pivoting our strategy to offering more courses, workshops, and webinars online, we are tremendously expanding access to all that we offer and ultimately our impact. Aegor Ray writes about our new workshop on managing anxiety and difficult emotions and highlights the success we are having with pay-what-you-can registration.

Key to learning how to savor are practices such as mindfulness and gratitude. Shelly Gill Murray has written a powerful personal narrative that points out that practicing gratitude takes practice. In her story, she highlights research that we did with CaringBridge on the power of being grateful and describes how to begin a gratitude practice.

In the end, we are called to both savor and save the world and at the Bakken Center, we will continue to do all we can to advance wellbeing at a personal, community, organizational, and community level. We deeply value your support and partnership and welcome your financial contribution to our work.

Warm Regards,

Mary Jo Kreitzer, PhD, RN, FAAN
Founder and Director
Earl E. Bakken Center for Spirituality & Healing
PHONING A SIBLING, meeting a friend for dinner, doing volunteer work—these activities, while seemingly unrelated, share a common thread. They all reinforce the feeling that we are connected to, and supported by, others. This sense of social connectedness plays a vital part in a person’s overall wellbeing, and the team at the Bakken Center for Spirituality & Healing’s Integrative Health and Wellbeing Research Program (IHWRP) aims to help people (and their care providers) keep it top of mind.

“Social connections can help us be resilient; they provide practical and emotional support,” said Roni Evans, DC, PhD, IHWRP director. “Research has shown meaningful social connections can play a protective role in how our nervous system responds to pain and stress. Also, the very nature of an enjoyable or positive interpersonal exchange can have positive effects on our mood and outlook.”

Lacking meaningful social connections, conversely, leads to many negative consequences. People who face prolonged isolation, ostracism, rejection, or social conflict are more likely to suffer from chronic pain, low self-esteem, depression, and poor emotional regulation. These feelings may diminish their ability and motivation to seek out social connections going forward, causing a downward spiral of physical, mental, and social suffering.

Seeking out social connection to prevent these consequences and embrace the benefits is a form of self-care—an action a person can take to enhance their own wellbeing. Someone who reaches out to a friend when feeling lonely, for example, is practicing self-care in a similar way as someone relieving stress through mindfulness practices. Self-care can help improve mental, social, and physical health, even helping people manage chronic pain in situations where traditional clinical treatment options are insufficient, risky, or expensive.

FROM SMALL STEPS TO LASTING HABITS

Developing a stronger sense of social connection can be as simple as getting to know neighbors, trying new activities with others, asking for help from others, or greeting people on the street. Volunteer work is a good option, as it helps people connect to their communities and the world around them while also giving them a sense of meaning and purpose. It doesn’t have to involve someone new—nurturing existing relationships with family, friends, and neighbors can be a great way to foster social connectedness—or even other humans, as spending time with a pet or setting up a bird feeder allow people to feel a connection with animals. Even immersing oneself in nature, such as by taking a walk outdoors or gardening, can help by providing connections to the living world around us.

Finding quality social connection is not a “one-size-fits-all” approach, Evans said. One person with chronic pain may crave social validation and acknowledgement so they don’t feel isolated or misunderstood, while another may need someone’s help with housework or walking the dog. In all cases, building routines can help turn behaviors that cultivate social connectedness into lasting habits.
“People can develop some social rituals by scheduling daily, weekly, and monthly times for connecting,” she said. “This can include a range of things, like calling, emailing, or writing a letter to friends or family, getting together over a meal—really anything, big or small, that commits us to connecting in some way on a regular basis.”

BRINGING SELF-CARE TO THE CLINIC

While the awareness is growing around how social factors impact a person’s wellbeing, including how they experience pain, clinicians are often not trained to address their patients’ social needs.

“Social factors have largely been ignored in pain care and research,” Evans said. “Unfortunately, because humans are so affected by their social context, it has been a mistake not to take this into account and likely has resulted in the high prevalence and suffering associated with pain conditions.”

The IHWRP team is now working to train front-line care providers, such as chiropractors, physical therapists, and nurse practitioners to identify what patients need from a whole person perspective, and coach them in self-care practices that will support their biophysical, mental, and social health. To make sure they can help clinicians understand and empathize with people from all backgrounds, the entire IHWRP team has undertaken cultural agility training and continues to receive coaching from the YMCA of the North’s Equity Leadership Institute.

Starting this fall, the research team will also launch a pilot study exploring how well training care providers to coach their patients in self-care practices works. The Support Trial—led by the IHWRP’s Brent Leininger, DC, MS, assistant professor, and Gert Bronfort, DC, PhD, professor—will focus on adults with persistent back-related leg pain or sciatica. Rather than simply telling patients to do certain self-care tasks (such as exercise, relaxed breathing, or progressive muscle relaxation), clinicians in the study will use active communication skills and other behavioral change strategies to encourage behavioral change and help each patient become more self-sufficient in managing the impact of their pain.

The study will gauge what patients think of the support, coaching, and resources for self-care they receive. A larger subsequent trial will then follow the pilot study to measure how effective self-care is in benefiting patients’ physical, mental, and social health, Leininger said.

“The hope is that the majority of management for pain gets away from ‘let’s try this or let’s try that’ and starts to become more of ‘let’s take a look at you as a person, and what you have going on at an individual level,’” Leininger said. “It’s not meant to be a quick fix, but rather a way to help patients manage their ongoing conditions in the best way possible.”

FINDING WAYS TO CONNECT

People are drawn to seek out social connection even when socializing itself isn’t the only focus of a given activity. Amy McGarness sees this firsthand in those who participate in the YMCA of the North’s ForeverWell program, which offers programming to adults 55 and up that sets the stage for social connection. Whether the class is based around physical activity, mental health, continuing education, spiritual wellbeing, or something else, connecting with other people is what really brings people in the door, she said.

“There are just so many ways that people connect, and that’s what keeps them coming back,” said McGarness, a ForeverWell specialist at the YMCA. “People tell you, ‘I love the class, but I really look forward to coming back and seeing so-and-so.’ That social piece is really what motivates folks to come back.”

Over the past few years, McGarness has also been a facilitator on a collaborative study between the YMCA and IHWRP that aims to inspire older adults to get more physical activity. Between this study and ForeverWell programming, she has seen firsthand how self-care activities benefit participants’ lives. Members form new connections over their shared experiences and support one another through difficult experiences. That continued even when the COVID-19 pandemic forced these interactions to switch to a remote model.

One silver lining of the pandemic, on a broader scale, was that it brought the value of social connection to the forefront of people’s minds and kindled discussions on the importance of self-care.

“We might not recognize it, most often there are things that we can do, big and small, to improve our health and wellbeing,” Evans said. “It’s something we can initiate and take responsibility for, which can be very empowering.”
How Loving Kindness Meditation CAN HELP YOUR MIND BREATHE

BY SHELLY GILL MURRAY

HEADING TO MY CABIN IN WISCONSIN, I passed the Franconia Sculpture Park in an unmown hay field adjacent to County Road 8. Among its giant recycled material sculptures, one installation is a pair of road signs. The first, outlined in red, says, “I worried.” The other, shaped like a highway sign, says, “I saw that worrying came to nothing.”

Being a kidney transplant recipient with a suppressed immune system since age 16 gave me plenty to worry about. In 2009, when my transplanted kidney began to fail after 28 years, I suffered from tangential illnesses—little things warning me of bigger problems trying to surface. A tweak of medication would balance things out for a short time before another problem arose. It was like patching holes on a swimming pool air mattress—once the hole is repaired, another breaks open.

My Body Was Dying

Every time the lab checked my blood levels for proteins, potassium and kidney function, one was too high or too low, forcing me to eliminate more foods from my diet. Because healthy foods like vegetables and proteins carry the most nutrients and require more work for my body, they had to be eliminated. My body was dying, and the recommended fix was minimal amounts of unhealthy food! If I hadn’t been so damn exhausted, the whole situation would’ve seemed funny.

Despite my deflating air mattress body, I tried to keep up with my running routine, just to feel normal. I’m a runner in every sense of the word. The endorphins from daily three-mile runs give me a punch like caffeine and center me for the day. For 35 years I have relished the release of sweat, breath of fresh air, and forward motion because they lower my stress. I’m also productive—my mind focuses with the music and rhythm of each stride. In fact, I formed the words on this page during a run.

You Need a Transplant

Once you are a runner, it’s hard to be anything else—even when your focused mind is not very settled. One day my regular nephrologist was out of town, so I met with a new one. He reviewed my chart and noted that I was living on 3 percent kidney function. He fixed his knowing eyes on me and said, gently, but emphatically, “There is nothing more we can do for this kidney. You need a transplant.”

It was a gut punch that had me wishing for my regular nephrologist. But it was what I needed for my mind to finally accept what my body was telling it. My Scandinavian roots insisted, “I am fine.” My driven self believed, “I can make this last a few more years.” Neither was right. I was trying to outrun the fear instead of focusing on the new life that awaited me.
Untethered

Ten years later, new kidney functioning well, I have come to realize that you can either run away from something or run toward it. After my daughter’s 2020 high school graduation, months of pandemic-related sheltering in place and the eventual start of college for my “baby,” I became an empty nester.

I decided to spend some time at our cabin where I felt the winds of time whisking me into a new season of my life. The lake was turning over and algae bloom formed a pea soup film. One afternoon as my sister steered our pontoon up to the dock, I hopped off with rope in hand, pulling the pontoon in to tie it up.

As the pontoon began to pivot away from the dock, I reached for the side, but instead fell to the bottom of the lake, plopping onto the muck and overgrown weeds. Bobbing to the surface, I was as astonished as my dog, who stared at me from the front of the boat as if even she knew it was past swimming season. I have docked this pontoon a thousand times and never fallen in!

Loving Kindness Meditation

Two weeks later, I crashed my bike within a block of my house. I am not a clumsy person, but I was clearly feeling off balance. My empty house, the pandemic, racial unrest, and a contentious election made everything seem off balance. For the first time in 20 years, I felt untethered like a pivoting pontoon.

What to do with all this angst? “Learn to meditate,” said everyone I know. “Get your mindset right.” I could no longer run from what seemed like deafening silence. I needed to find a way to pass through the porous boundary between anxious loneliness and peaceful solitude. So, I committed to a month of meditation using a Loving Kindness Meditation: “May you be happy, may you be healthy, may you be free from all pain,” to myself, my family, my neighbors, strangers, all creatures, the cosmos. Then I grasped at each individual star, hoping my anxious thoughts would disappear, but they didn’t. I thought, “How long does this process take? Running is fast, meditation is slow. I guess that’s why they called it a practice.”

By Day 23, patience, a byproduct of meditation, paid off. As I reached the greater rings on the circle of life around me, I felt calm. My emotions radiated out like warmth to the world. I used the words to reorient myself and let all thoughts come and go, dissipating like the ripples formed when a stone is thrown into the lake.

Although a meditation novice, I understood repetition and breathing to be the key, while focusing on yourself at the center. Then, like growth rings on a tree, you build on the circle by adding one for your loved ones, then acquaintance, then strangers, then the greater world. Each ring provides another source of protection, depth and support for your inner self. How hard could it be?

Meditation Reflections

Day 1: I repeated the meditation until I added enough rings to grow a Redwood that a 1965 Buick Electra could drive through. My mind couldn’t settle. Being inactive is hard as hell for me. I repeated “trust the process” and began again the next day.

Day 2: I noticed what my body was doing. I breathed in and out while loosely resting my wrists on the chair, palms facing up. I noticed my hands were open, welcoming. My arms relaxed, my feet firmly on the floor. As I breathed, I felt my muscles relax, depleting my aches. I kept my mind focused on the exercise by touching a thumb to each finger as I said, “May you be happy, may you be healthy, may you be free of all pain,” to myself, my family, my neighbors, strangers, all creatures, the cosmos. Then I grasped at each individual star, hoping my anxious thoughts would disappear, but they didn’t. I thought, “How long does this process take? Running is fast, meditation is slow. I guess that’s why they called it a practice.”

CaringBridge by Mary Jo Kreitzer, PhD, RN, FAAN and colleagues, participants who engaged in a 21-day meditation showed statistically significant reductions in stress as well as increases in self-compassion and social connection. Dr. Kreitzer is also on the advisory panel for How We Heal, an ongoing project by CaringBridge.

When you’re going through a health journey, you have a lot on your plate. CaringBridge replaces the time-consuming task of sharing your health news over and over. It’s a free, easy to use online journal for sharing health information with your family and friends.

Story shared from CaringBridge.org with permission.

About the Research

Since 2015, scientists from research institutions including the University of Minnesota and Mayo Clinic have been studying the effects on CaringBridge users who have participated in such practices as a loving kindness meditation, gratitude practice, reflective writing and spiritual support.

In a research study on Loving Kindness Meditation that was conducted on
MEET JAMIE HAZELTON, NBC-HWC

M.A. in Integrative Health & Wellbeing Coaching

BY JACQUES LEROUGE

Raised in Bemidji, Minnesota, Jamie Hazelton (she/her) is a frequent camper, a role model, a gay transgender woman, and a Health Coach. If you met her, you might share a love of crab legs. You might talk about some of her favorite state park vacation spots along the North Shore, or that lately she’s been listening to the “Widowed Mom Podcast,” though she is neither a widow nor a mom; she says she feels connected to the wisdom the host offers.
THE END OF 2020 brought significant change for Hazelton – she presented her capstone for her Master of Arts in Integrative Health & Wellbeing Coaching and participated in a panel discussion as part of the “Perspectives on Increasing Inclusion in Health Coaching” event. She explained that after graduating she transferred that energy into her new focus, starting her practice Whole You Health. “One of the things I’ve enjoyed a lot about postgraduate life is working with the community. I am passionate to work with and serving their needs with my training,” she says.

While Hazelton has coached for a variety of clients like the Emergency Physicians Professional Association, her passion is working with people with transitional identities. “I most often serve LGBTQIA+ and specifically the trans/nonbinary communities, however, I also work with individuals who are struggling with identity – whether that is with their own identity or allowing their identity to be accepted within this world.”

“The Owning Your Transition group is my highlight every week. Jamie’s calm and knowing guidance brought the group together in a way that allows us to discuss and explore our various transition challenges and discover new ways of seeing beyond them. […] I’d recommend Jamie to most anyone who needs someone to talk to about transgender issues, and beyond.”

JOAN

“I want to see my community in-person and be around them,” Hazelton says, “I haven’t had the opportunity to do that because of the pandemic, however, I can see people’s faces on screens and that type of connection is really nice to have during this time. I work with individuals who live in Canada, the United States, Mexico, Germany, France, and England. It’s a very powerful avenue to be able to connect with them and say, ‘look we have this in common and let’s help you get to wherever you want to be.’ I still prefer to connect in-person - but online is great, too.”

Hazelton reflected on the safety that digital spaces provide for the transgender community to reach out to one another. “I actually started a YouTube channel eight years ago - way before I even thought about coaching as an option - to help with my own transition and embracing myself.” She explained that the YouTube transgender community “was the first time I saw representation of people like me, and

“I’ve always looked elsewhere to figure out who I am. Jamie has helped me to see that I need to trust myself to become my most happy, authentic, and beautiful self!”

JOSIE

That’s really powerful, so I always said I want to be that online safe support for others.” Her channel has since reached one million plus views and has helped her forge connections around the globe through shared experiences.

Before she enrolled in the Center’s Health Coaching program, Hazelton considered it ironic to enter a program through a department with “spirituality” in the name as she considered herself “the least spiritual person ever.” Nevertheless, she remembered the advice from her instructors to enter into everything with a beginner’s mind and took courses like CSPH 5331 - Foundations of Shamanism and Shamanic Healing and CSPH 5225 - Meditation: Integrating Body and Mind. “It allowed me to open up a part of myself that I was hiding. All of those classes that allowed me to stop and think about myself and how I connect to the greater whole were really inspirational for me and helped motivate me to pursue who I am today.”

“One of the most valuable lessons that I learned in the program was creating work life balance,” Hazelton says. “I have a strict schedule, so I also make sure I’m taking care of my own needs and creating that flexibility.” She leaves up to 12 hours a day open to leave flexibility open for her global client base, though she typically serves her members 7-10 hours each day and leaves lots of time open to adventure with her partner.

“What was really unique about this program was the semester-long class dedicated to starting a business,” Hazelton remarks. The course helped her with the many different aspects behind establishing a practice, but more importantly it helped her develop close relationships with her cohort. Thus, the Circle Coaching Collaborative emerged and has since met weekly to discuss their practices and support each other.

“Transition is tough. Jamie is helping me find my confidence to come out as a transgendered woman. I have had online therapy sessions with a licensed therapist, she was great, but I hit a wall. I needed someone with personal experience with transition. Coaching helps you receive insight on your inner you, how to become you, and how to overcome issues, such as fear. I have realized, I am so much more than the person I have been for the last 49 years.”

SARA

Hazelton describes herself as a more reserved person, but she reflects that making connections at the University of Minnesota was key to her experience. Her advice to a health coach beginning their education is to “take advantage of the opportunities to get involved with your cohort, alumni, and the National Board of Certified Coaches.”

Hazelton will continue to run Whole You Health virtually, while she moves with her partner to Albany, New York this summer. She is looking forward to participating in the LGBTQIA+ community there, serving her community, and growing her practice.
Von

VOYAGE

Center Director of Graduate Studies
Dr. Susan O’Conner-Von Retires

BY KATIE DOHMAN

SUSAN O’CONNER-VON IS MANY THINGS: a PhD, an RN, a professor and, for the last seven years, the Center’s Director of Graduate Studies. By all accounts, she’s also an expert advice-giver, supreme policy wonk, a compassionate ear, and a fearless leader.

“We jokingly call her the tiny hammer,” Christina Owen, student services specialist at the Center, says of O’Conner-Von’s superb management skills. “She lays down the law in the kindest, most professional way. When she is giving someone bad news, it almost doesn’t feel like it because she has such a wonderful way about her; her patience, understanding, empathy, and passion for helping students and her general care for the wellbeing of everyone has a way of making us feel heard.”

The multi-award-winning O’Conner Von, who has served in the role for “an incredible seven years,” is returning full time to the School of Nursing, a world in which she has always kept one foot firmly planted. “It was a tough decision, especially in a time where we all want continuity and consistency,” she says. “But it’s time for new blood, new thinking, new energy. I’ll always stay connected with the Center.”

“We always invested in faculty development,” says Center Founder and Director Dr. Mary Jo Kreitzer. “She was eager to share feedback directly with faculty and together to review student evaluations with an eye towards learning and growing as a teacher.”

Her legacy will leave a lasting impression on many, including Kely MacPhail, senior education specialist and director of the Center’s Learning Resources Group. “Susan’s calm presence and commitment to integrity were deeply reflected in how she approached her responsibilities as Director of Graduate Studies,” she says. “She has a very keen sense of when to take action and knowing the best ways to engage different stakeholders. Her ability to influence others and achieve results is inspiring, and I will strive to carry that forward.”

Erin Fider, student services and academic programs coordinator for the Center, who worked with O’Conner-Von nearly daily, says that not only did Susan bring “a wealth of knowledge” to Center programs from her years of service on various university committees, but she also became a friend.

Together, they traveled to Ireland. “During a dinner in Killarney, Susan and our guide secretly recruited a table of about a dozen ladies, who happened to be in a choir, to sing happy birthday to me at full volume in perfect harmony. They had pretended all day not to remember, but I knew they were up to something because Susan never forgets a birthday,” Fider says, adding that Susan also remembers the names of everyone’s pets.

Fider adds it’s hard to characterize what everyone will miss about O’Conner-Von, because of the depth and breadth of what she brought to the Center, from policy to personality.
Susan has an amazing work ethic. She juggles multiple roles between her Bakken Center and School of Nursing appointments. Yet she is always responsive, approachable and quick with her humor,” Fider says. She always made herself available to consult with faculty and students on a variety of issues, often arriving with treats from Caribou Coffee. “She is a source of support – we all know that Susan has our backs!”

O’Conner-Von says she’ll miss the phenomenal faculty, superb staff, and diversity of students the Center attracts, but she won’t be disappearing. “I’m hoping people remember me as a very compassionate, caring individual who really focused on the health and wellbeing of our students especially and being kind to each other—a role model for openness and acceptance and gratitude for each other.”

Dr. Megan Voss, who will become the Center’s director of education in the Fall, says she has big shoes to fill as she takes up the mantle: “She has saintly qualities, honestly.”

“I am deeply grateful for Susan’s leadership throughout the past 7 years,” says Kreitzer. “She has helped us build a very solid foundation for our educational enterprise that will serve us well in the future – truly a lasting legacy.”

Stepping into the role of the director of education is Dr. Megan Voss, DNP, RN, and assuming many of Susan’s responsibilities in Center academic programs.

“Susan is someone I’d admired a long time, and I see the positive changes she has made,” says Voss. “It’s a role that I always thought ‘someday that would be a really cool role and such an honor,’ but didn’t think that day would be now.”

Voss, who is a nurse clinician, educator, and is currently Integrative Therapy Program Director for the University of Minnesota Masonic Children’s Hospital Pediatric Blood and Marrow Transplant, says her goal is to uphold the “incredible foundation” O’Conner-Von has built. “I feel so grateful for the state of the Center’s educational programming she is handing over to me. I can’t imagine a better person to follow in terms of inheriting a well-oiled machine.”

She also hopes to capitalize on the momentum of creativity, flexibility, and the transition into a digital world that the COVID-19 pandemic forced. “One of my strengths is that I am a flexible, curious person who is wanting to grow and change, and I am not a rigid thinker. This pandemic pushed us into an area we couldn’t hide or escape our lives and we came face-to-face with our own wellbeing. I think we learned how important a whole-person approach is – Susan understood that from the beginning. Now, the rest of us get to come in, build on it, see what emerges, and what the future looks like.”

Voss will be taking on an associate professor role in the School of Nursing as well. “I’m a big fan of learning from multiple places and being connected,” she says. “Being more fully in this side will help me root into the role in a different way if I were still primarily on the clinical side.”
IN OUR FAST-PACED LIVES, the mind-body connection – the complex relationship between a person’s physical body and internal state – is not often a focus for most people. The word “mind” is intentionally used to signal an emotional and mental ecosystem that encompasses a person’s nervous system, outlook, distress tolerance, and sense of purpose. Rather than a one-to-one flowchart system, the mind-body connection may be illustrated as a root system - a web of interlocking channels for which there are many outlets for access and remediation.

Since its founding more than two decades ago, the University of Minnesota’s Earl E. Bakken Center for Spirituality & Healing has been a leader in demystifying the myriad ways through which people can access healing. The Center has also been a leader in mindfulness research and education.

While research shows that mindfulness is tied to positive health outcomes, there are still barriers to exploring, developing, and optimizing personal mindfulness practices. For many people, the COVID-19 pandemic and ongoing crises of racism have only exacerbated the inaccessibility and instability of this fundamental part of wellbeing. To help address the pressures and uncertainty of the current moment, the Bakken Center partnered with the University of Minnesota Integrative Psychiatry & Wellness Program to co-present a workshop series – Mind-Body Tools to Manage Anxiety And Difficult Emotions – which addressed barriers to healthy living by empowering participants with strategies for mitigating anxiety.

Mind-Body Tools to Manage Anxiety and Difficult Emotions was a three-part series of hour-long online workshops to help people discover a sense of agency when dealing with troubling emotions and circumstances outside of their control. The series took a brass-tacks approach to discussing the often amorphous concepts involved in mental health like awareness and mood stability. Participants learned simple practices to engender calm, restore focus, and manage negative thinking.

Sue Nankivell, the Bakken Center’s Director of Business Development and Community Relations, is excited to offer programming that provides tangible resources that people can immediately use “People came away with tools and strategies to help take charge of their mental health and wellbeing – portable, accessible strategies that don’t require an investment in equipment, special clothes, memberships, or prescriptions,” she notes.

Debbie Cohen, MEd, MAPP, taught the workshop series and is a passionate advocate for making mind-body connection tools available to the widest possible audience. Cohen is a multi-talented facilitator with more than twenty years of experience as a teacher of hatha yoga, mindfulness, and positive psychology. As a licensed Physical Education teacher, Cohen developed multiple Yoga in Schools programs both in Boston and in Minneapolis Public Schools. Her unique teaching experiences, skillset, and enthusiasm for holistic healing make it possible for Cohen to detach yoga and mindfulness techniques from rarefied, cost-prohibitive studios. The Bakken Center’s Mind-Body Tools Workshop Series is in keeping with this ethos and offered a set of living practices to ordinary people from all walks of life.

The Center’s announcement of the workshop series was met with eagerness from community members.
Bobbi Gass, a decade-long resident of South Minneapolis, looked forward to the workshop’s emphasis on hands-on skills and process. “I want practical tools to ease my racing thoughts and get me into my body,” says Gass, who has struggled with anxiety all her life. She’s seen an uptick in physical symptoms of anxiety over the last year, because continuous upheaval and loss have become typical to the point of becoming numbing.

“It’s not enough for me to try to distract myself anymore. I need ways that I can soothe my anxiety because I live with it. Honestly, the workshop also just sounded really fun,” Gass shares.

This engaging series was in direct response to community needs like those espoused by Gass. Cohen shares that, after a recent talk by Integrative psychiatrist Lidia Zylowska, MD, the Center received tremendous interest in tools to support emotional and mental wellbeing. This workshop series launches the Bakken Center’s joint ventures with Integrative Psychiatry & Wellness, but this is surely just the beginning.

“There’s an increasing awareness of mental health with the pandemic,” reflects Cohen. “Through practicing these techniques, we can support ourselves to maintain perspective.”

Mary Jo Kreitzer, PhD, RN, FAAN, Director of the Bakken Center for Spirituality & Healing, named two main motivations for the series: to provide programming that is widely accessible and to empower people to be agents of their own health and wellbeing. Notably, the Bakken Center offered a pay-what-you-can registration scale between $10 and $20 to better meet the needs of community members. Offering the series as online workshops is an additional measure towards the Center’s goal of increased accessibility.

“I’m glad I could tune in from my home,” says Gass, who enjoys the ease and convenience of online workshops.

The mission to empower individuals to work towards their own healing is one that shows up in the form and content of the new series. Each class unpacked a concept in emotional health, such as distraction or negative thinking. Students were then led through yoga-based practices that support the mind and work with the nervous system. The combination of approaches involving the intellect, breath, and movement allowed the class to be flexible and holistic. Students were bound to connect with some approaches more than others and are encouraged via take-home handouts, videos, and readings to practice on their own. In this way, the Bakken Center supports community wellbeing in a real, tangible form.

“According to a CDC report dated April of 2021, during August 2020–February 2021, the percentage of adults with recent symptoms of anxiety or depressive disorder increased from 36.4% to 41.5%,” shared Nankivell. The Bakken Center commits to understanding this troubling leap as a mandate for more wide-reaching programming that allows people to be forces of change in their own lives.

“What I am most excited about,” explains Cohen, “is the wonderful opportunity this series provides to share with others the practices I find tremendously supportive for cultivating emotional wellbeing.”

*Future offerings of this workshop will be announced on [csh.umn.edu](http://csh.umn.edu)*
Center Provides Parkinson’s Disease Patients New Resources to *Take Charge of Their Health & Wellbeing*
Nearly a million people are living with Parkinson’s disease (PD) in the United States. That’s greater than the number of people diagnosed with multiple sclerosis, muscular dystrophy, and Lou Gehrig’s disease combined. However, a 2018 literature review found that positive resources in Parkinson’s disease are scarce compared to other chronic illnesses.

“The few available investigations suggest the need of preserving motor abilities by proper rehabilitation programs for maintaining and/or promoting patients’ wellbeing and life engagement,” the researchers concluded.

Since Parkinson’s is a degenerative brain and nervous system disorder, improving a PD patient’s compromised motor skills makes sense. Yet, biochemical changes related to both the disease, the ability to control one’s body, and medications used to treat symptoms can trigger depression and other mood changes. Stress can worsen Parkinson’s disease symptoms and impact mental health. A Parkinson’s diagnosis can also impact a patient’s relationships and lead to social isolation, further affecting emotional and mental wellbeing.

Combined Wisdom

Prescription medications, specific lifestyle changes, and self-care strategies can make living with Parkinson’s disease less challenging. Integrative therapies like mindfulness and acupuncture also have potential benefits.

“Parkinson’s patients are very interested in integrative healing strategies,” says Susan Vold, BSN, RN, PHN, BA, CNRN, HNB-BC, a Movement Disorder nurse care coordinator and Deep Brain Stimulation Program Manager for M Health Fairview Neurology Clinic.

Finding credible sources about these less conventional health-supporting approaches can be challenging for many with Parkinson’s disease.

Providing easy-to-understand, evidence-based information on PD treatments is one reason that the Earl E. Bakken Center for Spirituality & Healing added a new section of free resources specific to Parkinson’s disease to its popular Taking Charge of Your Health & Wellbeing website.

The ad-free website receives 2.5 million unique visitors annually, according to Sue Nankivell, Center Director of Business Development and Community Relations.

Resources are shared in an easy-to-navigate, logical format. “This is critical for any person with a neurodegenerative disease,” says Vold, who served as a subject matter expert on the project.

The new Parkinson’s page was launched in March 2021 with partial support from a Medtronic Foundation grant.

“The Center has had a longstanding relationship with Medtronic and the Medtronic Foundation,” Nankivell explains.

Medtronic co-founder and Center namesake Earl Bakken held deep beliefs in what medical technology could do for wellbeing, Nankivell notes.

“But he also believed in the power of people to heal themselves,” she says. “He was very interested in how integrative and conventional healing practices could work together to create optimal wellbeing.”

“The page provides many examples of how integrative approaches are best used in conjunction with conventional therapies,” says Mary Jo Kreitzer, PhD, RN, FAAN, Director of Earl E. Bakken Center for Spirituality & Healing and Professor in the University of Minnesota School of Nursing.

“If people are considering using an integrative therapy such as acupuncture, we suggest that they use the information from the website to have a conversation with their healthcare provider, exploring together whether acupuncture is a good fit for them,” she says.

EQUITY INVESTMENT

The new website fills an accessibility gap beyond providing easy-to-digest, evidence-based information on conventional and unconventional interventions.

“Many of our patients are no longer working, and are on disability or Medicare. There is no extra money in their budget for information,” explains Vold, who participated in the project as a subject matter expert. “Information should be free to the patients and families needing it.”

Jean M. Larson, Manager, Nature-Based Therapeutic Services at the Minnesota Landscape Arboretum, Manager and Assistant Professor at the Earl E. Bakken Center for Spirituality & Healing, agrees.

“Not everyone has access to award-winning programs like the (Twin Cities-based) Struther’s Parkinson Center,” she says. “Providing this information makes for equitable access to great information.”

“The website offers ideas that are practical and easy to integrate into their lifestyle as they adjust to a new way of doing things,” Larson adds.

One suggested self-care strategy is boosting daily water intake to avoid dehydration that occurs with taking some medications.

The site also explains the potential impact mindful eating can have on enjoying food, which can be particularly helpful for those dealing with losses in taste and smell. Mindful eating may also help those with Parkinson’s cope with changes in their ability to use utensils.

Mindfulness-based practices can help beyond eating, though. Studies indicate that meditation can be helpful for people living with Parkinson’s by reducing stress and easing anxiety and depression.

With thousands of visits since March, the website appears to be reaching its goal — to share tools and resources that Parkinson’s patients can use to optimize their wellbeing.

“This website is an oasis where they can find resources and education to help them along on their daily journey of wellness,” Vold says.
Swept away like breadcrumbs in the moment, I decided to gather up the bits and pieces of my life to see if the trail ended in gratitude. Constantly asking my kids to put a little “gr” in front of their attitude, it was time for me to put up or shut up. To accomplish this, I engaged in a simple gratitude practice I heard about through CaringBridge.

A study by University of Minnesota researchers of CaringBridge users who participated in a gratitude practice showed reduced stress and increased overall wellbeing. Who couldn’t benefit from that? So over the course of 21 days in March 2020, I did these four things:

- At the end of each day, think back on three things you’re grateful for, no matter how small.
- Write them down on paper.
- Also write down a reason why you feel grateful for each thing on the list.
- Each week, look back on what you’ve written.

To download the four step gratitude practice, click here.

The Act of Practicing Gratitude

This recipe seemed easy enough to follow, until the coronavirus pandemic set in. Perfect timing for a gratitude practice, but harder work. What I didn’t account for was the difficulty in finding things to be grateful for when everyone in my family was feeling so uncertain, confused, angry, and, well, together!

To better understand how gratitude works, I looked to the root of the word, “gratis,” which happens to be the same root as the word “grace.” Grace invokes a sense of wonder.

Like grace, gratitude cannot be requested or demanded or earned. Unlike indebtedness, gratitude neither demands a “thank you” nor dissipates after it is said. Finally, gratitude cannot be paid back, only forward.

Writing Forms ‘Muscle Memory’

Finding success in my gratitude practice would require more than the requisite 21 days to form any habit. The tactile exercise of writing things down each day formed some “muscle memory” that propelled me forward.

It was easy to write down things for which I was grateful: a family singalong in the car; that my college kids shared in a family meal; that I did not burn our last batch of Sweet Martha’s chocolate chip cookies. But articulating why I felt grateful called for introspection.

How Many Days to Gratitude?

Asking why requires a pause, grants the opportunity to see a moment in time as an unearned gift; asking why forges gratitude. How many days to gratitude, a change in the way I perceived things, an acceptance of the world as it is?

How do we gather the bits and pieces that add up to the “good life,” held in our core, a place we can call “gratitude?”

The experience reminds me of the tune Seasons of Love, by Jonathon Larson, in which he measures a year in minutes, 525,600 moments: “in daylights, in sunsets, in midnights, in cups of coffee, in inches, in miles, in laughter, in strife.” Ticking them off in my mind was one thing, but only some of them stuck, had meaning, were worth remembering.
A Simple Moment of Pure Grace

To break up our time of sheltering in place, as was required by state guidelines, we drove to our family cabin north of the Twin Cities. During the car ride, we heard that singer Kenny Rogers had passed away.

My teen-age girls did not know we’d lost a country-music legend, so I downloaded Rogers’ song The Gambler, turned up the volume and started singing with my husband: “You gotta know when to hold ’em, know when to fold ’em …”

One daughter recognized the song and joined in. By the third time through the chorus, all of us were singing in harmony. The scene only lasted 5 minutes. But we haven’t had a family singalong since the kids were little, and with our youngest soon off to college, I can’t imagine the circumstances in which it would happen again.

It was a simple moment of pure grace.

Put Your Emotions in a New Order

Every night at the cabin we played a board game called Sequence. The board is covered in pictures of playing cards. The object is to match the cards in your hand with those on the board.

As you discard, you lay a chip on the matching card on the board. The player who can form a sequence of five chips in a row wins the game.

Playing Sequence requires focus, and offers a distraction from the tough parts of a day. Like a gratitude practice, the game creates the space for you to lay down your chips and put your emotions in a new order.

Conversation flows in unimagined ways. Every turn allows you to draw a new card and to see the board from a different angle. No one knows what’s in the cards going forward, but there is always another card in your hand to play.

Gratitude comes from knowing there is always another card to play. It builds resilience to weather life’s difficult moments.

Practicing Gratitude Takes Practice

Playing Sequence with my family will always make my nightly gratitude list. I hope it will always make my family’s gratitude list, too.

The recipe for gratitude is not hard to follow, it just takes practice. Now when I gather the bits and pieces of my life, they add up to a little more. The result is a cumulative positive effect on my being. Gratitude.

About the Research

Knowing that millions of people around the world use CaringBridge, and that its use can have a profound impact on healing, scientists from research institutions including the University of Minnesota and Mayo Clinic have been studying the effects on CaringBridge users who have participated in such practices as gratitude, meditation and reflective writing. In an academic paper titled, Outcomes of a Gratitude Practice in an Online Community of Caring, by Mary Jo Kreitzer, PhD, RN, FAAN, patients and family caregivers who engaged in a 21-day gratitude practice reported reduced stress and fear, improved sleep and increased overall wellbeing. Dr. Kreitzer is also on the advisory panel for How We Heal, an ongoing project by CaringBridge.

When you’re going through a health journey, you have a lot on your plate. CaringBridge replaces the time-consuming task of sharing your health news over and over. It’s a free, easy to use online journal for sharing health information with your family and friends.

Story shared from CaringBridge.org with permission.
# Take a Course at the Center This Fall

Earn academic credit while improving your health and wellbeing. The Center’s academic courses are open to students at all universities and to members of the community. Learn more about our fall academic courses and register at: [z.umn.edu/CenterCourses](http://z.umn.edu/CenterCourses)

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